

A Short Life of Kierkegaard

W.Lowrie

April 7 - April 16, 2010

Yet another book from my library. Will they all be read? If so this one is about to be read sooner or later. Who is the author? Wikipedia bills him as an educator, born in 1862 and died in 1952. The book, a shorter companion to a more ambitious work on the Great Dane, was published in 1942 and reissued by Princeton University Press in the early 70's. This must also have been about the time when I picked it up. This leads one to make a few general comments on the passing of time.

Kierkegaard lived a long time ago. In fact it is almost two hundred years since he was born. Yet the author of the book does not imagine him as living impossibly far deep into what has passed. In fact at the writing of the book, many of the events the author retells only happened a hundred years earlier. Take into account that the author was already an old man when he wrote the book, and that he was born a mere seven years after the death of Kierkegaard, and furthermore that Kierkegaard died relatively young, and that in fact many of his contemporaries may have been expected to live into the 1880's and 1890's, when the author himself was already a grown man, and you understand the sense in which Kierkegaard could not have been considered a mere historical figure. Finally, the book was old when I got it, but not impossibly old. Thirty years is no age for a book, in fact when we get older we think of many books as being recent, even if they were written thirty or even forty years ago.

Now this being a spin-off from a larger and more ambitious work (and in fact it is not uncommon that publishers suggest from biographers that they also write condensed versions of the thick volumes they have produced with such unrelenting efforts, lest those will not be wasted, but also benefit the general reader with a more limited attention-span) the author is free to be chatty and impressionistic, secure in the knowledge that he can eschew much as it has already been written up and documented. He tries to put Kierkegaard in his environment, a middle-sized European Capital, of a very provincial nature, and in which everyone knows everyone else (including the King, who comes across as out of a fairy-tale). As said before this is an exotic setting, but to the author only moderately so. So what was great about Kierkegaard? Is this not what the book sets out to explain? The author does in an aside reveal the answer to this in a rather explicit way. Why did Lowrie, a man already old and established, chose to learn Danish, this rather obscure and marginal Germanic tongue? Apparently because he was taken by Kierkegaard the sincere Christian. Not Kierkegaard the man about town, the brilliant wit, and the bitter satirist, although there is much to be fascinated as to those aspects. So it is a standard account of the life of a man. In particular you learn a lot about the father of S.K. (because it is in this slightly affected manner the author insists consistently to refer to his subject), the father who played such an important part in the life of the man. (About the mother little is known, although this does of course not mean that her influence was negligible, mothers' seldom are.) The older Kierkegaard was a stern man, carrying a heavy

burden of a conscience into his old age. What had he done? Something terrible, something arising out of his own sensuality. He might have committed an indiscretion he was unable to divest himself of. This cast a shadow not only on his life but also on his son, to whom his melancholia was his home and castle. At least so the author indicates.

So there is the rich man son, almost all of whose siblings have died before him (except his older brother, with whom he was on terms of relentless rivalry) and who himself expects to die very young, indeed who professes surprise that he has reached the age of 34. He is a man who can devote all his time to study and writing. In fact he is a born writer, fluent, witty, and also very successful, publishing under a confusing collection of pseudonyms, as was the custom at the time. Apart from some short visits to Berlin, he stays in his home city, where he becomes a fixture, a man admired as well as ridiculed. A physical misfit of frail health, but with a burning spirit, as the saying goes. Mind over matter.

There are the usual stories about the man to be told, the most well-known being his ill-fated engagement to the young beauty - Regina Olsen. An engagement which he eventually broke off, despairing of being able to provide for her the conventional expectations, a conventional woman at the time might entertain. Of course he was concerned lest she would be devastated, and did indeed try to make himself come out in as bad light as possible, succeeding perhaps far too well, rendering future attempts at reconciliation stillborn. There is also the story of the polemics against Goldschmidt and his journal of 'cause de celebre' - the Corsair, which brought Kierkegaard to the heights of his satirical powers, and involved the entire reading public of the city. It also marked a turning point. A turning away from aestheticism and the fruits of the intellect, towards a more spiritual and Christian concern, making him into the Kierkegaard, we all know. (And some, such as Lowrie himself, love).

The book is written for the general reader, just as Kierkegaard himself fancied himself addressing the man in the street. As noted above it is chatty, with a generous cuttings out of Kierkegaard's own writings, with the ultimate motivation to entice the reader to himself seek out the works of the Dane. Kierkegaard did write a lot. Not only did he publish profusely, but more to the point he kept a voluminous journal, which may indeed contain the real treasures of his thoughts. In short he was an obsessive. There are many such people in the world, and there is only so much space in our collective mental world, to admit a few. Kierkegaard, obviously belongs to the charmed circle of exceptions. And indeed this was not lost on him. As he lived he prophesied that after his death people would study his life. Maybe many people make such predictions about their posthumous future, but only those whose predictions turn out true, will have those known. Why did he have such a high opinion of himself? Maybe a natural over-compensation of having been the butt of his peers, only being able to stand on his own, through his wits. There is a fierce competition among young boys for power and prestige, more so than among grown-ups, who mostly have been sufficiently chastened. But before life has bruised and blemished egos, fists make a difference. Sharp indeed must the tongue be that can overcome physical bullying. And just such a sharp tongue is what the author tries to convince the reader was the secret weapon of the young Kierkegaard. Physical superiority is but a brief phase in life, the mind may live longer and brighter and develop along.

What was so remarkable about the thought of Kierkegaard? The wit with which he bewitched his contemporaries has a tendency to diffuse, once the circumstances which

originally provoked it are no more to remind the posterity of its source. The Christian preoccupations of Kierkegaard surely have made an impact, but exactly how, the author is at a loss to explain, or rather he does not even make the effort. All he really reveals is Kierkegaard's opposition against the established church. His idea that church ossifies true religion, making it into a mere institutions, in which parsons become small professors, and Christian virtues are buried under layers of theological speculation and sophistry. Still, many of his contemporaries thought of him as a hypocrite and a secret Catholic to boot. As to purer philosophy, he is often referred to as one of the predecessors of the so called Existentialism. It is true that he emphasized the subjective part of philosophy. That cold objective knowledge was not enough, our own relation to it played a very important role too. And naturally he was not only a born writer but also a born psychologist, or rather a psychologist of one, namely his own self. Introspection is a powerful drug, and of course he was addicted to it, as the heroinist is addicted to his opium. The idea of introspection is that what you discover is in fact universal, especially as far as it is not flattering to you. What else is the need for and function of a personal Journal, if not to provide both a mirror and a dung-heap. Something in which you can both admire yourself as well as relieving yourself, a combination that is socially impossible, but provides most of the rationale of private indulgence.

The final effect of the book is one similar to the one you get from studying a miniature from say the early 19th century. You are charmed by the awkwardness of execution as well as by the overly sweet nostalgia such idyllic scenes of innocent lives invariably provoke. It is like marveling at the details provided by an old-fashioned doll-house. And of course, and so far that would meet the more modest expectations of the author, your curiosity to delve into the real work of the subject is being whetted. In my case this curiosity is being hampered by the self-imposed obligation to read the works in the original, rather than in anglicized interpretations. Why indeed divest yourself of an accidental advantage? Even if it would turn out to be spurious?

April 16, 2010 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se