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# Life in Death:

## The Self, Dying and Biography

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The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. “Whither is God?” he cried; “I will tell you. *We have killed him* – you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the horizon? What were we doing when we unchained earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving?...How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers?

Frederich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 1882.<sup>1</sup>

In heralding the news of ‘the death of God’ by way of the madman, Frederich Nietzsche sought to highlight the strong sense of spiritual disorientation he saw in the push of modernity. The gravity of this news being registered by the madman’s eventual realisation that he had ‘come too early’, and the stunned response of his listeners telling him that ‘[t]his tremendous event’ had ‘not yet reached the ears of men.’ As would later be affirmed by Nietzsche’s aspiration of the human prerogative in terms of *will to power*, most potently embodied in the figure of the *Übermensch*, ‘the death of God’ indeed held a particular historical resonance. How life could be deemed meaningful in the shadow of this God-shaped hole was in essence a matter of individual subjectivity; becoming the object of one’s own will, not that of the divine.

The meaning of death in the nineteenth-century appears equally contentious in view of the diminished authority of religion. Had ‘the death of God’ unravelled the Christian ideal of life after death? Aside from Nietzsche raising the consequences of God’s absence, the nineteenth-century was otherwise clearly punctuated by moments which challenged Christianity. One such moment was the publication of Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* in 1859. Darwin’s emphasis upon the evolutionary contingency of all life in particular presented serious implications for any Christian presuppositions regarding death. As John Gray writes, the threat that Darwinism posed to religion was that it confronted people ‘with the prospect of their final mortality. Darwin forced

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<sup>1</sup> Frederich Nietzsche, trans. W Kaufmann, *The Gay Science*, (New York: Vintage, 1973 [1882]), 181.

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them to ask why their lives should not end like those of other animals, in nothingness. If this was so, how could human existence have meaning? How could human values be maintained if human personality was destroyed at death?<sup>2</sup> Philippe Ariés similarly points to a relationship between declining religious faith and a growing fascination with nature from the eighteenth-century as resulting in death being equated with the idea of nothingness.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, the thought that life did end at the moment of death led some on a quest for immortality by way of the very scientific method which helped to bring about the conundrum of religious faith. As Gray illustrates, the ongoing treatment of Vladimir Lenin as if he were a living person initiated by ‘The Immortalization Commission’ is a salient example of this quest to subvert death.<sup>4</sup> By the same token it is a clear attempt to contrive a God-like figure in a century characterised by a waning faith in Christianity.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the apparent fallibility of Christianity had thus presented a cohort of moral and existential dilemmas. And at the centre of this spiritual crisis was a particularly strong focus on the agency of the individual self. Whether this situation in fact owes much to Nietzsche’s critique of modernity, there is indeed something to be said for the argument that places the progress of the Western quest for subjectivity – the ideal of an individual and autonomous self – in an inverse relationship with the decreasing authority of Christianity. This point leads directly to the discussion of another quintessentially modern artifice: biography. The very idea that someone’s life can or should be accounted for in a singularly cohesive manner is clearly related to modernity’s characteristic preoccupation with the self. The problem of how to go about the explanation of someone’s life, writes David Ellis, ‘was not so much of an issue when author and reader both believed that the world was governed by divine power’.<sup>5</sup> Particularly in the case of saintly hagiography, in a world seemingly uncomplicated by an ambivalent attitude with respect to the existence of God there could have been little imperative to seek recourse as to how someone lived outside the frame of Christian theology. In this sense biography presents itself as an ideal tool to explore modernity’s ontological uncertainties. The question therefore deserves to be asked: how successful can biography be in achieving its central goal, a portrait of the individual self? Furthermore, how useful is the biographical representation of a subject’s death in terms of a narrative device which illuminates the self? How can death be represented in view of the life that was lived?

In its exploration of these questions, this article will focus firstly on recent theoretical debate around the self which has complicated the biographer’s task. As a wholly individuated entity in modernity the self has by no means survived the deconstructionism of the twentieth-century. Indeed, the idea that the self can only be realised in terms of its multiplicity of representations has become a central point of discussion in the academic understanding of biography.<sup>6</sup> In recognising

2 John Gray, *The Immortalization Commission: The Strange Quest to Cheat Death*, (London: Penguin Books, 2011), 21-22.

3 Phillipe Ariés, trans. Helen Weaver, *The Hour of Our Death*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981 [1977]), 246-252.

4 Gray, *The Immortalisation Commission*, 167-168.

5 David Ellis, *Literary Lives: Biography and the Search for Understanding*, (London: Routledge, 2001), 22-23.

6 Ian Donaldson, ‘Biographical Uncertainty,’ *Articles in Criticism*, Vol. 54, No. 4, 305-320; Ian Donaldson, ‘Matters of Life and Death: The Return of Biography,’ *Australian Book Review*, No. 286, (November 2006), 23; Inga Clendinnen, ‘On the Impossibility of Biography,’ *2007 National Biography Lecture*, ABC Radio National Homepage, Australia, <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/bookshow/inga-clendennin-on-the-impossibility-of-biography>, accessed 23 March 2012; Hermione Lee, *Body Parts: articles in Life Writing*, (London: Chatto and Windus, 2005); Helen Tridgell, *Understanding Ourselves: The Dangerous Art of Biography*, (Bern: Peter Lang, 2004).

the legitimate points raised in this debate, the central thrust of this article is that the biographical representation of someone's death nonetheless offers the opportunity to gain a genuine insight to the self. The main subjects discussed in evaluating this explanatory power of death in biography will be three men, who although thinly linked geographically and historically, shared a strong preoccupation with the ontological and moral uncertainties emerging out of modernity's weakening of religious authority: the German philosopher Frederick Nietzsche, the Russian novelist Feodor Dostoevsky and the Australian historian Manning Clark.

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While there may be a certain synchronicity between biography and the self in the context of modernity, as the discipline has developed so too has one of its most confounding challenges. How far biography can go in illuminating the self is constrained by a paradox at its heart which became most apparent in the course of the twentieth-century. To the extent that the self can be conceived as a coherent whole in the frame of modernity – perhaps in itself a hangover from the transcendent self implicit in Christianity – this has become decreasingly so with the passing of time. The development of certain strains in post-modern thought in particular has emphasised that the self, like everything else, exists in itself as a contestable category of understanding; an empty vessel to be filled at any one moment by any number of representations. How then can the self be viewed in its entirety? This is a pertinent question to ask of biography given any hopes it may have of conveying someone's life.

According to Ian Donaldson, the extent to which a biographer can assume to know their subject is inherently limited owing to the 'partial and fragmentary' nature of the evidence available to them.<sup>7</sup> Nor has the possibility of an ultimately knowable self seemed feasible since the emergence of French theory in the 1960s which undermined the possibility of the singular representation of any given subject.<sup>8</sup> As Helen Tridgell points out the inherent multiplicity of representation in biography was of particular concern to Jacques Derrida, who played a significant role in the deconstruction of the self from the 1960s.<sup>9</sup> In biography's case, as with all written work, the implications of Derrida's insight to the relationship between language and knowledge are clear: the signification of anything via language can only ever have representative value and no 'constitutive' meaning.<sup>10</sup> In Derridean terms, therefore, a unified conception of any biographical subject is precluded by the inconsistencies which are likely to exist between what is written and what is actually imagined in the minds of individual readers. That biography offers a complete insight to the self 'provided one uses the appropriate method and as long as the necessary documents are available', as once claimed by Jean-Paul Sartre, thus appears patently untrue.<sup>11</sup> In light of the insight provided to biography by Henry James, Inga Clendinnen similarly highlights the shortcomings of biography in terms of presenting a complete view of the subject. As Clendinnen writes, '[o]nce dead and deprived of the power to answer back, the biographical subject can be reduced to a puppet made to dance to any

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7 Donaldson, 'Biographical Uncertainty,' 317.

8 Donaldson, 'Matters of Life and Death,' 28.

9 Tridgell, *Understanding Ourselves*, 25.

10 Jacques Derrida, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Of Grammatology*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1976), 11.

11 Donaldson, 'Biographical Uncertainty,' 309-310.

tune the puppet-master fancies...A “swarm of possibilities” in life, transformed by death into a carven monument.<sup>12</sup>

Biography has nonetheless survived and adapted to this line of critique. According to Donaldson, the linguistic insights to biography extending from the 1960s are best understood as a wish to see the discipline of biography comport with the possibility that a single life can be evaluated in a multiplicity of representations.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, with specific reference to Derrida’s critique, Tridgell writes ‘by regarding biographies as arguments, rather than as transparent containers of facts, some of the main difficulties of representation can be avoided: the focus is instead on the art of the biographer, on how convincing the tale he or she is telling seems.’<sup>14</sup> In this sense the value of biography resides not in its ability to make truth claims but in ‘the ways in which biographers interpret facts, the significance which they attribute them.’<sup>15</sup>

In a similar vein, with respect to the problems with biography brought to light by James, Clendinnen affirms the discipline’s prospects so long as it heeds the ‘swarm of possibilities’ that constitute the life of any given subject. Along with ‘the transformative magic of narrative’ innate to biography, the genre can thus admit ‘us to experiences not our own’, allowing the reader to participate in the inner life of another person only briefly, in moments of love or grief, or possibly in shared aesthetic delight.<sup>16</sup> As Hermione Lee explains, biography remains attractive in light of the finite knowability of the self owing to its ability to appeal to our desire to gain ‘a vivid sense’ of who a person is, or was, particularly when it focusses on ‘moments of intimacy, revelation, or particular inwardness’.<sup>17</sup>

As with the discipline of history more broadly, biography has thus been adapted by its practitioners to accommodate the fragmentary nature of knowledge brought to light in the course of the twentieth-century. To the extent that the genre is then still able to approach the task of giving ‘a vivid sense’ of the self, how far does death go towards this aim? As Lee further remarks, it seems problematic that death can seem meaningful at a point in history characterised by the apparent unintelligibility of a person’s life, ‘[y]et it is still very unusual for death in biography to occur as random, disorderly, without meaning, without relation to the life lived, and without conclusiveness’ perhaps owing to the resonance of Christianity’s onus on death completing the meaning of life.<sup>18</sup> With specific reference to Janet Malcolm’s treatment of the various biographical accounts of Anton Chekov’s death, Lee emphasises how biographers seem to wish to glean as much from their subject’s death as possible. That Malcolm seems so perplexed by the difficulty in taking a moral away from Chekov’s death given how ‘dizzingly mixed up’ the accounts of it have been, speaks to the conclusion that death should indeed equate to some form of special representation in the reconstruction of the subject’s life.<sup>19</sup>

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12 Inga Clendinnen, ‘On the Impossibility of Biography,’ 2.

13 Donaldson, ‘Matters of Life and Death,’ 28.

14 Tridgell, *Understanding Ourselves*, 25.

15 *Ibid*, 25.

16 *Ibid*, 5.

17 Lee, *Body Parts*, 3

18 *Ibid*, 206, 216.

19 Janet Malcolm, *Reading Chekov*, (London: Granta, 2003), 74.

As Malcom's treatment of Chekov suggests, perhaps biographers are then justified in the belief that death can provide a 'concrete expression' of who a person really was.<sup>20</sup> This being said, it is important to recognise that the genre's treatment of death is beset with ethical concerns with respect to any reservations held by those who survive the subject, not to mention those that may have once been held by the subject. As Jill Roe explains, a chief problem facing biography is that it 'is not just the subject's reputation that must be considered, but the effect its treatment might have on the lives of significant others.'<sup>21</sup> An example of this biographical tension can be drawn from David Marr's treatment of the death of Partick White. By comparison to the nuanced detail throughout his book, Marr's account of White's death is relatively jaundiced. As Marr would later concede, he had come to regret the way in which he had related his subject's death, particularly owing to his awareness of the importance White placed with truth. When it came to relating White's death initially, Marr was more concerned with how to present the most sensitive representation of Manoly Lascaris, White's long-time partner, who was present at the writer's death.

As the account of White's death reads in Marr's biography: 'At about 9 Lascaris went to sleep in his room across the landing. He was exhausted. At 5 the next morning he heard a disturbance and went in to help. White stopped breathing a few minutes later.'<sup>22</sup> What Marr would later reveal almost twenty years after the book's release was that he had elided certain details of White's final moments to spare Lascaris' embarrassment, being aware that he 'would have enough to cope with when the book came out'. Marr was immediately aware that Lascaris had come to adhere to an untrue account of his partner's death, presumably on the basis of self-preservation. As Marr writes, if 'I wrote about White's death with White's absolute attention to the truth, I would expose Lascaris's innocent lies.'<sup>23</sup> In any event, Marr would later redress this discrepancy by presenting the following admission made by Lascaris shortly after White's death: 'The nurse was very strong and picked him up under the shoulders and I was to take his legs to carry him back to the bed, but because of my bad back I couldn't. But then I knelt down and slowly straightened up and carried him back to the bed.'<sup>24</sup>

It is certainly understandable that Lascaris would prefer to obscure these details by presenting a different version of White's death. More to the point, it speaks of Marr's awareness of the ethical constraints facing biography to allow Lascaris to create a space in which to grieve, at least while he survived White, to the neglect of adhering to an account of the writer's death that may have been more in the spirit of the obstinately truthful character revealed throughout the rest of the book. What is truly telling, however, is how Marr's final treatment of White's death demonstrates the biographical tendency to represent the death of the subject with an eye to the life that was lived.

That this is indeed an important consideration is highlighted by Brenda Niall in her discussion of the controversy emerging from Darleen Bungey's biography of Arthur Boyd that Arthur's uncle, Martin Boyd, had not in fact succumbed to stomach cancer but had committed suicide. In having accounted for Boyd's death herself in a previous biography of the Australian writer, Niall's main

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20 Paula Backscheider, *Reflections on Biography*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 91.

21 Jill Roe, 'Biography Today: A Commentary,' *Australian Historical Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 1, (March, 2012), 116.

22 David Marr, *Patrick White: A Life*, (Sydney: Vintage, 1992), 597.

23 David Marr, 'Patrick White: The Final Chapter,' *The Monthly*, April 2008, 41.

24 *Ibid*, 42.

concern with Bungey's suggestion of suicide, other than her use of evidence, is the way in which she accords this representation with a similar characterisation of the life that was lived. As Niall writes, because Bungey 'has this assumed suicide in mind, she constructs a matching figure', a process equally light on evidence.<sup>25</sup> The image we receive of Boyd in line with his desperate attempt to end his life on the basis of Bungey's account is one of 'another sickly, lonely, self-exiled writer' who, moreover, acted wickedly in his capacity as an uncle, particularly in the event of his mother's death. Bungey portrays the particular moment as disadvantaging his brother Merric, and subsequently Arthur. Outside of this controversy Niall has herself admitted to the influence that Boyd's exile and loneliness in later life had upon the broader narrative she created, 'consciously, or not', of his life.<sup>26</sup> However, with respect to evidence she is not only left unable to account for any indication that Boyd committed suicide but is also unsure as to how Boyd could ever be represented as the sickly and despairing Wicked Uncle.

Notwithstanding the issue of evidence, what would be the significance if Boyd had indeed committed suicide? What can be said when someone's death seems to reveal something about them that was otherwise not apparent to the rest of their life? The life of Frederich Nietzsche, with whom this discussion began, offers insight to this line of questioning. What is interesting in the case of biographical accounts of Nietzsche's death is the way in which it is overshadowed by his mental collapse ten years prior. Excluding an epilogue which explores the philosopher's posthumous influence in Europe, Rudiger Safranski ends his 'philosophical biography' of Nietzsche with an account of the notorious collapse in Turin from which he never recovered:

On January 3, 1889, just after Nietzsche left his apartment, he caught sight of the carriage driver beating his horse on the Piazza Carlo Alberto. Nietzsche, weeping, threw himself around the horse's neck to protect it. He collapsed in compassion with the horse. A few days later, Franz Overbeck came to collect his mentally deranged friend. Nietzsche lived for one more decade.<sup>27</sup>

The absence of any details regarding the last ten years of Nietzsche's life on Safranski's part can to a certain degree be reconciled in light of the fact that he was focussing on his subject's philosophical output. As he concludes from the above paragraph, 'Nietzsche's philosophical history ended in January 1889. Then commenced the other history, the history of his influence and resonance.'<sup>28</sup> While ostensibly the case, the scope of the book in fact offers far more insight to the man than the development of his philosophical ideas; it is far more than just a 'philosophical biography'. Viewed as such, by ending the book with an account of Nietzsche's collapse Safranski conflates this moment with his subject's death. The sentence 'Nietzsche lived for one more decade' then sequesters the final years of the philosopher's life, in essence equating the collapse with his death.

In an earlier account of Nietzsche's collapse, R.J. Hollingdale similarly imbues the event with sufficient pathos to render the reader aware of a particular end in Nietzsche's life:

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25 Brenda Niall, 'One More Falling Body,' *Australian Book Review*, No. 299, (March 2008), 28.

26 Brenda Niall, *Life Class: The Education of a Biographer*, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2007), 176.

27 Rudiger Safranski, trans. Shelley Frisch, *Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2002), 316.

28 *Ibid*, 316.

As he was leaving his lodgings on the morning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> January 1889 Nietzsche saw a cabman beating his horse at the cab rank in the Piazza Carlo Alberta. With a cry he flung himself across the square and threw his arms about the animal's neck. Then he lost consciousness and slid to the ground still clasping the tormented horse. A crowd had gathered and his landlord, attracted to the scene, recognised his lodger and had him carried back to his room.<sup>29</sup>

That this moment was in itself comparable to death is emphasised by Hollingdale's inclusion of Franz Overbeck's comment after seeing his friend in a Basel mental clinic that 'it would have been a far more genuine act of friendship to have taken Nietzsche's life than to have handed him to an asylum.'<sup>30</sup> By the same token, Hollingdale's key point in the frame of the eleven years Nietzsche took to die was the mythology that came to surround him by way of his philosophy which 'lacked all content and all reality'.<sup>31</sup> To the extent that Nietzsche had come to represent an unreal figure in these years, Hollingdale places further emphasis on the events of 1889 in terms of the philosopher's death: 'All that was real was the unique individual Nietzsche, who had died in the first days of 1889; and his philosophy, which was, by the end of that year, available to anyone that could read.'<sup>32</sup> Hollingdale's eventual account of Nietzsche's death, owing to a worsening case of syphilis, while in addition to Safranski's biography, is nonetheless similarly telling of how death-like his final years were despite the seemingly immortal, though spurious, myth that had been created around him:

Nietzsche did die: on 25 August 1900, six weeks before his 56<sup>th</sup> birthday. During the previous years he had known nothing, felt nothing, thought nothing...He did not know that he was famous for, or that his fame rested upon an inversion of almost everything he had taught. When he died he did not know that for nearly eight months he had been living in the twentieth century, so much of whose subsequent history he had clearly foreseen.<sup>33</sup>

While an interesting biographical nuance in itself, the representation of Nietzsche's non-fatal mental collapse in terms of his death, at least as the man known to his friends, is also interesting in so far as it presents a seemingly incongruent side to his character and, in particular, his philosophy. Like Boyd's hypothetical suicide, Nietzsche's collapse provides an interesting perspective to the self otherwise largely lacking in the broader account of his life. While Hollingdale is emphatic on the point of Nietzsche's philosophy being misrepresented following his collapse – in large part owing to the interference of his sister Elizabeth – this need not exhaust the possibility of a comparison between what the man thought and how he acted. As Nietzsche explained in his autobiographical work *Ecce Homo*:

I consider the overcoming of pity a noble virtue; I have written about the case of 'Zarathustra's temptation', where he hears a loud cry for help and pity tries to assault him, tries to lure him away from himself, like a final sin. To stay in control, to keep the height of your task free from the many lower and short-sighted impulses that are at work in

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29 R.J. Hollingdale, *Nietzsche: The Man and His Philosophy*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), 282.

30 Ibid, 285.

31 Ibid, 302.

32 Ibid, 302.

33 Ibid, 305.

supposedly selfless actions, this is the test, the final test, perhaps, that a Zarathustra has to pass – his real proof of strength.<sup>34</sup>

To the extent that this sentiment prefigures in his philosophy, however, it seems unlikely that Nietzsche wholly embodied it himself. As Safranski writes,

Nietzsche's compassionate disposition caused him to suffer. The philosopher who later assailed the morality of compassion displayed an almost osmotic sympathy. Nietzsche himself could not be nearly as cruel, callous, and ruthless as he later demanded from the *Übermensch*. His exquisite sensitivity to changes in people as well as fluctuations in the climate had unfortunate consequences. Although his mother and sister often humiliated and belittled him, simply because they could not understand him, he was compelled to feel compassion for them and suffered from an excess of forgiveness.<sup>35</sup>

Much the same observation could indeed be made of Nietzsche in the case of his mental collapse.

What, then, can be made from Nietzsche's encounter with the horse in Turin? If anything it shows the sensitive side to the human condition within himself which he envisaged as being entirely redundant in the figure of *Übermensch*. To the extent that this progenitor of man in a Godless world was part of Nietzsche's attempt to elucidate the obsolescence of Christianity, his final moments as a sane man showed how much he himself had not been able to discard that most Christian of tenets: pity.

Nietzsche was not alone in addressing the implications of nihilism as its spectre rose throughout the second-half of the nineteenth century. The presence of nihilism in the work of Fyodor Dostoevsky in fact alludes to what influence it may have had upon Nietzsche's own ideas. The similarity between Nietzsche's collapse and Raskolnikov's confrontation with a cab-driver in Dostoevsky's novel *Crime and Punishment* speaks directly to any such speculation. At all events, there is much else in the figure of Raskolnikov that bears comparison to Nietzsche's treatment of nihilism. As Joseph Frank explains in his biography of Dostoevsky, the Russian writer's engagement with nihilism was to some extent a response to the 'growth of a proto-Nietzschean egoism among an elite of superior individuals to whom the hopes for the future were to be entrusted.'<sup>36</sup> According to Frank,

Raskolnikov...was created to exemplify all the potentially dangerous hazards contained in such an ideal, and the moral-psychological traits of his character incorporate this antinomy between instinctive kindness, sympathy, and pity, on the one hand, and on the other, a proud and idealistic egoism that has become perverted into a contemptuous disdain for the submissive herd. All the other major figures in the book are equally integrated within Raskolnikov's fluctuations between these two poles.<sup>37</sup>

Dostoevsky's work in this sense reveals the writer's awareness of the dangers inherent to reactions to nihilism along the lines of those later proposed by Nietzsche. Other biographical details revealed by Frank are equally suggestive that this was indeed Dostoevsky's view. Where Nietzsche could

34 Frederich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*, ed. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 79.

35 Safranski, *Nietzsche*, 167.

36 Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: A Writer in his Time*, ed. Mary Petrusiewicz, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 484.

37 Ibid, 484.

see the problem of nihilism and sought to offer a solution, Dostoevsky offers even more prescience in articulating the potentially dire consequences of doing away with human instincts such as kindness and sympathy altogether. Franks' biography is especially revealing in its investigation of this aspect of Dostoevsky's personality, particularly in accounting for the days and moments leading to his death in 1881.

A key insight that Frank brings to Dostoevsky by examining his personal notes and correspondence is the depth of his religious belief in spite of his clear role in defining how hollowed out faith in Christianity was becoming in the course of the nineteenth-century under the auspices of reason:

Dostoevsky's notes reaffirm, in the very last month of his life, one of the basic beliefs that had sustained him ever since emerging from the Siberian prison camp in 1854. At that time, he had written the famous letter declaring that, "if someone proved to me that Christ is outside the truth, and that in reality, the truth was outside of Christ, then I would prefer to remain with Christ rather than the truth."<sup>38</sup>

As the time of his death grew closer, in Frank's account, the depth of Dostoevsky's belief only grew stronger. Nietzsche's collapse leading to his death presents a complicated insight to the self in so far as it seems incongruent in light of his philosophy. This is less the case in view of Frank's account of Dostoevsky's death from emphysema on 28 January 1881. In leaving his children with a final message consisting in a 'parable of transgression, repentance and forgiveness', writes Frank, Dostoevsky may have imparted 'his own ultimate understanding of his life and the message of his work.'<sup>39</sup> The public reception of Dostoevsky's death is equally portrayed by Frank as a consolidation of the self to the extent that it can be seen as fulfilling Dostoevsky's desire to unite 'Russian society into one harmonious whole linked by faith and love.'<sup>40</sup> This 'sublime chimera', according to Frank, came no closer to being realised than 'during the days where his body lay in its bier.'<sup>41</sup>

Although historically and geographically obscure from these key figures in the discussion of nihilism, our final biographical case study offers arguably the most poignant example of an individual's struggle to reconcile the human condition in light of 'the death of God'. Moreover, no more is this struggle apparent than in view of this particular subject's death. In his biography of the Australian historian Manning Clark, Mark McKenna depicts a man for whom death posed a particular urgency, who 'since his mid-twenties...had felt that death should not exist'.<sup>42</sup> From being left bereft of any answer to the question of death following the birth of his first son in 1939, writes McKenna,

Clark would go on searching for an answer for the remainder of his life – in love, in writing, in fame, and in Christ. Haunted by the ghost of death and racked by feelings of guilt for past sins, he wandered the earth seeking redemption through story – the stories he encountered in the old and new testaments, in literature, in Australia's past, and those he wove from personal experience.<sup>43</sup>

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38 Ibid, 913.

39 Ibid, 925.

40 Ibid, 928.

41 Ibid, 928.

42 Mark McKenna, *An Eye for Eternity: The Life of Manning Clark*, (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2011), 25.

43 Ibid, 25-26.

In a very real sense McKenna presents Clark as an embodiment of the existential angst argued by Gray as being so characteristic to modernity in line with the challenges which have beset religious truths. Moreover, according to McKenna, '[i]t was not only that death brought the end of consciousness that unsettled him; death was the one journey we have to make alone, and the closer he came to the end of his life, the more terrified he became of this final loneliness.'<sup>44</sup>

Implicit in its title as it is in McKenna's biography more broadly, Clark 'yearned for an *éternel*', with the works of figures such as Dostoevsky ever at hand he hoped for a sense that humanity transcended mere corporeality.<sup>45</sup> Arguably no moment captures the terror in which he imagined this ideal going unrealised than his death. As McKenna shows, for many who knew Clark there was a strong element of performance in his character; he was a man living and representing 'his life as one extended experiment.'<sup>46</sup> This played directly into his urge to overcome mortality and the abyss it threatened. By endeavouring to cultivate a mythical representation of himself, and in time embody it, Clark left any biographer with the central challenge of resisting an already written narrative, an existing account of the self as it he wanted it to be perceived. 'Clark', writes McKenna, 'courts his biographer at every turn'.<sup>47</sup>

McKenna's telling of his subject's death is truly interesting in this regard when he reveals a moment when Clark had the least control over how his life could be represented, while at once being a moment of genuine insight to the self. By no means can it be inferred from McKenna's description of Clark's death-scene that he was at all prepared to die, the helplessness with which he approached his imminent death being a defining moment of empathy between the author, subject and reader throughout the book. As McKenna offers the thoughts of Helen Rusden who was present in Clark's dying moments:

I was touching his leg as the ambulance men walked in, they came in just behind me, and there was terror in Manning's face, he was desperate to stay alive. The last things I remember him saying were 'Help me, I'm dying' and I can't remember if he said I don't want to die, but that was certainly the feeling I got, there was overwhelming feeling of terror, of him not being ready. There was absolute fear in his face. It was just this chaotic minute and he was dead.<sup>48</sup>

In death it then appears Clark unconsciously performed the starkest demonstration of one of the more resonant readings of his character. Whether his 'shy hope' of God's existence – and therefore the promise of eternity – was realised is beyond any biographical speculation.

What is more open to discussion is the liminal space that Clark so consciously occupied in the frame of modernity. Where God could once be thought of as providing some form of buffer to corporal existence following the moment of death, as the nineteenth-century gave way to the twentieth and beyond this was increasingly less viable an idea. As Pat Jalland observes in view of Australian society's particular orientation toward death in line with modernity, in so far as

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44 Ibid, 26.

45 Ibid, 22.

46 Ibid, 22.

47 Ibid, 29.

48 Ibid, 673.

[r]eligious faith gave Christian families a model of acceptance of death as the will of God [allowing] them to express sorrow in overtly emotional terms, using the language of the Bible, the Prayer Book and familiar hymns: this Christian language of consolation permeated the vernacular in a way unimaginable to many people today.<sup>49</sup>

Where this sentiment undoubtedly still exists in Australia and elsewhere, in Clark's case his acute sense of reflexivity and awareness with regard to the problems facing the self presented by modernity inhibited any possible spiritual consolation he may have received at death from being realised. By the same token, perhaps this same part of Clark led him to posit himself in Bonn on the morning after Kristallnacht in the place of his wife Dymphna, who was studying in Germany while Clark was in Oxford. To the extent that this was 'the beginning of his confrontation with the "age of unbelief"<sup>50</sup> his need to be present on this historic occasion, which confounded his understanding of what evil humankind was capable, may have undermined any concern he had for truth and posterity, not to mention the appropriation of his wife's memory. Apocryphal experiences aside, as this article has shown, Clark was at least not alone in confronting the problems inherent to modernity in light of the apparent fallibility of Christianity.

The complexities of the self in this sense appear as a phenomenon peculiar to the modern subject. And, as has been shown through considering the deaths of Nietzsche, Dostoevsky and Clark respectively, biography presents itself as a useful means of understanding the self as it navigates this terrain. Perhaps the best biography can hope for in this regard is to achieve but multiple, and at times contradictory, representations of the self. To achieve this what the genre needs is a suspension of any belief that the self can be perceived in its entirety so that its various representations, all the many 'aspects' of the self, can be comprehended or at least considered as the image of a subject is conveyed.

Given the place that death occupies within the negotiation of the human condition in modernity it provides fertile ground to understand one particular 'aspect' of the self. While not necessarily unique in the course of human history, the idea that death spelt the ultimate end of our consciousness, the extinguishment of the self, can be traced as a particularly modern phenomenon. Within this array of ontological uncertainty characteristic of modernity, the biographical representation of death may at times present an incongruent view of the self relative to the life lived, while at others function to consolidate a more cohesive representation of who a person was. In any event, the biographer's urge to elucidate the meaning of a subject's life – 'a vivid sense' of who they were – by way of their death is by no means a fruitless one. Rather, it offers one of the more insightful and empathetic engagements between all participants in biography.

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49 Pat Jalland, *Changing Ways of Death in Twentieth Century Australia: War, Medicine and the Funeral Business*, (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2006), 5.

50 Mark McKenna, 'Being There: The Strange History of Manning Clark,' in *Best Australian Essays 2007*, ed. Drusilla Modjeska, (Melbourne: Black Inc., 2007), 215.

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