KIERKEGAARD'S JOURNALS

EVEN in the abridged form of the English translation[1] the *Journals* of Kierkegaard are not to be read at a sitting, or even in a series of consecutive sittings. Their thought is at once too concentrated and their range too vast. Covering his jottings and reflections *de omni re scibili et quibusdam aliis* over twenty of his most creative years, the *Journals* could perhaps be assimilated in scarcely less a span. Not, therefore, a book to borrow. But emphatically a book to possess, to browse in and to browse upon, to open and to close at well-spaced intervals which allow ample time for digestion, for assimilation and rejection. A book to feed upon, for it contains in epigrams and tabloid essays the marrow of his thought. But for that very reason a book which, consumed gluttonously, must infallibly produce biliousness and dyspepsia accompanied by dizziness and nausea.

There will be some who find Kierkegaard indigestible and nauseating anyway. And that not only for the reasons which he himself anticipated; the reasons which would reflect upon his readers rather than upon himself. Not only, that is to say, because 'every man is afraid of the truth,' and 'between man and truth lies mortification,' or because he sought 'to tear the veil from human twaddle and from the conceited self-complacency with which men try to convince themselves and others that man really wants to know the truth' (1153).[2] Not only because of the 'scandal of the Cross' which he proclaimed, fully understanding that if you 'act just once so that your action expresses the fact that you fear God alone and do not fear men: you at once "scandalise" people,' and that 'whatever avoids "scandalising" is only what, out of fear of men and human respect, conforms entirely with worldliness' (1116). Nor yet only because of the 'severity' of his apprehension of Christianity, of which he could write, 'I realise that my suffering as well as my guilt makes me need Christianity on a vast scale, though I am always afraid of making it too difficult for others, who may not perhaps require it on the same scale. But that is a worry which neither the God-Man nor an apostle could have—but then I am only a poor human being' (1060).

---

[1] *The Journals of Sören Kierkegaard.* A Selection edited and translated by Alexander Dru. (Humphrey Milford : Oxford University Press; pp. lxi, 603; 25s.)

[2] Numbers refer to Mr. Dru's useful marginal numbering in the English edition.

But it is that very poverty of his humanity which may scandalise and repel. And indeed the fascination which Kierkegaard can exercise is not easy to explain, still less to analyse or defend. To those who are insensible to his spell, who find him in fact an insufferable bore, there is nothing to be said, except that the loss is their own. But nor is there any answer to those who find him an insufferable egotist, to those who find him a prig, to those who, recalling his treatment of Regina Olsen, agree with his contemporaries in branding him as a cad. There is no answer to those who find him eccentric, introverted, morbid. There is no answer but to agree with all these charges, and to enforce them by recalling that he was all these things quite consciously, quite consistently and quite deliberately. His very psychoses he cherished and fostered, raising them to the level of consciousness, subjecting them to volition, the more to endure and enjoy the torture of being an 'exception.' He was odd, wilfully odd, and persevering in his oddity, and while detesting it choosing it as a vocation and a martyrdom (907); while desiring to be as the rest of men and, while quite capable when he chose of being a wit, a *flaneur*, a social success, nostalgic for society, choosing the ridicule which he loathed of 'the common man' (1092).

Yet he believed,

> 'Just as in a case of herrings, the top layer is crushed and spoiled, and the fruit next to the crate is bruised and worthless, so too in every generation there are certain men who are on the outside and are made to suffer from the packing case, who only protect those who are in the middle' (541).

There is a martyrdom, in some respects more fearful than physical torture: 'Which is harder,' he asked, 'to be executed, or to suffer that prolonged agony which consists in being trampled to death by geese?'

The martyrdom, though occasioned from without, was self-imposed, deliberately chosen and artificially stimulated. Deliberately and confessedly he would make mountains of mole-hills, major tragedies of trifles. He cultivates self-pity and makes of it a burden to himself and his acquaintance. Kierkegaard, the *Journals* convince us, would be a tiresome person to live with. Nor is his tiresomeness that which we sinners may understandably find in sanctity. Kierkegaard was no saint; we shall profit nothing from him unless we understand that he was very much a sinner, and that in proudly seeking to 'suspend' and 'transcend' the ethical he fell in fact very far below the ordinary standards of tolerable conduct. Over against 'the man who has grown so inwardly familiar with God that, like John of old, he may be said to lie upon the divine breast,' he is more akin to 'the man who in his bestial brutality misunderstands and wants to misunderstand all the deeper emotions . . . for whom even the simplest thing is difficult' (16). Yet there is nothing exciting or splendid about his sins. He is no Don Juan, though he could portray the debauchee and the seducer as no debauchee or seducer could do. He is no Prometheus defying omnipotence, though his life is one incessant wrestle with the Angel. His pride is not the pride of Lucifer, but the refinement of vulgar vanity. But no more are his sins those common lapses of human frailty which call for human sympathy and indulgence. His egotism is unrelieved by even the affectation of modesty, let alone redeemed by any convincing sign of genuine humility. He could quite shamelessly and deliberately cause others to suffer and exploit their sufferings to feed his own conceit, and then whine like a spoiled infant at their ingratitude for his exploitation of them. He *was* a prig and a cad. He was the most inconsiderate and complaining of wilful hypochondriacs:

> as faint as a Sheva, as weak and forgotten as a Dagesh lene, feeling like a letter printed upside down, as unmannerly as a Pasha with three tails. If what is said of happiness, that those who are conscious of their good actions are already rewarded. were true of unhappiness, how happy would a hypochondriac of my proportions be, for I take all my cares in advance and yet they all remain behind . . . . As jealous of myself and my scribblings as the National Bank of its, and altogether as reflexive as a pronoun (312).

If he was a ' martyr,' there was no silent, joyful fortitude in his martyrdom; he was no of the *exercitus candidatus,* but of the unsaintly and exasperating band of those who ' make martyrs of themselves.'

Yet if, in common with some of his critics, we imagine that in condemning Kierkegaard's character and conduct to our satisfaction we have thereby disposed of Kierkegaard, we shall be making a great mistake. As great a mistake as his misguided apologists who seek to whitewash his character and explain away his conduct. On the contrary, in recognising them we have taken the first step—but no more than the first step—towards understanding his work and profiting from it. On the one hand, indeed, he is no ' objective ' thinker (in the post-Kantian sense) whose thought can be appraised independently of his life; he is an ' existential ' thinker in whom there is the inextricable ' fusion at every stage of the work with the person,'[3] and ' for him "to express existentially" was more than a matter of literary style, it was indeed to stake his personality on the truth he expressed and to back his work with his life.'[4] But on the other hand, it is his work and not his life which is his gift to us. Tiresome he doubtless was, but we are not called to live with him. Vain and self-centred he doubtless was, but he never set himself up as a saint or as a model for our approval or imitation. He appealed from human justice to divine, from the objective, 'rational-ethical' to the divine 'Absurd,' assured even in contending with God that God would judge him in accord with his 'exceptional' calling. To that Tribunal we must confidently leave him lest in condemning him we be condemned.

---

[3] Theodor Haecker. *Sören Kierkegaard.* (Oxford University Press. 1937.)

But his work is ours. That work could not have been the same had his life not been the same. We are to learn not *from* him but *through* him—as he had learned not from but through Regina Olsen (761). Through him we may learn what no 'saner' man and no saintlier man could have experienced to tell us. His lack of sanctity, and even of what we may regard as sanity, was his loss; but we cannot justly deny him the satisfaction of asserting that his loss is to that extent our gain.

We will not here attempt to appraise or analyse his many-sided genius. Of that enough and more than enough has been written by others. And, thanks to the enterprise of the Oxford University Press in translating his works, we now possess in our own tongue sufficient material to judge of its astonishing depth and its still more astonishing breadth.[5] If we have not yet in English any samples of the simple beauty and childlike wisdom of his more 'popular' writings, those of us who have no Danish may know of it in the excellent French of Monsieur Tisseau.[6] But it is in his *Journals* that we are enabled to meet him most 'existentially' and at his most 'existential,' and from his *Journals* that we may learn most of the immense range of his insight.

---

[4] Bernard Kelly in *The Thomist,* July, 1939.

[5] In addition to the *Journals* we now have the *Philosophical Fragments* and *Fear and Trembling,* of which he wrote: 'once I am dead, *Fear and Trembling* alone will be enough to immortalise my name' (965). The vast range of his interests and the power of his thought are also illustrated in the many passages quoted in Theodor Haecker's little book and Dr. Lowrie's voluminous study, both published by the Oxford University Press.

What strikes us first in reading Kierkegaard is his profound, his almost uncanny, understanding of human nature; an understanding which could have made him, had he wished it, one of the greatest of novelists. Leon Chestov in a suggestive essay[7] has indicated some of the more subtle parallels between Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky; but a more obvious parallel lies in their researches into the 'underworld' of human nature, their revelation of the hidden springs of human activity, the complexity of human motives and the vastness of human powers and propensities for self-deception: the mystery of iniquity within us all. In isolating himself from the common run of men whose elemental instincts are unconsciously repressed, or consciously suppressed and sublimated, Kierkegaard establishes in effect a new community with what is common to, though hidden, in all men. In becoming an 'exception' he establishes a new affinity with 'the common man,' and perhaps what scandalises us most in reading him is the scandal caused by self-recognition. In psychological terms he reveals the Unconscious. In theological terms, he opens new vistas of the havoc caused by original sin.

Introspective, supremely self-conscious and self-analytic, sophisticated about the elemental, Kierkegaard typifies and reveals to himself the 'modern type' of man, the last overripe fruits of a great civilisation. In so doing he is, though a pioneer, not unique. But what gives him his unique interest and his unique importance is his revelation of that ' modern man ' face to face with his God, of the ' Individual as the Individual standing in an absolute relation to the Absolute,' naked, but not at all ashamed. He is ' modern man ' with all his self-knowledge and all his ' natural goodness ' with its concomitant vanity, battered by the *tourment de Dieu.*

---

[6] Published by the translator at Bazoges-en-Pareds, Vendée, France.

[7] *Kierkegaard et la Philosophie Existentielle (Vox clamantis in Deserto); En Guise d'Introduction.* (Paris: Vrin.)

So he sets for us in a new and a contemporaneous form the problem of the tension of grace and nature: human nature as conditioned by its recent history and its present environment. He is, we have said, no proud pagan Prometheus defying divine Omnipotence. But nor is he a pre-Christian Job contending with the mystery of divine Justice. His problem is a Christian problem, the problem of modern man confronted by the far more terrible mystery of the infinity of tireless divine Love, and wanting only to be ' let alone.'

It is no new problem: it is a problem which is set wherever the awareness of divine Love as manifested in the Incarnation is confronted by human self-sufficiency. It is the hackneyed problem which *The Hound of Heaven* romanticised, and by romanticising sterilised. Kierkegaard faces it with ruthless realism—but can never meet it with complete personal surrender.[8] The God of Love of the New Testament is to him indescribably more terrible and more ' cruel ' than the God of Justice of the Old. Here we may see how his experience of human love with Regina Olsen conditioned his apprehension of love with God, and how, in his own words, he was to make of the 'sting in his flesh a sting in the side of the world.' So he could write:

---

[8] We cannot here discuss how far this surrender was hindered by a pathological and non-moral sense of guilt, how far by moral weakness, and how far by the defects in his ' existential ' philosophy which misled him into supposing that surrender to the ' Absurd ' must involve the sacrifice of ' Socrates,' *i.e.*, of reason. But this last factor is fundamental in any adequate Catholic appraisal of his life and work.

> Perfect love means to love the one through whom one became unhappy. But no man has the right to demand to be thus loved. God can demand it; that is infinite majesty. And it is true of the man of religion, in the strictest sense of the word, that in loving God he is loving him through whom he became unhappy, humanly speaking, for this life—although blessed (1096).

Years before he had prayed:

> Father in Heaven! When the thought of thee awakes in our hearts let it not awaken like a frightened bird that flies about in dismay, but like a child waking from its sleep with a heavenly smile (248).

But that joyful tranquillity in Christianity he was never to find in this life, and within a few days he had learned:

> The first impression of Christianity is so beneficent, so powerful in transforming our whole spirit in a single moment, that there is no wonder that like the disciples we wish to remain upon the mountain and to put up our tent there; but like the disciples we must come down from the mountain again. . . . (253).

It was not that he failed to recognise the presence also of what he called the 'leniency' in Christianity, but 'to put an end to coquetry I had to introduce severity—introduced just for the sake of giving impetus in the direction of the leniency of Christianity' (1072). It was the hideous treason of that 'coquetry' with infinite Love that angered him, for he understood that:

> In order really *to love God* it is necessary to have *feared* God; the bourgeois love of God begins when vegetable life is most active, when the hands are comfortably folded on the stomach, and when the head sinks back into the cushions, while the eyes, drunk with sleep, gaze heavily for a moment towards the ceiling (150).

He insists that we take the Love of God seriously, and his insistence is all the more poignant because he was ever to find that Love too much for himself to bear. He addresses God:

Deep down in my soul you implanted the blessed assurance that you are love. You treated me paternally, like a child, and impressed the same thing upon me a second time, and proved to me that you were love. Then you were silent for a moment, you wished to try my strength a little, to see whether I could do as much without the proof. Then all grew confused for me. I grew so frightened and afraid, imagining too that it was infinitely above me, and I was afraid I had gone too far . . . (1117).

But there were moments too of ecstatic understanding.

This is all I have known for certain, that God is love. Even if I have been mistaken on this or that point: God is nevertheless love; that I believe, and whoever believes that is not mistaken. If I have made a mistake it will be plain enough; so I repent—and God *is* love. God *is* love, not he *was* love, nor: he *will be* love, oh no, even that future was too slow for me, he *is* love. Oh, how wonderful. Sometimes, perhaps, my repentance does not come at once, and so there is a future—but God keeps no man waiting, he is love . . . . (1102).

Such moments were rare. Not for long could he find the yoke of Christ easy or His burden light. But it was insufferable to him that the burden should be adjusted to human selfishness and human comfort.

I have often said that Christianity can be presented in two ways: either in the interest of man (an extenuating adjustment) or in the interest of God (true Christianity). I have also said that if I do not succeed or dare to present Christianity in the latter form I shall admit it and keep the place free . . . Christianity is not a little moralising and a few articles of faith; Christianity is the reckoning between God and the world . . .

And now, long after Christianity has, as it is expressed, conquered and deposited a culture, Christianity and the world are so mixed up that the question must be expressed once again in a new potency: is Christianity of God or of man?

That is what filled people with enthusiasm in the early days of the Church, they felt quite literally that it was God's matter which was being fought over, not just a few dogmas, but whether God was to be God.

My very humble work is: to make people aware. I admit that I dare do nothing more—yet I am a cry of alarm (1192).

He knew that the 'adjustment' of Christianity by

Liberal tolerance was not only a treason to the truth of Christ, it was also bad policy:

> Official preaching has falsely represented religion, Christianity, as nothing but consolation, happiness, etc. And consequently Doubt has the advantage of being able to say in a *superior* way: I do not wish to be made happy by an illusion.
>
> If Christianity were truthfully presented as suffering, ever greater as one advances further in it, Doubt would have been disarmed . . . (1208).

* * * * * *

Kierkegaard was a Protestant and an inheritor of Protestantism. His problem was, he believed, the problem set by that inheritance—the problem of the individual soul, wrested from the society of the *communio fidelium,* and left in its solitude to face its God unaided by the support of an *Ecclesia* or by the mediacy of its priesthood. His problem was, as he said of another's, the problem set by 'the isolation of the individual as conditioned by the Reformation' (121). Already in 1838 he realised that.

> There are, after all, few men equal to bearing the Protestant view of life, and if it is really to be a source of strength to the average man it must either constitute itself into smaller communities (separatism, conventicles, etc.), or become more like Catholicism, so as in both cases to promote a communal bearing of the burden of life in society, which only the most gifted individuals can afford to be without (192).

In 1854 he concluded:

> Protestantism is quite untenable. It is a revolution brought about by proclaiming 'the apostle' (Paul) at the expense of the Master (Christ) (1387)

So his last years were engaged in his bitter attacks on the 'official' religion of his country; the religion which, in aiming too high for human capacities, had ended in the supreme betrayal of evacuating Christianity of the Cross.

Mr. Dru, in a footnote to his excellent Introduction, wisely warns us against exploiting for polemical ends the bouquets he throws at Catholicism and Catholic institutions or the brick-bats he throws at Protestantism.[9] But it remains true that his understanding of the issue between Catholicism and Protestantism is profoundly illuminating. From his nostalgia for the Church, from his yearning for the community of the Middle Ages, from his shrewd reflections on Catholicism as the promoter, and Protestantism as the degrader, of sane humour, there is much to be learned. Catholics may perhaps learn more to prize their heritage from one who so keenly sensed the lack of it than from many who, possessing it, take its blessings for granted. Yet Kierkegaard, who had no illusions of false modesty regarding his own importance for posterity in the subsequent evolutions and revolutions in Continental philosophy, and who might even have foreseen the radical revolution he was to effect through 'dialectical theology' in Protestant thought and spirituality, might well be astonished to witness the extent of his influence on those Catholic thinkers of to-day who are most closely at grips with contemporary spiritual problems. He could scarcely have foreseen that the pages of a Theodor Haecker, a Peter Wust, an Ida Coudenhove, an Erich Prszywara, a Gabriel Marcel, a Marcel de Corte would be permeated by his influence; that it would be a Catholic who would edit his *Journals* so skilfully and translate them so devotedly from his own 'dialect' into English.

But the importance of his religious thought and experience, even, and perhaps especially for the Catholic reader, is manifest. Though the problems with which he wrestled were genetically Protestant problems, they are not essentially or exclusively such. The problems of solitude and its tensions are heightened rather than diminished by integration into society,[10] and Kierkegaard himself well understood that the Church should be no *échappatoire* from personal responsibilities and individual and immediate relations with God:

---

[9] 'S.K.'s increasing dissatisfaction with Luther and Protestantism, and a tendency to mark their shortcomings in relation to Catholicism, is not a "result" to be used, but part of his work in bringing a "corrective." Most of his criticism holds good against easy-going Christianity of any sort. But he is nevertheless open to the crudest misconstruction, and the apologist, whether Catholic or free-thinker, would have no difficulty in making second-hand use of his "god-fearing satire"' (p. liii).

> Who is to show us the middle course between being devoured by one's own reflections, as though one were the only man who ever had existed or ever could exist, and—seeking a worthless consolation in the *commune naufragium* of mankind? That is really what the doctrine of an *ecclesia* should do.

* * * * * *

But for all of us the supreme value of Kierkegaard lies in his penetration of the meaning of Faith; his apprehension of the way to Faith from self-sufficiency through the abyss of ' inborn dread ' intensified by conscious ' fear and trembling,' to the saving ' folly ' of Faith in the 'Absurd.' This is the *leitmotif* both of his life and his work, the theme to which he constantly recurs. He claimed, characteristically, ' It is clear that in my writings I have given a further definition to the concept faith, which did not exist till now.' It is a claim a Catholic must dispute; but if much he wrote is false of Faith, it is supremely true of Hope.[11]

It is this that gives to Kierkegaard his peculiar relevance in these dark days. He himself, in the heyday of the technical and political triumphs of the nineteenth century, foresaw much of the anguish those very triumphs were making for posterity. He saw in 1850 how

> The railway mania is in every sense a second Babel. It belongs to the end of a period of culture, it is the final spurt . . .

---

[10] An article on Christian Solitude by S. von Radecki, *Die Schildgenossen*, May, 1939, is illuminating on this point.

[11] The Catholic reader should constantly bear in mind that for Kierkegaard, brought up as a Lutheran, the concept of simple *fiducia* is paramount in his idea of what he calls Faith.

> The railways are related as a heightened potency to the idea of centralisation. And the new period is related to dispersion into *disjecta membra.* Centralisation will probably be the financial ruin of Europe (1066).

He saw how a cheap press ' ensures our not missing any filth or sediment ' (1068), and establishes the triumph of unreason: ' It is the masses that really rule the State: and with the assistance of the daily press nonsense is all powerful ' (1082). He foresaw how the triumphs of democracy must breed the tyranny of totalitarianism: ' Think of the liberal constitutions, those incomparably perfect discoveries —the pride of the human race—and it arouses longing for an Eastern Despotism as something more fortunate to live under ' (1068). He saw that ' the tyranny of equality, communism, is the most terrible tyranny,' and that ' the men in the service of the levelling process are the servants of the power of evil, for levelling itself does not come from God, and all good men will at times grieve over its desolation; but God allows it and desires it in order to bring the highest into relation with the individual ' (quoted p. xxix).

For there are times when, if men are to regain Faith, their Reason must be abased; when to have Hope they must be driven to despair. It is the bitter lesson which, it would seem, divine Love has determined that our age should learn, and few can help us to learn the lesson so well as Sören Kierkegaard. For the agony of our time is less the unprecedented physical suffering than the agony of the triumph of unreason, the being ' trampled to death by geese,' the loosing of the irrational forces of destruction. *Le monde entier retentit de cette colère des imbéciles.*[12] It is the *impasse* of the practical reason before the insoluble dilemmas of events: the impotence of might in the service of right. It is the paralysis of the ' rational-ethical ' before the moral issues which confront it: ' the ultimate problem and the deepest anguish of mind . . . when the Christian finds himself faced with a situation in which he is convinced that war is a duty but the methods of war a crime.'[13]: the ineluctable dilemma of the unjust war and the unjust peace; the irrationality of events which demand destruction calling upon destruction to destroy destruction—the casting out of devils by Beelzebub.

---

[12] Georges Bernanos : *Les Grands Cimetieres sous la Lune.*

Kierkegaard will not solve these problems for us, nor has he any balm with which to assuage our anguish. On the contrary, he will cast us deeper into the abyss by showing *why* no human solution and no human consolation may be possible. He is not, he will insist, *the* Exception, but a *vox clamantis in deserto* showing the way to The Exception. But he may help us to understand the purpose of the chastenings of infinite Love, and how, when the human spirit stands impotent before its destiny, it may rise again by Hope in the 'Absurd'—the humanly Impossible, the divinely Possible which, St. Thomas explains, is Hope's proper object. He will help us to see the purposes of Providence in a world run mad. He will show us how the pagans' *Quem Deus vult perdere* is changed by Christianity into *Quem Deus vult SALVARE—prius dementat.*

VICTOR WHITE, O.P.

---

[13] Gerald Vann, O.P.: *Morality and War*, p. 43.