

KIERKEGAARD AND THE SELF BEFORE GOD: ANATOMY OF THE ABYSS by Simon D. Podmore, *Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2011, pp. xxviii + 248, \$ 24.95, pbk*

The *malin plaisir* of deconstruction, as a species of literary criticism, lies in exposing what good authors manage to hide from their readers; namely, the rhetorical procedures by which the former ensure their sway over the latter. It is probably the most innocent of all wicked pleasures, since its function is to highlight the multifarious facets of an accomplished manner of writing. Accordingly, the adepts of deconstructionism have a hard time dealing with works which have already been carefully deconstructed by their authors. This is a sure way of throwing these angels of literary destruction into a chasm of perplexity. From this point of view, Kierkegaard is the *nemesis* of deconstructionism. The explicit intent of Kierkegaard's theory of 'indirect communication' is to prevent his readers from differentiating the author's voice amid the heterogeneous and often squarely opposite views upheld by the pseudonyms invented for that purpose. The only coherent understanding that should arise from this field of energetic contradictions is that of the reader. Interpretation is the coming-to-be of a human being as a distinct person. This makes the task of presenting the thought of Kierkegaard rather difficult, as if it could be compared to that of other philosophers or theologians.

Simon Podmore's *Kierkegaard and the Self before God: Anatomy of the Abyss* deftly sails between the Charybdis of a self-deceiving hegelianizing synthesis and the Scylla of coerced apophaticism. The only hitch is that the book has forgotten to tell its readers why. One could presumably make up for this deficient epistemology by stating that this is more an essay about Kierkegaard than a study on Kierkegaard. While dedicating a substantial part of his book to discussing secondary literature on Kierkegaard, Podmore feels free to draw parallels with thinkers (Foucault, Levinas, Derrida, Marion, among others – beware, the whole French gang is on the prowl!) and issues (the Holocaust) that have little or no explicit connection with Kierkegaard. There are quotations galore from Kierkegaard's works, but no classification and analysis on more objective grounds than the thread of Podmore's unrestrained meditation. In a very Kierkegaardian way, the fundamental insight of Kierkegaard is as much an object of Podmore's investigations as an opportunity for him to speak his mind, under the pseudonym of Kierkegaard, on issues discussed by contemporary philosophers.

What about this insight then? Trying to summarize Podmore's interpretation of it, I would claim that it is the perception of sin as pertaining to the core of existence and as instrumental to the unfolding of the authentic Self. This is more than enough to make any Thomistic (Catholic) mind shudder. True, the subtle but pivotal distinction between the goodness of the natural order and a damaged faculty of self-determination, as simultaneously coexisting and interacting in the children of Adam, is a liability of the whole Lutheran universe. Be that as it may, the most Thomistic theologian will not deny that the root of inherent human brokenness lies in the finitude of the created condition. The fissure of sin is contained in the indefinite distance between the created and the uncreated which conditions the production of actually existing minds out of nothing. When Kierkegaard speaks about an 'infinite qualitative difference', he has precisely in mind sinfulness as the existential depth in which the indefinite distance between the created and the uncreated reflects as in a mirror. In addition, the relevance of Thomistic dialectics between natural goodness and frailty of the will relies on an interpretation of Christ's salvation as a concrete dynamics leading human beings from their fallen state to a supernatural condition of union with God. By contrast, Kierkegaard's goal is not to describe the elements of a transformation process, but to identify *the correct existential position* that a disciple of Christ should assume vis-à-vis God.

In this line, Podmore presents Kierkegaard's path towards God as a steadfast contemplation of the abyss, the multiple aspects of which – remorse, melancholy, anxiety, doubt, despair – are submitted to an unceasing exertion of inner criticism in view of finally reaching this 'correct' understanding of personal existence in the light of Christ. Being the immediate opposite to bourgeois self-satisfied (un-) Christianity, the confrontation with the *Afgrund*, the bottomless dimension of existence, is a possibility which is integral to human consciousness. There, according to Podmore's Kierkegaard, God reveals his face and, inseparably, an authentic notion of the Self comes into sight. God is never more directly apprehended than when he appears as the defiant Stranger against whom Jacob-Yishrael wrestles in the dark (p. 90f). The true Self is what emerges from the crushing experience of God's holiness as one faces the abyss of one's ingrained sinfulness. From this point of view, Podmore establishes an interesting connection between Kierkegaard's specific emphasis on the experience of God's holiness and Rudolf Otto's concept of the numinous (p. 68f). For both authors, true religion is about dealing with the 'Wholly Other'. Podmore misses, however, the opportunity to dwell upon the paradoxical – at least from a Barthian perspective – convergence between Otto's pan- or trans-theistic approach and what Kierkegaard considers as the cutting-edge of untainted Christian faith.

It is not easy to describe how Podmore's meditation makes its way towards what is presented as Kierkegaard's final view on the purpose of Christian existence. There are no clear-cut boundaries between the different aspects of Kierkegaard's thought which are examined in turn. Nor is the logic underpinning the progress of the reflection from one chapter to the other very much apparent. The reader is left to cull elements that seem more interesting than others out of an often quite repetitive philosophico-spiritual narrative. Manifestly, contemplating the abyss is about sinking without trying to escape. What about reaching the bottom then? How does that feel?

One can hardly dismiss as irrelevant the idea that forgiveness is the ultimate reality onto which Kierkegaard's 'infinite qualitative difference' opens. What God's forgiveness means cannot be grasped unless one has taken the measure of the immeasurable distance between the creature and the Creator. What the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Lk 18:9–4) teaches is that 'casting one's gaze downwards, one is actually enabled to stand before God with an uplifted face' (p. 154). The 'final discovery' is that 'God has actually defied that very distance' (p. 169). This interpretation of Kierkegaard's ultimate wisdom, since it touches on the core of the relationship between the personal subject and God, as indicating its *Sollen*, presents a striking similarity with the logic of Luther's most decisive insight. In order to take place, the discovery of God's unjustifiable grace of justification must come out of a merciless inner face-to-face with one's sinfulness and, consequently, the consideration of God's legitimate wrath against the one who yearns most after Him. Podmore rightly expands upon the affinity between Luther's notion of *Anfechtung* and Kierkegaard's use of *Anfoegstelse* (p. 120f). In contrast to *Versuchung, temptatio*, which threatens faith from without, *Anfechtung, impugnatio*, threatens faith from within, as it whispers into the ears of the sinner that the possibility of ever deserving his or her faith is lost from the very first moment of its coming to be. Podmore is much less convincing, however, when he tries to spell out a fundamental difference between Luther's and Kierkegaard's points of view. If it is true that the devil plays a more prominent role in the reflection of Luther, he is certainly not the '*alter Deus*' against whom Kierkegaard directs the arrows of his theological irony. What Kierkegaard criticizes as a wide-spread distortion of Luther's message is an excessive emphasis on the devil's manoeuvres to win over religiously troubled minds, thus reducing God to a semi-powerless entity. Kierkegaard appears to be struggling to restore a correct understanding of Luther's insight: the reference to the devil is nothing

more than a means to realize the deepest nature of our relationship to God. Yet if this is the case, the ultimate wisdom of Kierkegaard comes forth as much less original than Podmore presents it. Forgiveness is another word for justification as long as it tells about the divine and entirely sovereign decision to withhold a well-deserved punishment. Accordingly, the question arises whether applying the Lutheran pattern of ‘sudden-illumination-through-existential-despair’ to express Kierkegaard’s fundamental insight does justice to Kierkegaard’s originality as a thinker.

Kierkegaard might well think of the religious stage as higher than the ethical, the aesthetic stage being placed lowest (*Concluding Unscientific Postscript*). Should we, however, conceive this succession in a linear manner that could equivalently be described in the theological terms of Luther’s quest for God or in the philosophical terms of Hegel’s indefinitely recursive *Aufhebung*? What makes Kierkegaard’s view on the truth of religion compelling is that it coexists with other truths of an ethical or an aesthetic kind which are not negligible or overturned for being of a less profound nature. Paying due tribute to M. Bakhtin, one could speak of Kierkegaard’s ‘monological polyphony’ as easily as one nowadays evokes Dostoevsky’s ‘dialogical polyphony’. Reading Kierkegaard feels like listening to a concert of soloists. In order to appreciate fully the relevance of Kierkegaard’s thought on divine forgiveness, to grasp the meaning of this *possibility*, one would need to hear all the contrapuntal themes that deal with the issue of the constitution of the Self in Kierkegaard’s works. Kierkegaard is definitely not Luther. But, as Podmore rightly emphasizes, Kierkegaard is not Sartre or Foucault either. Claiming that the subject will exist as long as there is a *cogito*, and that God cannot be dead as long as there exists a thinking subject, is, indeed, more in line with Descartes. Showing that these considerations are crucial to the very notion and survival of Christian faith remains, in my estimation, the main achievement of Podmore’s book.

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