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Emmanuel Falque, *The Metamorphosis of Finitude: An Essay on Birth and Resurrection*, trans. George Hughes (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012)

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Review Essay

Emmanuel Falque, *The Metamorphosis of Finitude: An Essay on Birth and Resurrection* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012)

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This book was first published in French as *Métamorphose de la finitude: Essai philosophique sur la naissance et la résurrection*, in 2004, and is the second in a triptych of books: it was preceded by *Le Passeur de Gethsémani* (on anguish, suffering and death), and is followed by *Les Noces de l'Agneau* (on the body and the Eucharist). Falque points out that the common theme of this three-volume series is that “the theological truths of the Easter Triduum (the Passion, the Resurrection, and the Eucharist) need to be examined in the light of philosophical experience (agony, birth, and the body)” (ix). Underlying this theme is the conviction that “The more we do of philosophy, the better the theology” (x). The present book, which was conceived and written so that it could be read independently of the others in the triptych, has as its goal “to say what the resurrection could mean for us today” (ix).

The English translation – by George Hughes, who has produced a very readable and elegant translation – has on its cover a detail from the altarpiece in the Beaune hospice in Burgundy, France, by the Flemish painter Rogier van der Weyden (c.1399–1464), one of the most influential northern European artists of his time. Falque states that it was the depiction of the Last Judgement in this altarpiece that provided the inspiration for the book, and he describes the painting in a way which could be interpreted as the very thesis of his book: “Neither *another* world nor an event *in* the world, the resurrection shows itself here in its own true daylight as a transformation of the world, and of human beings in the world” (xiv).

In the Introduction, Falque elaborates on the book’s aim as offering a “phenomenology of the resurrection,” about which very little has been written, whether in philosophy or theology (4). The resurrection, according to Falque, ought to be considered as a transformation of the ontological structure of our being and of the world itself – the “metamorphosis of finitude” (7). “And so the resurrection changes everything, even the structure of discourse” (8).

The book is divided into three Parts, each consisting of three chapters. In Part I, “Précis of Finitude”, Falque begins by emphasising the importance of taking finitude as the starting-point in theology as much as in philosophy: “I know myself and I feel myself to be finite, and not to admit this is a way of beating a retreat in front of an evident ‘fear of existence’” (13).

Chapter 1 (‘Impassable Immanence’) opens with a critique of the prioritisation of the transcendent or infinite over the immanent or finite in much contemporary phenomenology and theology. Falque finds this unsatisfactory from a philosophical point of view: “The experience of grace or openness to God is not given *first*...but only *afterward*... That is to say, it is *mediated* in and through the resurrection in Christ” (16). Falque helpfully distinguishes “finitude” from “the finite.” The latter is a delimitation of the infinite, so that being finite amounts to having certain limitations which can only be overcome by striving towards the infinite. Finitude, however, is something that is ‘impassable’, so that it cannot be surmounted by placing it into relation with the infinite. Only finitude in this sense “can tell us what there is of the Being-there of man (*Dasein*)” (18). If that is so, then (*contra* the new breed of theologically-twisted phenomenologists) phenomenology must be done “from below,” not “from above” – indeed, for Falque, this is mandated by Christianity itself, specifically by its teaching of *the Word made flesh* (20).

In a similar spirit, Chapter 2 (“From Time to Time”) argues that a phenomenological exploration of finitude must not begin from the idea of eternity (the atemporal), but from time or temporality. Quoting Lacoste, Falque states: “We are ‘in time’ as we are ‘in the world’, and ‘our presence in the world must be our *first consideration*’” (23). Falque also approvingly quotes Heidegger: “The essential phenomenon of time is the *future*” (26). Time is to be oriented toward the future, not the present. But in the hands of Falque, this becomes the project of refiguring eternity “as the *transformation of temporality* starting from the resurrection” (26). The Christian doctrine of the resurrection therefore becomes “*ontologically* the first principle of everything” (24). But if there were no Fall, would there have been any resurrection? And if not, then how could the resurrection be accorded such ontological primacy?

Chapter 3 is entitled “Is There a Drama of Atheist Humanism?”, referencing of course Henri de Lubac’s 1950 book. In contrast to Lubac, Falque invites us to a non-confrontational dialogue with, and even appropriation of, atheism, where atheism is viewed not in light of the certitudes of faith, but as something that can challenge and purify faith. “There will then be no drama of atheist humanism, no resigned or despairing apprehension of a world definitively going astray” (35). This leads Falque to question Heidegger’s view that the believer cannot genuinely ask “Why?” since the believer already presumes to have the answer and so cannot authentically pose the question. In a perceptive reply

to Heidegger, Falque states that if faith is conceived as something that is always already troubled by the possibility of unbelief, then the “Why?”-question can genuinely be asked (i.e., it can be posed in more than a mere “as-if” way) from a position of faith.

Part II of the book (“Toward a Metamorphosis”) begins with a chapter on Nietzsche’s understanding of metamorphosis (as given in his notion of the eternal return) as a critique of the Christian (specifically, the Pauline) notions of metamorphosis and resurrection. The focus here lies on the resurrection of *the body* and hence on corporality and material nature, with Falque making the interesting suggestion that, on the Christian view of resurrection, “what revives of me...is not my biological or organic body but the *manner* that I have of living through this same body” (58-59).

The following chapter (Ch. 5: “The Resurrection Changes Everything”, echoing Merleau-Ponty’s “The Incarnation changes everything”) presents the death of God as an “ordeal for the Father, and not in the first place for the Son” (66). It is an ordeal for the Father because of the “apperceptive transposition” (Husserl’s term), the Son’s “ability to *transfer fully* to the Father, into *his* experience of consciousness (as spirit), what he [the Son] himself has undergone in his lived experience of the flesh (as body)” (67). Falque thus, somewhat controversially, endorses the idea of there being passion or suffering in God, even stating that this “must in fact be one of the requisites of a theology today” (69). The third person of the Trinity is introduced in the final section of the chapter, where the action or power of the Holy Spirit is said to be the means by which metamorphosis is achieved.

In Ch. 6 (“The Incorporation of the Human Being”), Falque puts forward “the monadologic hypothesis” that God is all, or nothing exists outside God – in which case what happens in God (the passion and resurrection of the Son) must also be something that happens to human beings (our resurrection and transformation). Following this logic, the ascension of Christ to the Father is also our “incorporation” in the Trinity, as Christ takes our corporality with him to the Father. As Guardini put it, “Christianity dared to place the (human) body in the most hidden depths of God” (cited on 84).

Part III of the book (“Phenomenology of the Resurrection”) opens with Ch. 7: “The World Become Other”, where Falque seeks to distance Christianity from the dualist tendencies of Greek, and especially Platonic, philosophy. The central theme here is that “there are not *two worlds*, but *two different ways of living the same world*” (102), a heavenly mode of being open to God, and an earthly mode of closing in on oneself. But in the metamorphosis of finitude (the resurrection), the structure of the world is changed to such an extent that my own manner of being in the world is transformed: the world “becomes other”, and I do too.

And not only the world and the self, but time too becomes other, Falque states in the next chapter (Ch. 8: "From Time to Eternity"). This metamorphosis can occur in an instant or a moment, as Falque illustrates with Augustine's account of his conversion, famously stating in his *Confessions*: "Your today is eternity." But this is eternity not as another temporal plane, but as "another way to live the same time" (115). In a penetrating phenomenology of joy, Falque goes on to show how metamorphosis occurs not only in the moment of eternity, but also in the "joy of birth as birth of joy."

The book's final chapter (Ch. 9: "A Flesh for Rebirth") opens with a phenomenology of birth, where the way I relate to my own birth today is viewed as analogous to the way I relate to my rebirth (resurrection). This is followed by a very interesting phenomenology of the resurrection, motivated by the question: Why do so many today find the idea of the resurrection of the body unintelligible, or as something that has the status of a fairy tale? Falque states that the answer lies in "the lack of a *contemporary anthropology* that would fit a body capable of being transformed" (136). In an effort to provide such an anthropology, Falque identifies the *resurrected body* not with the biological body, but with the fleshly or "living" body, i.e. the way in which we live and experience our body. Falque finds support for this in the biblical descriptions of the resurrected Jesus, where the capacities of Jesus' resurrected body outstrip those of any mere biological body (e.g. it is a body that defies the law of gravity when ascending to heaven). Hence, the resurrected body cannot be identified with the biological body, and indeed the true nature of corporality consists less in our biological substance than in "the way we live, accept, and receive this in our *incarnation*" (138). And it is this ("the flesh") and not our dead bodies that will be resurrected. But the question remains: Is the resurrected body in any way biological? Falque's response is: "Here we must be silent" (143). This is a disappointing reply. For if no connection remains between the biological body and the resurrected body, then we are left with the very angelism or Gnosticism (the body of Christ as immaterial) that Falque wishes to avoid; while if a connection remains, then the unintelligibility and fairy tale-like quality of the resurrection returns.

Despite such limitations, Falque has offered an insightful and novel account of what it means for us, as embodied creatures, to be born and reborn.