

ALASTAIR HANNAY, *Kierkegaard* (London: Reaktion Books, 2018)

Kierkegaard's life seems to have been branded by the influence of a father understood in a pre-Freudian manner as a substitute for God and by his ambivalent desire for Regine Olsen, his "muse", his feminine ideal, the Platonic priestess, and inaccessible fiancé. His ambivalence prefigures Dostoevsky's conflict between happiness and freedom (with the corollary that human beings rarely prefer tragic heroism to "cheerful slavery") and something else, which can be called "the Nietzsche strategy": to seek alliance with one's greatest enemy against oneself. Kierkegaard presents this trait, obviously morbid and psychopathological, of turning the weapons of reasons "against himself" (p. 25), and of poisoning his own happiness. His rejection of the affective fulfilment is reminiscent of the Freudian death drive, more specifically of anhedonia (the lack of pleasure), a symptom of clinical depression. Queen Elizabeth's terrible declaration from *Richard III* describes Søren's ordeal: "I'll join with black despair against my soul, / And to myself become an enemy" (II, 2).

Kierkegaard, "the author of a series of curiously innovative and strangely disturbing books" (p. 9), is often credited as being the father of existentialism. We can record the birth of existential philosophy in an early fragment from his journals (1 August 1835). In the so-called "Gilleleje Testament", the 22-year old Søren, expresses something that is still relevant for us, not only as philosophers, but also as flesh and blood human beings: "What I really need is to be clear about *what I am to do*, not what I must know, except in the way knowledge must precede all action. It is a question of understanding my own destiny, of seeing what the Deity really wants *me* to do; the thing is to find a truth which is truth *for me*, to find *the idea for which I am willing to live and die*" (p. 33).

We often forget that we must individually explore the *essence of existence*, needing to find the personal "meaning of life" in a universe ordinarily devoid of meaning. We are "first and foremost" caught in the machinery of "levelling" (Kierkegaard anticipates Heidegger here); we act as robots caught in the web of work and consumerism or as sleepwalking "slaves to the wages": like Ivan Ilyich, Tolstoy's character, we only realize too late that we haven't lived at all, that our existence was a living death. Finding "a truth which is truth *for me*" is a task similar to Buddha's awakening: liberating the "self" from the deceptive dictatorship of the Heideggerian "they self" (*das Man*), becoming an individual in spite of distortions and harassments of the "system".

Kierkegaard emphasizes in the same fragment from his journals that existential truth is higher than philosophical (or logical) truth, suggesting that the practice of existentialism understood as individual quest for meaning is more

important than any other theoretical or objective endeavour: "What use would be in this respect if I were to discover a so-called objective truth, or if I worked my way through the philosophers' system and were able to call them all to account on request, point out inconsistencies in every single circle?" (p. 34) One feels that Kierkegaard is a sort of para-philosopher (as Hannay calls him in another book) and would despise the tendency of philosophy to become a verbal and derivative enterprise. "The philosopher's originality comes down to inventing terms", writes the Kierkegaardian Cioran, adding that "we are engulfed in a pleonastic universe". Woody Allen (another artist influenced by Kierkegaard) has Abe Lucas, the philosophy professor from the movie *Irrational Man*, say: "So much philosophy is just verbal masturbation".

In other fragments from the journals we find traces of depression: "I have just come back from a party where I was the life and soul. Witticisms flowed from my lips. Everyone laughed and admired me – but I left, yes, that dash should be as long as the radii of the earth's orbit ————— and I wanted to shoot myself." (p. 55) If the tone of this notation is reminiscent of the deep melancholy of the Romantics (Keats and Leopardi come to mind), the bold manner of writing heralds Lautréamont and Surrealism. In another fragment (from 2 February 1839), we find an erotic portrait of Regine that brings to mind Don Giovanni's unbridled libido: "Everywhere, in every girl's face, I see a trace of your beauty, but it seems to me that I would have to have all the girls in order to extract *your* beauty from all of theirs" (p. 64).

An excerpt from *The Concept of Anxiety* prefigures not only existential philosophy, but also existential psychotherapy (for instance R. May and Yalom) and theology (Barth and Tillich): "Whoever has learned to be anxious in the right way has learned the ultimate" (p. 103). Kierkegaard's seminal definition of anxiety as an "ontological affect" (through anxiety we become aware of Being) and his insistence that anxiety differs from fear in that it has no particular object anticipate Heidegger's *Being and Time* and Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, the two main works of existential phenomenology from the 20th century. We should point out that the way in which Heidegger treats Kierkegaard in *Being and Time* is almost embarrassing: "In acknowledging his debt to 'S. Kierkegaard', however, Heidegger finds Kierkegaard's treatment of the *Existenzproblem als existenzielles* too constricted by its Hegelian framework" (p. 177). Heidegger's inability to recognize Kierkegaard's influence in the constitution of the existential concepts of anxiety and authenticity reminds us of the Freud's "bad faith" regarding Schopenhauer's and Nietzsche's anticipation of unconscious and repression.

Another idea from Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* foreshadows Kafka: "...in a world where everyone was trying to make things easier, it was time 'to make difficulties everywhere'" (p. 131). In my view, Kierkegaard's radical "inwardness" reveals that there is no (easy) way out: there is only a (difficult)

way in (how to become a “self”). We remember Kafka’s famous aphorism: “My prison cell – my fortress”. Kierkegaard shows that the “aim of Christianity is not to bring us cosily together in congregations; it is ‘isolating, singling out ... polemical.’” The individual “must ‘put himself in order to find God’” (p. 117). Kierkegaard’s extreme attack upon the Danish Church from the last year of his life points out the simulation and hypocrisy of state religion (or the distinction between true *belief* and *belief in belief*) and can be contextually discussed along other works of religious deconstructionism from the 1830’s and 1840’s (David Strauss, Max Stirner, Ludwig Feuerbach): “I hereby repeat my objections: I would rather gamble, booze, wench, steal, and murder rather than take part in making a fool of God, would rather spend my days in the bowling alley, in the billiard parlor, my nights in games of chance or at masquerades than participate in the kind of earnestness Bishop Martensen calls Christian earnestness” (p. 151).

Due to Hannay’s flawless knowledge of the life and work of the Danish author, some of the confiscations of Kierkegaard’s philosophy seem awkward to him: for instance, Marcuse’s claim that “Kierkegaard’s work was ‘the last great attempt to restore religion as the ultimate organon for liberating humanity from the destructive impact of an oppressive social order’” (p. 176) or the bizarre-sounding volume *Kierkegaard and Political Theory: Religion, Aesthetics, Politics and the Intervention of the Single Individual* (p. 173).

We could say, using a Schopenhauerian distinction, that there are at least two types of Kierkegaard commentators: those who live *for* Kierkegaard, and those who live *from* him (“Today his relevance for academic discussion in many areas is taken for granted”, notes Hannay, p. 171). There could be another type: those who live *like* him. To be an existentialist in the 1840’s, to live in such an “inclosing reserve” that one has almost no contemporaries, to understand Christianity so deeply that one almost becomes heretic and one goes outside its limits (or proves that Christianity goes outside itself, like Feuerbach’s religion of appearance), to prove that Platonic love still exists, to argue that the individual is everything and that the system is nothing (to reverse a propaganda phrase from Nazi Germany quoted by Ernst Jünger): these are some ways in which we can be like Kierkegaard today, in a zeitgeist shaped by tumultuous waves of post-structuralism.

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