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Kierkegaard and the Uncanny: A Cast of Sinners and Automatons

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An arresting feature of Kierkegaard's authorship is the disjunction presented there between (1) the proclamation of individual autonomy and (2) the enduring desire for fusion with a natural, human, or divine other, which would confound any reliable determination of agency. On the one hand, we have Kierkegaard's exacting integrity, his insistence on freedom and the significance of choice, and, on the other hand, a powerful appeal to a nostalgic immersion in one's surroundings, to a boundary-destroying moment of absorption in the Other. Certainly both elements have their place in traditional formulations of religious life and religious experience, but, in Kierkegaard's pseudonymous production, the combination is at times incongruous: bracketing for the moment the idiosyncracies of the individual pseudonyms and their texts, we have a series of works which, while emphasizing individual freedom and its appropriation, contain more than their fair share of characters who split, dissimulate, act under the compulsion of unnamed outside forces, divine or otherwise, and in general seem to display precisely the opposite of a sober acceptance of one's freedom and responsibility. To make matters more complicated, at times these lapses in vigilant, self-conscious, responsibly-chosen action seem to be instances of what Kierkegaard designates sin, or of the obscurity and division which follows in its wake. At other times, they seem to signify the very opposite: a surrender to the divine, a renewed immediacy. I would maintain that the desire for fusion with another permeates both the aesthetic and religious spheres, as they are depicted by Kierkegaard, and that the presence of this desire is signaled in his texts by a pervasive sense of the uncanny. I shall argue that this sense marks both the aesthete's relation to his or her alter ego(s), as well as the religious individual's annihilating proximity to the godhead. I would suggest that a satisfactory account of individual freedom and identity is adequately expressed neither as an absolute autonomy, nor as an evacuation of individual initiative by inscrutable divine fiat. Kierkegaard's works cry out for such a mediation, but, in their refusal to proffer it, they stake their claim in the reader's living resolution. First, a brief glimpse at Freud's treatment of the uncanny.

Freud's exploration of «The "Uncanny"» (1919) searches out the source of uncanny feelings, drawing examples from both fiction and real life[1]. He explores in detail the phenomenon as portrayed by a writer much loved by Kierkegaard himself, E.T.A. Hoffman, in his piece, *The Sandman*. Freud's suggestion is that the sense of the uncanny arises as a result of a «defence which has caused the ego to project material outward as something foreign to itself.» (Freud, p. 236) The sense that one has returned to a place or a situation that is both familiar and alien (*heimlich, unheimlich*) is accounted for either by the projection of unacceptable impulses on to what is exterior, or through «regression to a time when the ego had not yet marked itself off sharply from the external world and from other people.» (ibid.) The uncanny, whether it springs from projection or regression, involves a disavowal of or confusion concerning one's own agency, as is the case when we have fictional characters or psychotic ones, watching with horrified and powerless fascination the actions of their alter egos. Thus the uncanny can involve the odd suspicion that one has encountered a piece of oneself, roving around unsupervised at the periphery of one's vision.

The anxiety that one's actions are controlled by an alien force, inaccessible to the conscious subject, mounts.

One need not look far to locate similar examples in Kierkegaard's texts. *Either/Or*'s «A» expresses dread over the contents of the seducer's diary, an anxiety made more dreadful by the clear implication he may be its author: Eremita ponders, «It really seems as if A himself has become afraid of his fiction, which like a troubled dream continued to make him uneasy, also in the telling. […] I, too, sometimes have felt quite strangely uneasy when I have been occupied with these papers in the stillness of the night. It seemed to me as if the seducer himself paced my floor like a shadow […]»[2]. «A» adds «I myself can scarcely control the anxiety that grips me every time I think about the [seducer's] affair. I, too, am carried along into that kingdom of mist, into that dreamland where one is frightened by one's own shadow [...] Often, I futilely try to tear myself away from it; I follow along like an ominous shape, like an accuser who cannot speak, how strange! He has spread the deepest secrecy over everything, and yet there is an even deeper secrecy, that I myself am in on the secret and that I came to know it in an unlawful way» (*SV1* 2, 281-282/*KW* III, 310).

The text *Repetition* is similarly replete with doubles. In a manner more explicit than in any other text, Constantin and his offshoot, the young man, openly fight for control of the text and the plot. The young man makes a break for it, fleeing to an unknown destination, refusing to speak to Constantin,

1. FREUD, S. (1955) p. 219-255.
2. KIERKEGAARD, S. *Either/Or*, p. 9. In *Kierkegaard's Writings*, vol. III (Hereafter cited as *SV1* as well as the corresponding volume and page in the first Danish edition of *Søren Kierkegaards Samlede Vaerker* [1901-06]), followed by reference to volume and page number in the Hongs' translation.

seeking a new name in the midst of a thunderstorm. When Constantin in his final missive reassures the reader that his every word has been ventriloquism, the reader is left to wonder who is speaking through whom. Even the reader, Constantin implies, might be drawn into this play of false facades and questionable agency. We are no longer sure who possesses primary agency, who the parasitic, «split off» impulses.

So far, however, there are no surprises. Kierkegaard's aesthetes, after all, are famous for their proclivity for denying the essential unity of the self, and with it their responsibility, then slipping off to cavort with their evil doubles. What complicates the picture, however, is an uncanny similarity between the aesthetic works, which present the melding and splitting of fictive personae, and works, much more likely to be regarded as expressing Kierkegaard's own views, which treat not the respective domains of fictive characters, but the respective domains of human and divine, and the nature and possibility of human autonomy.

In the two works which deal in greatest detail with human freedom, *The Concept of Anxiety* and *The Sickness unto Death*, the attempt is made to introduce and elaborate a conception of human freedom capable of grounding an unambiguous distinction between sin and mere finitude. This effort culminates in an account of the will which posits, first, an unconditioned act of freedom at the heart of original sin, and, as its consequence, a depravity of the will so complete that all effective agency is forfeited, a state not essentially different from the trance in which «A» presumably authored the seducer's diary, or the numbing despair in which Constantin's psyche split in two. In both cases, Kierkegaard wittingly or unwittingly erodes the distinction between the human and the divine, with the result that the specter of an indifferentiation of human and divine looms over the texts, as reflected by opposed but equally untenable accounts of freedom. The reader is asked to entertain, first, a freedom which, in its original and unconditioned state, is arguably indistinguishable, in scope and power, from the divine will, and, later, subsequent to the fall, a human impotence so all-encompassing that the individual's «fate» must be determined by divine initiative. The pseudonymous authors of *The Concept of Anxiety* and *Sickness unto Death* exhibit an eagerness to fix the subject's identity and scope of agency which surpasses the aesthete's project of self-definition. The result is a return of the repressed: the attempt to establish a freedom separate from all «weakness, sensuousness, finitude, ignorance, etc.» (*SV1* XI, 207/*KW* XIX, 96) gives rise, if not to the dramatic personal fragmentation of the aesthetic, then to equally pronounced impasses in argumentation, to opposed accounts of the nature and possibility of human freedom. Let us look at each of the works in turn.

In *The Concept of Anxiety*, Vigilius Haufniensis closely and anxiously watches over the boundary line between freedom and nature. Tracing the genesis of human freedom out of nature, circling the moment of its appearance, Haufniensis is initially eager to find «intermediate categories» (*Mellembestemmelser*) which can preserve both the impact of the contingent circumstances

in which freedom comes to be (historical, societal, familial, genetic) and the essentially unconditioned leap of choice. Anxiety is chosen to fit the bill, and Haufniensis, ever cognizant of the weighty significance of the context of human actions, repeatedly invokes the possibility that «a person seems to become guilty merely through anxiety about himself» (*SV1* IV/*KW* VIII, 53) and that «he who becomes guilty through anxiety is indeed innocent, for it was not he himself but anxiety, a foreign power, that laid hold of him.» (*SV1* IV, 315/*KW* VIII, 43) In spite of these provisos, however, Haufniensis fastens the end with «and yet he is guilty, for he sank in anxiety, which he nevertheless loved even as he feared it.» (ibid.) Thus Haufniensis' initial rejection of Pelagianism and *liberum arbitrium* is reversed by his insistence on the qualitative leap in which freedom asserts itself, a qualitative leap which springs clear of the quantitative accumulations of anxiety with which history is laden.

Assuming the territory already covered by Haufniensis, Anti-Climacus, the poet-existence responsible for *Sickness unto Death*, makes no pretense of fondness for intermediate categories which would bridge the realms of nature and spirit[4]. The contrast between nature and freedom is now displaced by the opposition between a freedom understood solely in human terms, as autonomy, versus a Christian understanding of freedom and sin. Part One of *Sickness* presents, accordingly, the gradations of despair «within the category of the human self or the self whose criterion is man», while the second part treats despair as it appears in and to the «theological self, the self directly before God.» (*SV1* XI, 191/*KW* XIX, 79)

Within Part One, a phenomenology of despair is elaborated in which the «object» of despair is transformed in accordance with the subject's developing consciousness of its own freedom. Despair over the external world and one's placement in it yields to despair over oneself or the eternal, as the subject becomes aware that the external world is never the cause of despair but only the occasion for one's awareness of it. Ultimately, and in spite of an impressive cataloguing of forms of despair, the irony of this «phenomenology» lies, of course, in its failure to produce a Hegelian synthesis of finite subject and absolute ego. As we follow Anti-Climacus' phenomenology of despair through higher and higher levels of consciousness, the individual approaches not a fuller assimilation of the Absolute, but rather increasing degrees of defiance. Part One of *Sickness* culminates in the depiction of this defiance, a protest against existence and its goodness, triggered by the inability of the subject to create the conditions of its own existence. The defiant self wishes to begin «not at and with the beginning, but “in the beginning”.» (*SV1* XI, 179/*KW* XIX, 68). Part One thus carries the project of human self-assertion and autonomy, the project which Climacus designated the Socratic, to its end.

4. In contrasting the Socratic notion of sin as ignorance with Christianity's more «rigorous» conception, the reader is instructed: «Here, as with [...] every intermediate definition [*Mellem-Definition*]—its emptiness becomes apparent.» (*SV1* XI, 199/*KW* XIX, 88)

Part Two proclaims the Christian standpoint that despair is rooted in sin before God, rather than in adverse fate or insufficient self-understanding. An unconditioned act of the human will against God, despair is a free act for which we are responsible, yet the natural human cannot conceive it. For sin obscures consciousness, first and foremost of itself. We learn of sin only through revelation, i.e. through divine intervention. Thus original freedom culminates in its forfeiture, revealing, from this perspective, the deeper «flaw» underlying the foiled phenomenology of the first part. If finitude curtails the aspirations of the would-be autonomous subject (Part One), Christianity views this subject as annulled, not by finitude, but by its very aspiration to autonomy. Though Anti-Climacus initially proclaimed «the more consciousness, the more self; the more consciousness, the more will; the more will, the more self» (*SV1* XI, 142/*KW* XIX, 29), this optimistic (and Hegelian) concurrence of self-consciousness, will, and God-consciousness, reaches its abrupt termination in the fact of sin. Thus, a human autonomy which excludes transcendence gives way to an inscrutable and all-engulfing Providence, the by-now-familiar antinomy of human autonomy/human impotence.

Anti-Climacus claims sin to be the most radical confirmation of the qualitative difference between God and man. «In no way is a man so different from God as in this, that he, and that means every man, is a sinner...» (*SV1* XI, 231/*KW* XIX, 121). If the primary distinction between human and divine comes to rest in a human act, rather than in ontological difference, the risk arises that the Atonement involves not so much the redemption from sin as the abolition of individuality. In attempting to isolate the pure and unconditioned act of freedom at the heart of sin, Anti-Climacus unwittingly brings the human will into approximation with the divine, as Descartes did before him, and the infinite difference posited between the two threatens to collapse. On this view, the Atonement signifies not the reconciliation of God and humans, but their indistinction.

Echoes of the uncanny can be detected in many of Kierkegaard's texts, not only in his depiction of the aesthete's fragmented pursuits and consciousness, but in the propect of faith's second immediacy as well. The unlimited expansion or unqualified submission of the human will to its other is in practice the same. The accounts of autonomy and of faithful submission are marked by a similar flaw, the failure to describe and sustain a qualified autonomy. The insistent separation of «human» and «Christian» perspectives is itself despair, yet this very separation structures *The Sickness unto Death*, and, arguably, Kierkegaard's theology. The all-or-nothing accounts of freedom which the text offers seem to reflect rather than resolve despair, which increasingly appears to be not only the object of the text but its governing perspective as well. Both suggest a disintegration of the boundaries of the individual, an uncanny prospect, whose mood dominates aesthetic and religious writings alike.

If the Atonement promises not only redemption from sin but threatens abolition of individuality, small wonder that the poet, whose existence Anti-

Climacus describes at the opening of Part Two of *The Sickness unto Death*, clings to his thorn in the flesh as a distinctive quality of his being and insists upon writing about the religious life rather than living it. If the primary quality which distinguishes humans from God were sin, the poet's unwillingness to be «healed» becomes more understandable. Who would then begrudge the poet his insistent grip on his sin and his pen and his thorn in the flesh?