

Hitchcock meets Kierkegaard: Selfhood and Gendered Forms of Despair in *Vertigo* and *The Sickness Unto Death*

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Abstract

The development of *Vertigo*'s main characters provide a detailed illustration of the dialectics of despair as analysed in Kierkegaard's *The Sickness Unto Death*, in particular of the so-called "masculine" and "feminine" types of failed selfhood. This article shows the relation of selfhood and despair to dizziness both in Kierkegaard's work and in Hitchcock's film, and it examines the religious subtext of *Vertigo*. The dramatis personae of Judy and Scottie are analysed by applying Kierkegaard's phenomenology of despair. They display a variety of failures to relate to their selves, like unconscious and conscious despair, possibility's despair, despair over the earthly and despair of the eternal. Moreover, they epitomize the gendered types of despair as depicted in *The Sickness Unto Death*: losing one's self in relation to someone, and obsessively striving for self-assertion at the cost of others.¹

I. Introduction

Scholars have acknowledged the Kierkegaardian atmosphere in Hitchcock's films, albeit only in passing.² One would think that in the case of *Vertigo*, the connection could be made easily, for instance to Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Anxiety* – after all, the work famously compares anxiety to dizziness.³ But surprisingly, such references are rare.⁴ Instead, Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) has simply been declared "a cinematic footnote to Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*",⁵ with Scottie being the Aesthete who cannot

¹ This paper has been presented at the conference *State of the Arts. Kierkegaard. Literature. Theatre. Music* at the Søren Kierkegaard Research Centre in Copenhagen, 2019. I am thankful for the helpful comments and the inspiring feedback from the participants.

² See Ken Mogg, "Hitchcock's Literary Sources". In Thomas M. Leitch & Leland A. Poague (Eds.), *A Companion to Alfred Hitchcock*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell 2011, pp. 28-47, and Alan Woolfolk, "The Dread of Ascent. The Moral and Spiritual Topography of *Vertigo*." In Palmer R. Barton, Homer B. Pettey & Steven M. Sanders (Eds.), *Hitchcock's Moral Gaze*, Albany: State University of New York Press 2017, pp. 237-252.

³ See *CA*, 61.

⁴ For example, Robert B. Pippin's study *Vertigo and the Anxieties of Unknowingness*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press 2017, does not consider Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Anxiety*. The only reference to Kierkegaard is given in a general comment on philosophy and film, when Pippin mentions Kierkegaard's interpretation of Don Giovanni (ibid., p. 3).

⁵ George Stack, "Vertigo as Existential Film", *Philosophy Today*, vol. 30, no. 3, 1986, pp. 246-264, p. 262.

commit himself to anything and just strolls through San Francisco, indulging in impossible romanticisms.

Such marginalization of Kierkegaard's relevance for Hitchcock's films is unjustified, as I will argue with regard to *Vertigo*. I will show how *Vertigo*'s characters move through a complex unfolding of various forms of despair as presented in *The Sickness Unto Death*.

I begin with recalling the narrative of *Vertigo* and continue with a reflection on vertigo as a symbol for existential disorientation both in Kierkegaard's work and Hitchcock's film, thereby disclosing the religious subtext of *Vertigo*. Subsequently, the characters' developments as failed attempts to achieve authentic selfhood is analysed by applying Kierkegaard's phenomenology of despair. Specific attention will be paid to the gendered types of despair.

II. Vertigo's Plot

Vertigo begins with a prelude on the rooftops of San Francisco: Detective John "Scottie" Fergusson (played by James Stewart) slips while chasing a criminal and dangles from a rain gutter. A policeman attempts to save him, but falls to death. From then on, Scottie experiences a spinning dizziness when he only steps on a kitchen ladder. He thus quits the police force.

The story starts to unfold when a remote college friend (Gavin Elster, played by Tom Helmore) asks Scottie to spy on his wife Madeleine (played by Kim Novak) and to protect her while she is "wandering" around San Francisco. Elster's explanation for his wife's behaviour: she is possessed by the spirit of her great-grandmother Carlotta Valdes, who killed herself at the age of 26, that is, at the same age that Madeleine is now.

And indeed, Madeleine seems to follow in her great-grandmother's footsteps. For instance, Scottie has to save her from drowning herself in the San Francisco Bay. After they have finally met like this (before, Scottie managed to stay unnoticed when following her, or so he thinks), they start "wandering about" together. Scottie is increasingly fascinated by Madeleine's beauty and her trance-like episodes. During a visit to the redwood forest and the nearby sea, Madeleine confides in Scottie that "there is someone within me, and she tells me that I must die." Scottie promises to help her and they kiss.

The next day, Madeleine turns up on his doorstep and tells him about a recurring dream involving a tower, a bell and an old Spanish village. Scottie identifies the place as the 150-year-old Spanish mission San Juan Bautista, which has been preserved as a museum. In order to convince Madeleine that her dream is based on her memory rather than the doings of a ghost from the past, Scottie drives her to the mission. There, they kiss again and confess their love for each other. However, crying out the words "it's too late – there is something I must do", Madeleine suddenly runs away. Scottie hurries after her, right into the church, but due to his acrophobia he is unable to follow her up to the bell tower. He hears a scream and sees her body falling down from the tower, landing on the roof of the mission building.

In an interlude we then watch Scottie's nightmare: he approaches an open grave and spirals endlessly into a void. The next scene shows Scottie in a mental hospital, totally apathetic and not even showing any signs of recognition when his old friend and former fiancée Midge (played by Barbara Bel Geddes) tries to break through to him during a visit.

After being dismissed from the hospital, Scottie restlessly wanders the streets of San Francisco, following women who resemble Madeleine from afar. He meets a

girl called Judy Barton (also played by Kim Novac), who – despite her brunette hair and her totally different way of speaking and behaving – somehow reminds him of Madeleine. She agrees to go on a date with him.

We then watch Judy write a letter to Scottie. She confesses that she was dressed up as Elster's wife Madeleine in order to lure Scottie into becoming a "made to order witness": With help of the story about the beautiful, possessed Madeleine, Elster and Judy led Scottie to the Old Spanish mission. Knowing that the acrophobic Scottie would not follow Judy up to the tower, Elster was hiding in the belfry with his wife, the real Madeleine. When he was sure Scottie was watching, he threw her down the tower. Like this, Elster was able to stage the murder of his wife as suicide. Scottie never reads this letter – when finished writing, Judy tears it to pieces, and thus Scottie does not get to know about the cruel charade – at least not at this stage.

When they go on the date, Scottie admits that Judy reminds him of someone else, and in the next couple of days he buys her the very same clothes she wore as "Madeleine". When he asks her to change her hair colour as well, they fight. In tears, Judy gives in to have her hair dyed a platinum-blonde, on the condition that Scottie promises to love her.

After this total make-over, Judy has regained her former Madeleine-look, and Scottie kisses her for the first time (at least that's what he thinks). But then Judy "accidentally" (?) puts on the necklace she has worn while impersonating "Madeleine", and Scottie now realizes what is going on. He does not tell Judy this, but instead urges her to drive with him to the Old Spanish mission. There he brutally forces her up the stairs until they reach the bell tower (his fear of heights has suddenly vanished). He confronts Judy with the murder. Judy admits everything, but she also begs him to love her, and they kiss. Suddenly a dark shadow arises from the stairs. Judy screams, backs

away and falls of the tower (or jumps; since she moves out of the frame, this is ambiguous). The shadow turns out to be a nun, and with the words “God have mercy”, she starts tolling the bell. The last shot of the film shows Scottie standing on the tower’s balustrade, looking down.

III. Dizziness and Selfhood

As mentioned above, when Kierkegaard’s thought is applied to Hitchcock’s movies, it is usually with reference to *Either/Or*. Regarding vertigo as the “existential symbol par excellence”, Stack notes that Scottie “escapes from the nagging anxiety in the face of possibility” and flees from “the responsibility of being a self.”⁶ But *Vertigo* does not only illustrate the unconscious despair of *Either/Or*’s Aesthete. Rather, all the film’s main characters move through the dialectics of despair as explained in Kierkegaard’s *Sickness Unto Death*. But first of all, what does dizziness have to do with it?

Throughout his work, Kierkegaard uses vertigo in order to describe various ways of failed selfhood. Because selfhood is complex, one can go astray in many ways. Vertigo therefore is a metaphor for a variety of symptoms, as John Hoberman has shown systematically.⁷ Most prominently, vertigo is associated with anxiety in the face of freedom. According to Vigilius Haufniensis, anxiety

may be compared with dizziness [*Svimmelhed*]. He whose eyes happen to look down into the yawning abyss becomes dizzy. But what is the reason for this? It is just as much in his own eye as in the abyss, for suppose he had not looked down. Hence anxiety is the dizziness of freedom, which emerges when the spirit wants to posit the synthesis and freedom looks down into its own possibility, laying hold of finiteness to support itself.⁸

⁶ Stack, “*Vertigo* as Existential Film, p. 258.

⁷ John M. Hoberman, “Kierkegaard on Vertigo”. In R. L. Perkins (Ed.), *International Kierkegaard Commentary*, vol. 19. The Sickness Unto Death. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press 1987, pp. 185-208.

⁸ *CA*, 81.

Quite literally and almost comically, this resonates with the first scene after the incident on the rooftops of San Francisco: While Scottie visits Midge, he suddenly becomes determined to get rid of his acrophobia through a gradual, controlled exposure to heights. He climbs on a kitchen ladder, and on each step he proclaims “I look up, I look down” – only to faint seconds later in Midge’s arms.

Scottie’s freedom is up for discussion in this early scene. Scottie announces that the next day the medical corset (which he had to wear since the accident) will come off and he will be a “free man”. When Midge asks him what he will do, now that he has fully recovered and quitted the police force, he replies: “Well, I’m not gonna do anything for a while. You know, don’t forget, I’m a man of independent means.” He seems to intend to use this freedom like the Aesthete in *Either/Or*, strolling around town, looking for pleasantries (and enjoying a drink in bars on “street-level”, as he tells Elster a bit later). Scottie does not want to face his freedom in a deeper sense, which is: deciding what to do with his life after the accident, whom to be when he cannot be a policeman anymore. There are many possibilities, and he is anxious about them, unable to commit himself, so he rather realizes none of them. Scottie’s anxious vertigo thus may be adequately described as “freedom’s disclosure to itself in possibility.”⁹

The scene furthermore reveals that Scottie’s acrophobia is not the result of the accident, rather, while dangling from the rain gutter he simply learned he had it all along – when looking back to that night, he mutters to himself “boy, what a moment to find out I had it.” This indicates that Scottie’s vertigo is more than just a psychosomatic symptom. If we assume with Kierkegaard that “dizziness, in the category of the psychical corresponds to what despair is in the category of spirit”,¹⁰ then the inci-

⁹ CA, 111.

¹⁰ SUD, 144.

dent on the rooftop only brought to the surface what was simmering in Scottie all along: “whenever that which triggers his despair occurs, it is immediately apparent that he has been in despair his whole life.”¹¹

IV. *Vertigo’s Religious Subtext and The Sickness Unto Death*

On first sight, the film appears to tell a spectacular, mundane story, adapted from the French crime novel *D’Entre les Morts* by Pierre Boileau and Thomas Narcejac (1954). But a comparison of the book and the film reveals immense changes of the original material, in fact, as Robin Wood observes, a “total transformation.”¹² The most prominent change is that in the film, the viewer gets to know earlier than Scottie that Judy was impersonating Madeleine.¹³ And when Flavières (Scottie’s counterpart in the novel) finally learns about the charade at the end of the book, he strangles Renéé (Judy’s counterpart) in a rage. The relation between the two main characters thus leads to different consequences in *Vertigo* than in *D’Entre les Morts*. Moreover, the nun tolling the bell at the end of the film does not appear in the novel at all.

Hitchcock also changed the location and added important symbols, which point to the eternal in general and Christian religiosity in particular. There is a constant presence of Christian symbols in the film like the Old Spanish mission, crosses, cruciform gestures, baptismal fonts, graveyards and Pietà scenes (e.g. Scottie carrying the unconscious “Madeleine” to his car after rescuing her from drowning in the bay). There are allusions to sin and the fall as much as to grace and paradise. The latter is hinted at by a colourful flower shop, in which Scottie to his very surprise ends up

¹¹ *SUD*, 24.

¹² Robin Wood, *Hitchcock’s Films Revisited* (revised edition), New York, NY: Columbia University Press 2002, p. 109.

¹³ For a detailed analysis of the change that took place when Hitchcock turned the novel into a film, see Barbara Creed, “Woman as Death. *Vertigo* as Source”. In R. Barton Palmer & David Boyd (Eds.), *Hitchcock at the Source. The Auteur as Adaptor*, Albany: SUNY Press 2011, pp. 239-253, and Robert J. Yanal, *Hitchcock as Philosopher*, Jefferson, N.C. & London: McFarland & Co. 2005, p. 55.

when following “Madeleine”. The sudden burst of colours and the effect it has on Scottie shows that he is not simply erotically attracted to a good-looking woman. Rather, as Warren argues,

Scottie becomes fascinated with a woman who knows the way into a beautiful place through a dark alley and even darker, ugly back hallway; fascinated with her visit to a grave and with the atmosphere of the church and graveyard itself, suggesting a breakthrough from this life to something beyond, like the dark alley and hallway leading to the beautiful flower shop.¹⁴

With this choice of locations and backgrounds, gestures and symbols, and also by having the camera sometimes occupy a high-up (god-like) position, Hitchcock adds a fine-spun religious subtext to the suspenseful events narrated by the French original. This opens up an existential-religious dimension, to which the characters fail to relate. The failure mirrors the cultural change that took place in the middle of the 20th century, when the psychotherapeutic thought world started to supersede religious traditions. Through the various forms of disorientation of his characters, Hitchcock depicts the effects this cultural shift had on the individual. As Alan Woolfolk notes, such critique is built on philosophical concepts created in the 19th century:

Hitchcock’s insights extend [...] toward a moral psychology that is reminiscent of the crisis psychology of European intellectuals such as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Freud. Indeed, Hitchcock depicts in *Vertigo* the crisis of individuals afflicted by the ills of both a dying ascetic culture and an emergent remissive culture [...] He prefers to describe the deficits of a self in a culture with a dearth of spiritual and moral demands, rather than the inner conflicts of one with too many.¹⁵

¹⁴ Charles Warren, “Offensive”. In Katalin Makkai (Ed.), *Vertigo*, London and New York: Taylor and Francis Group 2013, pp. 89-111, p. 101.

¹⁵ Woolfolk, “The Dread of Ascent”, p. 238.

We recall that Kierkegaard criticizes an institutionalized Christianity for falsifying and destroying its original values, especially the radical, unmediated responsibility one has for one's life, and for which one must justify oneself in front of God.¹⁶ Hitchcock is faced with a slightly different situation – a fully secularized culture –, but he draws the same conclusion: the expulsion of faith from the industrialized world deprives the individual of an authentic relation to itself.

Kierkegaard's crisis psychology helps to shed light on the behaviour of Scottie and Judy. Their development can be understood in terms of the dialectic of despair as analysed in *The Sickness Unto Death*. The manifold ways of despair are due to an intricate definition of selfhood. Kierkegaard (using the fictive voice of Anti-Climacus) defines a self as a relation of contradictions like the eternal (infinite) and the temporal (finite), possibility and necessity. In addition, to become an authentic self, one has to take a stand towards this relation – for instance, one needs to accept the necessities of being born in a particular time and into a particular social environment, but at the same time one should acknowledge the chances one has to determine one's life oneself. We are not simply the result of our upbringing or physical endowments and we are not just living in the present, fulfilling our immediate bodily needs. We believe in certain values and shape our lives through the decisions we make. Thus, we would usually agree that our self amounts to more than a socially, historically and physically determined existence, and this "more", as Leslie Howe puts it, "is the eternal in us, and it can be represented in us by love, the good, ethical life, or the search for God."¹⁷

But this is not yet sufficient to make for a proper self according to Kierkegaard. Only when the self becomes conscious of itself as relating to the contradictions mentioned above, only then it becomes fully what it is meant to be: spirit. If it is not

¹⁶ *M*, 41.

¹⁷ Leslie A. Howe, "Kierkegaard and the Feminine Self", *Hypatia*, vol. 9, no. 4, 1994, pp. 131-157, p. 133.

conscious of itself like this, spirit will only be “dreaming” in the self.¹⁸ However, being aware of one’s relating to oneself as a relation is still not enough in order to become an authentic self. According to Kierkegaard, one also needs to accept the fact that one is established by a power other than oneself – it is not up to us to decide whether we come into existence in the first place. One truly becomes oneself only when one relates to this power. Thus, “in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that establishes it.”¹⁹ This power Kierkegaard understands to be God.

Despair as failed selfhood thus includes three elements: the syntheses, (un)consciousness and the relation to God. This leads to a complex phenomenology of despair, which Kierkegaard calls the sickness unto death, with death meaning the spiritual death. It would go beyond the scope of this article to list all the types of despair. Let us therefore concentrate on the forms that *Vertigo*’s two main characters display, starting with Judy.

In the beginning, Judy does not show any signs that she is reflecting on her existence, so Anti-Climacus would say that like most people, she is in a state of *unconscious despair*. Coming from a humble working class background and having to fend for herself, the only thing she yearns for is money and status. With consideration of the constituents of a self’s synthesis, her despair can thus be defined as *despair of finitude*, which is to lack infinitude or the eternal. Judy helps to cover the murder of the real Madeleine because she imagines she would become Elster’s new wife, and

¹⁸ Compare to the *The Concept of Anxiety*, where vertigo is used to illustrate this state of selfhood: “Anxiety is a qualification of dreaming spirit, and as such it has its place in psychology. Awake, the difference between myself and my other is posited; sleeping, it is suspended; dreaming, it is an intimated nothing. The actuality of the spirit constantly shows itself as a form that tempts its possibility but disappears as soon as it seeks to grasp for it, and it is a nothing that can only bring anxiety. More it cannot do as long as it merely shows itself. [Anxiety] is altogether different from fear and similar concepts that refer to something definite, whereas anxiety is freedom’s actuality as the possibility of possibility. [...] Anxiety may be compared with dizziness.” *CA*, 61.

¹⁹ *SUD*, 14.

she later lets Scottie make her over in the hope that he will love her as a consequence. In this, Judy has lost the sense for reality. She does not want to acknowledge that she is dealing with two mad men who most probably will be her downfall (in fact, one made her a murder accomplice!). Anti-Climacus's detailed diagnosis would thus be that she suffers from an unconscious despair that is defined by a lack of infinitude *and* a lack of necessity. In Judy's worldview, "possibility outruns necessity" and her self "runs away from itself in possibility."²⁰ But more about Judy's despairing self later. For now, let us turn to Scottie.

Scottie passes through various forms of despair. As shown above, he has been in despair even before the accident on the roof happened. His former life as policeman can thus accurately be described as the very common *unconscious despair of finitude*, which is to lack infinitude.²¹ Before he dangled from the rain gutter and witnessed his colleague fall to death, he probably lived like Kierkegaard's philistine, fully immersed in immediacy and considering himself a successful, happy man. But, as Anti-Climacus remarks

the common view has a very poor understanding of despair. Among other things, it completely overlooks (to name only this, which, properly understood, places thousands and thousands and millions in the category of despair), it completely overlooks that not being in despair, is precisely a form of despair.²²

Recall that spirit is defined as "a relation that relates itself to itself in the relation."²³ Despair is thus "to be unaware of being defined as spirit."²⁴ Before the accident, Scottie's life did not include any reflection on himself. It is only through the newly expe-

²⁰ *SUD*, 35f.

²¹ *SUD*, 33.

²² *SUD*, 23.

²³ *SUD*, 13.

²⁴ *SUD*, 25.

rienced vertigo, only when he is not “functioning “anymore (from the common point of view), that he is confronted with himself. Here, the dialectic of despair shows itself: *through* despair, one becomes spirit: “Precisely because the sickness of despair is totally dialectical, it is the worst misfortune never to have had that sickness: it is a true godsend to get it, even if it is the most dangerous of illnesses.”²⁵

The accident on the rooftop turns Scottie’s vague, unconscious despair into a “despair over something earthly.”²⁶ As a consequence, he has a hunch that there is something in him that exceeds his immediate finite particularities. But he shies away from such reflections and does not draw any consequences for his life. All Scottie does is quitting the police force, “wandering” around San Francisco. He appears to be unwilling to decide what to do with his life, keeping all possibilities open (thus, displaying signs of possibility’s despair, like Judy). Meeting “Madeleine” then deepens his despair in two ways: first, her mysterious beauty feeds his imagination, which is a core drive of possibility’s despair. As Woolfolk notes, “in his aimless freedom, Scottie attempts to avoid the necessity of becoming a responsible agent by escaping into an impossible romanticism”²⁷ – after all, “Madeleine” is married to his college acquaintance and suffers from a mental illness, from which he, a retired policeman, is very unlikely to heal her.

Second, “Madeleine” directs his attention to the infinite and the eternal. As it often has been noted, Scottie is attracted to her because of her seeming relation to a beyond, to infinity (symbolized by the spiral of her bun), and to death.²⁸ But Scottie is merely flirting with the eternal, without relating to the eternal in himself. Thus he displays a “fantastical-ethical debilitation, the disintegration of a sensual, soft despair, in

²⁵ *SUD*, 26.

²⁶ *SUD*, 50.

²⁷ Woolfolk, “The Dread of Ascent”, p. 247.

²⁸ See Creed, “Woman as Death”; Warren, “Offensive”, p. 101; and Wood, *Hitchcock’s Films Revisited*, p. 115.

which individuals grope as in a dream for a concept of God.”²⁹ This ethical weakness later becomes apparent when Scottie discovers that Elster murdered the real Madeleine – the murder as such does not seem to bother him, whereas the idea that he has been tricked by Judy and Elster totally outrages him.

After Scottie witnesses what he thinks is the suicide of his beloved, he falls into a deep depression. Clearly, his despair has now intensified: from a despair over *something earthly* (his inability to continue working as a police agent) it has turned into a *despair over the earthly* (after the loss of “Madeleine”, everything else has become meaningless). Now it is only a small step to the “despair of the eternal”. As Anti-Climacus notes, the fact “that he attributes to something earthly such a great worth, or that he first makes something earthly into the whole world and then attributes such great worth to the earthly – this is in fact to despair of the eternal.”³⁰ Scottie’s nightmare (spiralling vortices, seeing himself fall into nothingness, moving towards an open grave) suggests that he indeed went through this dialectic movement and now despairs over the eternal. This is also in line with the film’s depiction of the failure of the therapeutic culture. Mozart’s symphonies, enthusiastically recommended by the musical therapist, do not help Scottie at all, as Midge notes when visiting him in the mental hospital. In fact,

no therapy can offer a cure for Scottie’s madness because the spectre haunting his nightmare is, as we learn in the dream sequence that leads to his madness, a terrifying image of his own death [...]. Prior to the rise of the therapeutic thought-world the extra-ordinary problems of the human condition were addressed within the context of religious and philosophical systems.³¹

²⁹ CUP, 544.

³⁰ SUD, 61.

³¹ Woolfolk, “The Dread of Ascent”, p. 240f.

Without such guidance, Scottie's situation dramatically worsens, as vividly described by Anti-Climacus:

The person in despair himself understands that it is weakness to make the earthly so important, that it is weakness to despair. But now, instead of definitely turning away from despair to faith and humbling himself under his weakness, he entrenches himself in despair and despairs over his weakness. In doing so, his whole point of view is turned around: he now becomes more clearly conscious of his despair, that he despairs of the eternal, that he despairs over himself, over being so weak that he attributes such great significance to the earthly, which now becomes for him the despairing sign that he has lost the eternal and himself.³²

Scottie might be dismissed from the mental hospital, talking and walking around as usual, but his despair has turned into an aggressive form. It has become *defiance*, that is, "despair through the aid of the eternal, the despairing misuse of the eternal within the self to will in despair to be oneself."³³ Scottie now displays what Anti-Climacus calls *masculine despair*. Meeting Judy, who incorporates feminine despair, accelerates the dialectic of despair for both.

V. Feminine and Masculine Forms of Despair and Becoming a True Self

The various phenomena of despair described in *The Sickness Unto Death* are additionally categorised as two basic forms of despair: "In despair not to will to be oneself"³⁴ and "in despair to will to be oneself."³⁵ Anti-Climacus identifies the former with the feminine, and the latter with the masculine, admitting that these are ideal categories, whereas in reality, women and men display both. However, he also holds that devotedness is the essence of woman: "In devotion she loses herself, and only then is she happy, only then is she herself; a woman who is happy without devotion, that is

³² *SUD*, 61.

³³ *SUD*, 67.

³⁴ *SUD*, 49.

³⁵ *SUD*, 67.

without giving her self, no matter to what she gives it, is altogether unfeminine.”³⁶ The problem with such seeming disposition is, as Sylvia Walsh points out, that “in abandoning or throwing herself altogether into that to which she devotes herself woman tends to have sense of self only in and through the object of her devotion. When that object is taken away, her self is also lost.”³⁷ In contrast, man’s nature is self-assertion; he has an “egotistical concept of the self.”³⁸ Woman is perceived to give herself by instinct, lacking intellectuality. Since the latter is needed for reflection, and since self-consciousness is considered necessary to fully become spirit, women according to this classification would achieve a lesser self than men.³⁹

Judy shows all signs of losing herself in devotion and submitting herself to the will of others. However, she does not fully fit into Anti-Climacus’ classification. She consciously dedicates her time to help Elster camouflaging his murder as suicide. And the letter that she tears apart tells us that she is very much aware of what she will get herself into should she decide to continue meeting with Scottie. She also seems to be aware that she is losing herself. This becomes evident in the dialogue between her and Scottie, when they are fighting about his demands to make her over:

J.: Why are you doing this? What good will it do?
 S.: I don’t know. I don’t know. No good, I guess. I don’t know.
 J.: I wish you’d leave me alone. I want to go away.
 S.: You can, you know.
 J.: No, you wouldn’t let me. And I don’t wanna go.
 S.: Oh Judy. Judy, I tell you this. These past days have been the first happy days I’ve known in a year.
 J.: I know. I know, because... ‘Cause I remind you of her. And not even that very much.
 S.: No. No, Judy. Judy, It’s you, too. There’s something in you that...
 J.: You don’t even want to touch me.
 S.: Yes, yes I do.

³⁶ *SUD*, 50.

³⁷ Sylvia I. Walsh, “On ‘Feminine’ and ‘Masculine’ Forms of Despair”. In R. L. Perkins (Ed.), *International Kierkegaard Commentary*, vol. 19. The Sickness Unto Death, Macon, GA: Mercer University Press 1987, pp. 121-134, p. 124.

³⁸ *SUD*, 49.

³⁹ See Howe, “Kierkegaard and the Feminine Self, p. 150.

J: Couldn't you like me, just me, the way I am? When we first started out, it was so good. We had fun. And... and then you started in on the clothes. Well, I'll wear the darned clothes if you want me to, if you'll just like me.
 S. [stares at her in silence, then]: The colour of your hair...
 J.: Oh, no!
 S. Judy, please. It can't matter to you.
 J. [in tears]: If... If I let you change me, will that do it? If I do what you tell me, will you love me?
 S.: Yes.
 J.: All right. All right then. I'll do it. I don't care anymore about me.

Judy's willing self-negation is almost painful to watch. We witness an existential form of vertigo as depicted by Sartre, who understands masochism as "a kind of vertigo, vertigo not before a precipice of rock and earth but before the abyss of the Other's subjectivity."⁴⁰

Judy agreed to have her appearance and behaviour changed once before (when Elster turned her into "Madeleine"). But with Scottie, it is different; it includes more despair. In a way, there still was an egotistical element involved when she let Elster change her looks, her way of speaking and her demeanour. After all, she was very much interested in taking up the role of the future Mrs Elster! Her motives were money and status, so she was devoted to Elster out of calculation. Even though the wish to become someone else (Elster's new wife) indicates that she suffered of the despair of not willing to be herself, she did not totally give up her sense of self yet. This only happens in her relation to Scottie. Here, she is consumed by her wish to be loved by Scottie, and this makes her vulnerable to his radical endeavour to keep *his* sense of self at all costs – that is, at her costs.

After "Madeleine's" death, Scottie's despair becomes the most intense version of the masculine form of despair: he is in defiance, desperately wanting to be himself. Instead of accepting that his concept of self was previously built on false grounds (he was obsessed with an *image* of a woman, getting carried away by his *projections*),

⁴⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, transl. by H. E. Barnes, introduction by M. Warnock; with a new preface by R. Eyre (2nd edition), London: Routledge 2005 (originally published 1943), p. 400.

and subsequently modifying his self-understanding, he tries to change the circumstances: He is now obsessed with recreating his “Madeleine” and the relationship he thought he had with her.

Of course, this is not possible. When Judy puts on Carlotta’s necklace and thus reveals that she actually has been “Madeleine” all along, Scottie finally realizes that he built his sense of self on a fraud. This leads to a dramatic acceleration of events. Both Judy’s and Scottie’s despair now has fully risen to the surface and is drastically depicted as sickness. But in Kierkegaardian terms, in these darkest moments despair’s dialectic reaches its strongest potential: “Ultimately this is still a step forward, [...] simply because this despair is more intensive, it is in a certain sense closer to salvation.”⁴¹

Why is this a step forward? We must not forget that Kierkegaard’s definition of selfhood is indispensably built on the Christian concept of God. In the pain of despair, one can either go deeper into despair or accept that there is a power which has established one’s existence and on whose mercy one can rely, if one only gives up one’s profane understanding of selfhood. Thus one “must go through the despair of the self to the self [...] the self must be broken in order to become itself.”⁴² It is important to note that in this kenotic approach, it is the former “weak” mode, the feminine way of selfhood that leads into the right direction: “In the relationship to God, where the distinction of man-woman vanishes, it holds for men as well as for women that devotion is the self and that in the giving of oneself the self is gained.”⁴³ As Walsh argues, the feminine devotedness can even be regarded as exemplary – if it is the right kind of devotion, that is, to God or to the love of neighbour: “Since the self has its ground in the eternal, which consists essentially in love, and one’s chief task in

⁴¹ *SUD*, 62.

⁴² *SUD*, 65.

⁴³ *SUD*, 50.

life is to actualize that quality, it would seem too that devotion to the eternal would properly be given expression in and through one's relation to others."⁴⁴

The tower scene at the end of *Vertigo* suggests that Judy has changed. Once they arrive at the Old Spanish Mission, there is no room for doubt anymore – she knows that Scottie knows, and yet, she lets herself be taken up the tower again. Her despair of not wanting to be a self has thus slightly shifted. It has become selfless love for Scottie, the desire to help him, the madman who announces she will have to serve as a “second change” to free himself from his trauma: “I need you to be Madeleine for a while now”. What this precisely implies is alarmingly unclear, at least for the spectator. And the brutal way Scottie pushes Judy up the stairs to the bell chamber indicates everything but love from Scottie's side. Still, it is out of love that Judy decides to contribute to Scottie's re-staging of “Madeleine's” death. She loves him so much that she wants to heal him, also at the cost of her own death. This might even suggest a development from the wrong, desperate way to lose herself in order to be loved to a higher sacrificial devotion. And in fact, from a Kierkegaardian perspective, Scottie truly is saved, even though he might not understand this himself yet. After he has lost Judy, *Vertigo's* last shot shows him on the tower's balustrade, with his arms helplessly raised in a cruciform posture.

Now, to conclude that Scottie is a Christ-like figure would surely go to far.⁴⁵ But this image shows that something has happened to Scottie: he has realized his obsession, and he accepts that his desperate attempts to cling to his self-understanding have been wrong. In the end, Scottie gives up his defiance. The final reference to the central Christian symbol fits well with the fact that the Old Spanish mission is conse-

⁴⁴ Walsh, “On ‘Feminine’ and ‘Masculine’ Forms of Despair”, p. 127.

⁴⁵ Also Neil Hurley, commenting on this cruciform posture, notes that it remains “open to speculation whether the mantle of Christ fits the shoulders of Scottie Ferguson”; Neil P. Hurley, *Soul in Suspense. Hitchcock's Fright and Delight*, Metuchen, NJ & London: The Scarecrow Press 1993, p. 153.

crated to San Juan Bautista, that is, to the performer of baptism through which one dies and is born to a new life.⁴⁶ This resonates with Kierkegaard's emphasis on kenotic selfhood, after all it is "through the aid of the eternal [that] the self has the courage to lose itself in order to win itself."⁴⁷ Thus, Judy's death helped Scottie to finally reach the state of true selfhood. At first glance, this might seem absurd, given the sadness and loneliness Scottie expresses in the last shot. But let us not forget that authentic selfhood does not necessarily equal happiness, rather it is a state in which the self relates to itself, accepts itself and "rests transparently in the power that established it."⁴⁸

What gets lost in the English translation of that sentence is its mystic heritage. The Danish original reads "grunder Selvet gjennemsigtigt i den Magt, som satte det."⁴⁹ According to the mystics widely read in 19th century Denmark (Meister Eckhart and Johannes Tauler), the self becomes one with God in its "ground."⁵⁰ Thus, there is something in the self that is divine. I think that Scottie refers to this when he tries to explain his attraction to Judy, stammering "there is something in you that...", without being able to define what this precisely is. Thus, I opt for a different perspective in contrast to the commonly held interpretation according to which Scottie's fragmentary sentence simply refers to "Madeleine's" declaration "there is someone in me, and she says I must die." In a way, this declaration is still correct: in order to become a true self that relates to the divine, one has to give up one's convenient self-

⁴⁶ See Warren, "Offensive", p. 104.

⁴⁷ *SUD*, 67.

⁴⁸ *SUD*, 14.

⁴⁹ *SKS* 11, 130.

⁵⁰ Which is not the same as becoming identical with the divine. The latter is something that Kierkegaard strongly criticized, highlighting the "qualitative difference between God and man" (*SUD*, 117). For Eckhart's and Tauler's "mysticism of the ground" see Bernard McGinn, *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany (1300-1500)*, New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company 2005, pp. 83-93.

understanding – to die to yourself, as Kierkegaard would say.⁵¹ And in Judy's case, her relation to the divine as love actualizes itself in a literal self-sacrifice.

To be clear: this is *not* to say that suicide in any way could be a mode to devote oneself to God, quite to the contrary. Kierkegaard's concept of dying-to-onself strictly and unambiguously refers to the *metaphorical* death of the all-too-earthly and convenient versions of one's self-understanding.⁵² In addition, also when it comes to less extreme cases of making sacrifices for someone – which Kierkegaard regards as essential demonstrations of Christian love – he stresses that “no human being has the right to think that his [or her] suffering will be atoning or beneficial for others [...]. No, this would make him [or her] more than human.”⁵³ Thus, from a Kierkegaardian perspective, Judy's death as much as Scottie's final self-renunciation is dependent on divine grace. This resonates with the last words of the film, spoken by the nun: “God have mercy.”

⁵¹ See *FSE/JFY*, 76.

⁵² See Hjärdís Becker-Lindenthal & Ruby S. Guyatt, “Kierkegaard on Existential Kenosis and the Power of the Image: *Fear and Trembling* and *Practice in Christianity*”, *Modern Theology* vol. 35, no. 4, 2019, pp. 706-727, and Hjärdís Becker-Lindenthal, “Kierkegaard's Reception of German Vernacular Mysticism: Johann Tauler's Sermon on the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross and *Practice in Christianity*”, *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* (forthcoming).

⁵³ *JP* 2, 362. According to Deidre Green's interpretation of Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*, “Kierkegaard's concept of love demands that individuals not be content with being victims of oppression or participants in excessive self-sacrifice”, because this would allow the other to remain in evil, sinful behaviour. Deidre N. Green, “Works of Love in A World of Violence: Kierkegaard, Feminism, and the Limits of Self-Sacrifice,” *Hypatia*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2013, pp. 568-584, p. 574. According to this reading, Judy would have saved Scottie by resisting his attempts to make her over, by not joining him for a second trip to the Old Spanish mission and by not re-enacting “Madeleine's” death.