A *Friendship in Twilight. Lockdown Conversations on Death and Life*, Jack Miles & Mark C. Taylor (Columbia University Press)

Mark C. Taylor is, according to *Wikipedia*, 'a postmodern religious and cultural critic. He has published more than twenty books on theology, metaphysics, art and architecture, media, technology, economics, and postmodernity.' That means he comes at these things mostly as a philosopher, his theology informed by and dependent upon language and thought and art, more Wittgenstein than study of religious texts. That *Wiki* description doesn't really do him justice: his books include studies of tattooing and piercing, specific conceptual and avant-garde artists, landscape design, the notion of silence, human perception of time, network cultures, pedagogy and the nature of universities, and *Imagologies* was one of the first books of media philosophy, written collaboratively about the then-developing internet and digital technologies. This man clearly thinks and thinks clearly about everything.

Since 2004's *Grave Matters* there have been a number of publications dealing with death, including *Field Notes from Elsewhere: Reflections on Dying and Living* (2009), *Last Works: Lessons in Leaving* (2018) and *Abiding Grace: Time, Modernity and Death* (also 2018). Like much of his work these are difficult books which deconstruct and process ideas, often using the theories of thinkers such as Kierkegaard, Hegel and Derrida (who Taylor knew).  *A Friendship in Twilight* is perhaps part of this series of books, but it is also something different.

The back cover blurb suggests the book is Miles and Taylor's 'plague journal', a series of 'raw and searching letters', which reflect on (American) politics, the pandemic, catastrophe, literature, art, life and death. I'm not sure I'd call the writing raw, but it is intelligent and questioning, and the dialogue is intriguing, with Miles, a professor of religious studies and a former Jesuit, in many ways a more traditional believer than Taylor's philosophical stance allows.

Neither, however, offer platitude or emotion as a way to talk to each other. If anything, the book suffers from the opposite, to the extent I longed for a bit of everyday joshing along with the high-flying references, allusions and debate. In a discussion about the construction of memory and recall of same, Miles tells Taylor that '[y]our intriguing connection of algorithm and olfaction reminds me, too, that in the human brain, the amygdala, controlling olfaction, is close to the memory centre, which is why scent is so powerfully able to evoke memory. Or so it has been argued.' Well, yes, smell is a strong trigger for memories, along with music.

Elsewhere there is serious debate about Trump [remember him?], the spread of covid, and death. 'Eternity and nothingness – two sides of the same coin' says Taylor, before moving his discussion across the topics of black holes, cosmic webs, finite minds and infinity, ending his letter with a brief description of his garden and 'the harsh winter that lies ahead'. Miles offers a robust reply, noting that Taylor's 'intellectual bias is always away from individual agency and toward large processes, either imponderable in principle or else perceptible by a visionary few.' This, continues Miles, means that 'rather than seeing fascism as the work of fascists, you [Taylor] elaborated a vision of technological determinism yielding political outcomes.' Miles 'own bias' is 'toward personal rather than impersonal agency'.

It's heady stuff, and if at times it is rather elevated and academic, this correspondence clearly offered a lifeline of thoughtful dialogue rooted in long-term friendship which helped offset both the difficulties of life in lockdown, and the awareness that 'It's always a question of time. The clock is ticking-ticking for you, for me, for people lying in hospital beds, and ticking for the planet.' Taylor has been seriously ill in the last few years and it has clearly affected him, along with much that was happening politically, socially and naturally. But Taylor is not simply raging against the dying of the light, he and his friend Jack Miles are still both thinking hard and offering us their opinions, processes, ideas and conclusions to the perplexing questions they feel enabled and challenged to answer.

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