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KIERKEGAARD: HAMLET OR JEREMIAH?

I

DR. RIVIÈRE's article in the last number of THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY came as one more of many indications of a sudden interest in Kierkegaard. It must always be one of the curiosities of literary history that this writer, who died so long ago as 1855, and who has proved one of the greatest intellectual forces of an age, in Scandinavia, in Germany, and in France, has never yet been translated into English. Dr. Rivière has quoted some of the superlatives that have been applied to him. One might add to these and make the wonder grow still deeper that England has been so long indifferent. Let it suffice here to quote from a volume of essays by the late Professor Robertson of London University, who says that Kierkegaard is "the writer who holds the indispensable key to the intellectual life of Scandinavia". Must Ibsen and Strindberg, then, as well as Karl Barth and Brunner, be counted as his offspring?

There is, indeed, a rather slight volume of *Selections* in English (University of Texas, 1923), from which Dr. Rivière makes some quotations. The Dragon Press of New York published in 1932 *The Diary of a Seducer* (edition of five hundred copies), of which Dr. Rivière does not appear to be aware. But nothing more in English, and nothing at all in England, has been published of the writings of one who is admitted by those best qualified to judge to be among the half-dozen or so outstanding influences in literature, philosophy and religion of the nineteenth century.

Yet interest is awakening. Last year, besides the essay by Professor Robertson, there appeared two small books *about* Kierkegaard, one of which appends thirty-six pages of extracts from his writings. These are *Kierkegaard, his life and thought*, by E. L. Allen (Stanley Nott, 6s.), and *Søren Kierkegaard, his Life and Religious Teaching*, by John A. Bain (S.C.M. Press, 4s. 6d.). These have been well reviewed, Herbert Read remarking in the *Spectator* that there is likely to be much traffic down this road shortly. Professor Denis Saurat, on the other hand, in the *New English Weekly*, congratulated Mr. Allen that his book had laid a ghost. Kierkegaard, said Professor Saurat, was a ghost

that had long been troubling Europe, but in England the ghost had now been laid before it had begun to walk.

II

Thus the issue is raised with which it may be profitable briefly to deal. If Kierkegaard is but a ghost, it is true the ghost has been laid by these two books. But if there is a more substantial reality in him, then we may expect some reckoning with it will be demanded of our generation.

Both books are quite small. They are indeed most admirably lucid essays on their subject. One might fairly have expected of them something in the nature of an introduction, in the sense that they should awaken interest, but invite us to keep our minds open and postpone judgment until a closer acquaintance with the writings of Kierkegaard himself might become possible. Instead of such an introduction, what we get is an analysis and explanation that suggest we have here an abnormal specimen in the museum of thought. We are invited to note that a certain oddity once actually existed, and then turn elsewhere in our quest for light and leading.

But it is this attitude of the authors of these books that is the true oddity. It is this attitude that must in turn submit to be analysed and explained. It is an attitude characteristic of our time, and especially perhaps of England in our time, and may perhaps explain why publishers have taken it for granted until now that a translation of the writings of Kierkegaard would find no public.

Note how both authors proceed. They seek to explain (that is, explain away) the teaching of their subject from the facts of his own peculiar experience of life. For example, his father was fifty-seven years old at the time the son was born; the link that bound him to his father in affection was very strong; consequently he was brought up an "old-fashioned" child. This fact, of interest in the field of psycho-analysis, is made to bulk large in these accounts of the life and teaching of one of the greatest thinkers of last century. It was inevitable, therefore, that the tragedy of a broken engagement should be mentioned—and much more than mentioned, treated as something that set up a hidden bias in the man's mind. And so it is with the other significant circumstances of his life—his quarrel with Martensen,

his feud with the scurrilous paper *The Corsair*, his attack on the Church. These are supposed to explain his teaching.

In a sense they do. No great teacher can have any influence unless he teaches what he knows. And he truly knows only what he has felt. But there is a distinction to be made. A man may have felt deeply without having knowledge. In other words, emotion has a disturbing influence in his life. He represses the knowledge of it, tries to forget it, refuses to face up to it, and as a consequence becomes unable to estimate and express the truth about human experience. This is what our modern psychologists recognize when they employ themselves in tracing the insincerity that runs through the sentimentalism, for example, of Charles Dickens. There was a man, like many of his time, who felt keenly, but either would not or could not think clearly. But the distinction that must be made is evident as soon as we state that all we know about Kierkegaard we know because he himself has told us. There is no need here to ferret out dark secrets, hidden even from his own consciousness. If ever a man knew himself, that man was Kierkegaard. A good case could be made out against him for being too explicit. But no charge can lie against him of having hidden from reality.

This is the distinction that Mr. Allen and Dr. Bain have failed to make. Instead of regarding the tragedy of the man's life as a special qualification to speak with authority of faith in God through Christ, they assume that the tragedy gave his mind a twist, if it did not even disqualify him from being a teacher at all. Yet one might have expected a recognition that such a clear reading of his own heart as is almost without parallel elsewhere should predispose us to expect some profound reflection upon that ultimate question to which Christian faith is the answer, the question, namely, "Is life worth living?" Here is a man whose life was melancholy simply because he would take no short cuts to happiness, and would not seek in flight from himself a refuge from reality. Here is one who was so resolved to do justice to emotional values that he could write that *Diary of a Seducer* (which is just what its title says it is) and could prove himself a great critic of art and letters, worthy of a book devoted to him in this capacity by his fellow-countryman Brandes. None had a keener appreciation of Greek philosophy than he, and if he did not find himself in agreement with the Hegelian philosophy current in his day it was not because he was behind

others in power of intellect. Doing utter justice to the aesthetic nature in himself and giving full value to the life of the senses, and doing utter justice to the intellectual nature and the demands of morality, and finding that all ways led to dread and despair before God, he represented faith as beginning where a man's dependence on himself left off. To discount his teaching because of the circumstances of his childhood, or because of the tragedy of his youth, when it is just from himself that we learn of these, is to raise a very important question indeed.

III

Let us try to propound the question. Perhaps it might be phrased in some such terms as these : " Must we postulate a ' normal ' mind, in the sense of the mind of one who has not been too much storm-tossed in his experience of life, or at least has entered the comparative calm of forgetfulness, before we can expect to attain to true thoughts about God ? Or is it not rather the abnormal in experience, the mighty wind, the driving seas, and the tension of a dangerous situation, that is the first postulate of Christian faith ? "

To the present writer it seems that this statement of the question contains in it some explanation of the fact that Calvinism is to so many people to-day quite unintelligible. It is so utterly different from the optimistic and accommodating version of Christianity that is the present vogue. Without wishing to beg the question as between these two, we suggest that here also is to be found some explanation of the modern lack of interest in the Bible. If the man of to-day finds the Calvinism of yesterday unintelligible he consoles himself with the reflection that his fathers were not so " advanced " in their thinking as he is. (We refrain with difficulty from ironical comment.) But when he finds much of the New Testament to be equally unintelligible, he is reluctant to tell himself that it is because he is more " advanced " in his thinking. He suspects that this is not true.

We must go farther back. We must examine our presuppositions. What is it we are taking for granted about life ? Do we take it for granted, with the psychologists, that all that is tragic is abnormal, and that clear thinking depends upon our ignoring or upon our forgetting of tragedy ? This would seem

to be a common assumption of to-day. It renders unintelligible not only a "theology of crisis", not only Barth, Calvin, Augustine and Jeremiah, but the New Testament itself. For the assumption there is that tragedy is of the very essence of human experience. It is to people whose sincerity dares to acknowledge this that the Gospel is addressed.

Kierkegaard, as Dr. Rivière well pointed out, stresses not the continuity but the discontinuity of experience. In particular he distinguishes between the aesthetic and the moral planes of living, and between the moral plane and the plane of faith. The life of the senses can never be complete in itself. In all Greek art one is conscious of a trembling apprehension. Out of the false self-sufficiency of "Art for art's sake" the artist must come to a consciousness of moral values and a conception of duty as something transcendent. It is not a continuous progress; there is no logic of the senses to demonstrate the categorical imperative of conscience. But there is a tragic insufficiency and a gap to be leaped. Moreover, it is only when one has leaped this gap that the instinct for beauty can be satisfied. As a contemporary poet¹ has put it: "We begin to live when we have conceived life as tragedy." The moral life is the life of self-sacrifice. "Every deed of kindness", said William Blake, "is a little death."

As there is a discontinuity between the life of the senses and the moral life, so there is also between the latter and the life of faith. A generation that does not realize this or will not admit it can never understand the Reformed Faith. We hesitate to add that it can never understand the New Testament, yet we cannot see how the optimism that refuses to admit the gap between the human and the divine, the "infinite qualitative difference", can make any response to a Word of God that is plainly addressed to a situation of moral disaster. There is no logic of self-righteousness to demonstrate the grace of God. "He who lives by faith", says Kierkegaard, not once but several times, "floats on an ocean seventy thousand fathoms deep." A knowledge of our insufficiency, of our failure, not only as sensuous but as moral beings, is the first condition of being able to look beyond the limits and to be aware of God. Of that awareness we do not propose at this time to say anything. It has been our sole purpose to bring to light the false presupposition involved in writing of a great teacher as if his teaching must be less true

¹ W. B. Yeats.

because it was derived from a tragic experience. That experience, which might indeed have made him a Hamlet (with whom he has often been compared), did not in fact do so, but made him instead—if we must seek some comparison—a Jeremiah, a prophet for whom *via crucis* was *via lucis*. This has been recognized elsewhere, and we believe that when the writings of Kierkegaard are at last available in English it will be recognized here, too.

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