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What Lies Beneath: Self-Awareness and Alterity in *The Monk* And *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde*

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The question of identity and self-knowledge is a crucial concern of the Gothic, since the problem of reconciling innocence with the need for experience and knowledge is universally relevant. Both *The Monk* and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde* express this concern in terms of the limits of self-awareness and the ethical problems which follow on from a recognition of man's alterity. I intend to show, by a comparison of these two texts, how self-knowledge necessarily relies on an encounter with the Other, and consequently how this is what makes us aware of ourselves as ethical agents. Referring to the work of Butler and her reading of Levinas, I will discuss the response to the Other in terms of ethical responsibility, with reference to Kierkegaardian notions of sin and self-knowledge, in order to reach a final conclusion on the accountability of Jekyll and Ambrosio for their actions.

Levinas claims that 'a philosophy without radical, absolute otherness is incapable of real critique, for it is never really challenged by something other than itself.'[1] This applies to Ambrosio and Jekyll, who each have an insufficient sense of responsibility due to their extreme lack of self-knowledge. If I cannot fully understand myself prior to my encounter with the Other then I cannot properly be described as an ethical agent. Butler explains that the narrative subject is opaque to itself and therefore cannot ever own itself completely; she argues for a recognition of the limits of self-knowledge, since the responsible self is aware of these limits and can thus be in a critical position of themselves and the social world.[2] This theory can be applied in a broader sense here to the relation between the individual's experience of the world and his own self-knowledge, particularly in terms of temptation and awareness of personal boundaries, since it has a direct influence on his sense of moral obligation. To quote Butler, 'this conception of what is morally binding is not one that I give myself; it does not proceed from my autonomy or my reflexivity.'[3] It is impossible for Ambrosio or Jekyll to understand their own limits and responsibilities without being confronted by the Other. Sartre explains that shame is a feeling which I cannot elicit on my own: it is the Other who makes a demand of me and causes me to fear the consequences of my actions,[4] and until the point of transgression neither is fully conscious of the extent to which they each contain within themselves the potential for corruption.

At first it seems that there is a crucial difference between each protagonist's experience of the world. Ambrosio lives a completely sheltered life inside the monastery and has seen nothing of the world outside, whereas Jekyll is a highly respected doctor who admits to

[1] E. Levinas, Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p.189.
[2] J. Butler, Giving an Account of Oneself, (California: Fordham University Press, 2005)
[3] J. Butler, 'Precarious Life', from Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence, (California: Verso Books, 2006), p.130.
[4] Sartre, Being and Nothingness, (London: Routledge, 2003)

having been aware from early age of 'the two natures that contended in the field of my consciousness'.[5] However, if the instant at which each is made aware of their own alterity is a single, decisive moment, then neither Jekyll nor Ambrosio knows himself at this point. For Jekyll, this moment of realisation comes as he takes the chemical compound and manages to separate his two selves for the first time. He is confronted with his own alterity, physically embodied in the Other:

> Even as good shone upon the face of the one, evil was written broadly and plainly on the face of the other (...) yet when I looked upon that ugly idol in the glass, I was conscience of no repugnance, rather of a leap of welcome. This, too, was myself.[6]

In a single moment, the "otherness" of Jekyll becomes externalised and thus unavoidable. Ambrosio experiences something similar when Matilda confesses her love for him, and his emotional response is indicative of a change in perception.

> a thousand opposing sentiments combated in Ambrosio's bosom. Surprise at the singularity of this adventure; confusion at her abrupt declaration; resentment at her boldness in entering the monastery; and consciousness of the austerity with which it behoved him to reply; such were the sentiments of which he was aware: but there were others also which did not obtain his notice[...]still less did he perceive, that his heart throbbed with desire.[7]

It is significant that these feelings are described as if they are being awakened after lying dormant within the self. According to Merlau-Ponty, an individual's sense of otherness is already anticipated, something which he explains as the double sensation of my left hand touching my right hand, whereby I simultaneously touch and experience the feeling of being touched. This embodied self-awareness is a presentiment of the Other, so that what I see in the Other makes me aware of something that is within me, even if prior to this encounter I have only the seeds of alterity.[8] Alterity already exists in Ambrosio and Jekyll but it takes this confrontation with the Other to make them acknowledge it.

From the beginning of *The Monk* it is clear that Ambrosio is far from being the embodiment of goodness that the people of Madrid believe him to be. Being unexposed to the world does not absolve him from moral struggles, and his alterity is evident from the flaws in his character. He studies the Bible every day and preaches Christian ideals to others, yet his lack of self-knowledge renders him guilty of hypocrisy because he does not recognize his own pride. Don Christoval reveals that the monk is viewed as a saint in Madrid because 'the smallest stain is not to be discovered upon his character', while his chastity is such that 'he knows not in what consists the difference of man and woman.'[9] This extreme lack of worldly knowledge renders him incapable of comprehending what it is to sin and explains why he sees himself as superior to others. Believing himself to be above temptation, Ambrosio is guilty of pride and vanity even though he is seemingly oblivious to this fact. This is made explicit in places, such as when he dismisses his attending monks 'with an air of conscious superiority, in which humility's semblance combated with the reality of pride'[10]. He congratulates himself on surviving 'the ordeals of youth'[11], completely failing to acknowledge the difference between his own experience and that of his congregation. He is also guilty of

[5] R.L.Stevenson, The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde, p.62.
[6] R.Stevenson, The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde, (London: Heron Books, 1967) p.64.
[7] M.Lewis, The Monk, p.82.
[8] Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1962), pp.400-5.
[9] The Monk, p.47.
[10] The Monk, p.64.
[11] The Monk, p.65.

idolatry in his obsessive worship of the Madonna painting on his wall, particularly as unbeknownest to him it actually portrays the lustful Matilda. Physically attracted to the woman in the portrait, he tries to deceive himself that it is merely the painter's skill that he admires, rather than the female herself, and yet his desire 'to press with my lips the treasures of that snowy bosom' suggests otherwise.[12]

Just as in his own mind Ambrosio is a fine servant of God, Jekyll sees himself as a reputable gentleman, with an 'imperious desire to hold my head high,'[13] regardless of any internal resistance to this persona. The feelings he tries desperately to suppress remain obscure to him until that moment of confrontation with his own hideous Other and his realization that 'This, too, was myself'. Therefore he does not know the extent of the danger he puts himself in by trying to enact a physical separation of the 'polar twins'[14] inside him. Believing himself capable of following through with his experiment and living a dual life he dismisses what the consequences of this might be to himself and others. To quote Priestley, 'He who does not foolishly affect to be above the failings of humanity, will not be mortified when it is proved that he is but a man.'[15] Like Ambrosio, Jekyll sees himself as being above ordinary human weakness and only realizes the severity of his condition when it is too late.

I want to use the Levinasian notion of the "face" and Kierkegard's theories of ethics to suggest that a sense of ethical responsibility comes as a direct result of an encounter with the other. According to Levinas, the "face" of the Other makes an ethical demand upon me, and yet I do not know which demand it makes. The point at which I think a face-to-face encounter of this kind occurs in each novel has been stated previously, and it is this moment in which Otherness becomes unavoidable. In this encounter with the Other there is a dual response, which can be seen as operating in two stages: fear and recognition. The initial feeling is fear, since we are most terrified by what we do not understand. Burke emphasises this point in his criteria for the sublime, explaining that obscurity is a necessary aspect of terror.[16] The Other initially appears as something abject and uncanny, and for this reason it represents a threat. Following Matilda's revelation, Lewis describes Ambrosio's inability to comprehend his conflicting feelings; when Matilda threatens to stab herself, her exposed flesh awakens new feelings in him as 'his eye dwelt with insatiable avidity upon the beauteous orb: a sensation till then unknown filled his heart with a mixture of anxiety and delight'.[17] Following this he is left 'distracted, resolute and confused,'[18] and for the first time he begins to doubt himself.

In the face of this fear comes an instinctive desire to make that which we do not understand into a known entity. By relating it to what we know, we hope to bring the abject Other out of obscurity and expose it for what it is. Thus the unknown is labelled as a negation of what is known, and since the most known entity in this encounter is the 'I', the Other becomes simply the 'Not I'. This idea is conveyed by the words used by Jekyll and others to describe Hyde. When asked to describe what he has seen in the laboratory, Jekyll's servant, Poole, is unable to identify that 'thing' as anything more than 'Not-Jekyll', suggesting that Hyde is outside the natural order of things and resists classification. Rather than being a developed character in his own right, he remains merely a negation, or as Halberstam puts it:

[12] The Monk, p.65.
[13] Jekyll and Hyde, p.61.
[14] Jekyll and Hyde, p.62.
[15] J. Priestley, from the Preface to Experiments and Observations on different kinds of Air, and other branches of Natural Philosophy. (London, 1774-77), xxi.
[16] E. Burke, 'Obscurity', in A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful, (New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1909–14), Part IV. sect. 14–16.
[17] The Monk, p.84.
[18] The Monk, p.85.

'Hyde is the disappearance of Jekyll'.[19] The doctor gives instruction of what is to be done in the possible event of his 'death or disappearance', acknowledging Hyde as a presence whose validity requires him not to exist. James notes that 'rationality encourages us to eliminate the "unease" and "perplexity" associated with a lack of understanding, replacing it with the "relief and pleasure" of rational comprehension.[20] However, for Levinas, attempts to assimilate the Other into a known entity are futile because the Other is completely Other and cannot be made otherwise. Therefore whilst the desire for comprehension may be instinctive, in these circumstances the Other resists all attempts to make it known and thus maintains its status as ultimately separate and distinct from what we understand. Despite this, the examples that I have chosen from *The Monk* and *Jekyll and Hyde* show that there is some level of recognition in each encounter with the Other, and while this in no way elucidates exactly what the Other is, it evokes in the observer a feeling of empathy and forces him to respond in some way.

The move towards recognition and empathy constitutes the second stage of this encounter, in which something in the abject Other provokes a realisation of shared experience; it reveals that part of what makes the Other so terrifying is its representation of something that is actually within us. No longer merely an external fear, it suddenly becomes very real and unavoidable. The conflict that emerges here between a feeling of revulsion and a recognition of something known yet not understood is reminiscent of Levinas's description of the dual response evoked by the other:

> The face of the other in its precariousness and defencelessness, is for me at once the temptation to kill and the call to peace, the "You shall not kill."[21]

If the Other is simultaneously tempting me to kill yet prohibiting me from doing it, then it suggests that there is a divine element to this encounter which makes a moral demand on the recipient. Butler explains how it awakens my sense of moral responsibility because it confronts me with a dilemma and thus 'establishes this struggle at the heart of ethics.'[22]

Considering that the Other evokes an ethical struggle within us, it is possible to see how self-awareness and responsibility are intrinsically linked. The Other challenges me so that I am forced to recognize something of myself in what I see before me, which brings me to an awareness of my own alterity. Following this realization I feel morally obligated to respond in some way. Kierkegaard explains how an encounter with the Other forces us to make a moral decision. With reference to Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac, he focuses on the key instant at which God intervenes since it is precisely at this moment that Abraham betrays his sense of ethics. By keeping secret his decision to sacrifice his son, even though he does not understand God's reasons, Abraham acts in accordance with absolute moral duty and in doing so he transgresses the ethical order. He is ethically responsible because he chooses to deny ethics:

> for it is indeed this love for Isaac that makes his act a sacrifice by its paradoxical contrast to his love for God (...) Only in the instant when his act is in absolute contradiction to his feelings, only then does he sacrifice Isaac, but the reality of his act is that by which he belongs to the universal, and there he is and remains a murderer.[23]

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[19] J. Halberstam, 'Gothic Surface, Gothic Depth: The Subject of Secrecy in Stevenson and Wilde' from Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters (London: Duke University Press, 1995), p.67.
[20] W. James, The Will to Believe (New York: Dover, 1956), p.63.
[21] E. Levinas, 'Peace and Proximity' in Basic Philosophical Writings, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), p.167.
[22] J. Butler, Precarious Life, p.135.
[23] S. Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, and Repetition, vol.6, Kierkegard's Writings, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p.74.

In a more relative sense, any encounter with an Other demands that we abandon a different Other in its place. Derrida explains, 'as soon as I enter into a relation with the absolute other, my absolute singularity enters into relation with his on the level of obligation and duty', and so I cannot respond to this Other without sacrificing 'the other other'.[24] Jekyll and Ambrosio each make a choice: by committing to the Other they betray their ethical responsibility to 'other others', taking the blame on themselves and denying those around them a choice. It is in this process that they become fully cognizant of their alterity and consequently become ethically responsible.

The manner in which one gains self-awareness can be seen as paradoxical: it is necessary to break the boundaries of selfhood in order to understand the self. The encounter with the Other is a necessary transgression because until this point, Ambrosio and Jekyll have kept in line with the laws of society only by an abstract fear of retribution. Kierkegaard writes that sin is a crucial part of self-knowledge, and in his reading of the Fall of Adam and Eve outlines the extent to which sin alters our perception, awakening us to the contrasts inherent in body and soul. [25] Significantly these contrasts already exist with us, they simply lie dormant until they are revealed. Prior to their encounter with the Other, Ambrosio and Jekyll live with the possibility of transgression, a state which can be compared to Kierkegaard's description of Adam and Eve in their 'anxious possibility of *being able*'.[26] In the Garden of Eden the power of being able to sin is a 'dialectical' state; it is at once 'antipathetic sympathy' and 'sympathetic antipathy', simultaneously attracting and repelling them from sin. Before Ambrosio gives into Matilda's temptation, he has only an abstract understanding of sin, which can best be described as merely 'a higher form of ignorance.'[27] Despite the fact that Ambrosio and Jekyll live in the sinful world, their knowledge of evil is similar to the "obscure" knowledge of evil outlined in Kierkegaard. He explains that obscure knowledge of sin accumulates progressively until transgression seems almost inevitable. A knowledge of evil that is only understood in linguistic terms is insufficient in the face of temptation, because one is forced to weigh an abstract concept of evil against an immediate empirical good. Since Ambrosio's knowledge of evil is qualified only by his innocence, he cannot properly know the limits of his goodness and therefore cannot fully know himself.

As I have already explained, the encounter with the Other does not just reveal our alterity, it also makes a demand of us as moral agents. Ambrosio and Jekyll's new understanding of themselves compels them to make a decision regarding their future conduct. With the feeling of guilt and shame comes a desire to hide away from society, to seek refuge in the mind where it does not have to answer for itself. Forced to live with the knowledge of their own alterity, Ambrosio and Jekyll continue to project an image of themselves to the world which covers up their inner torment. Jekyll talks of himself as 'the fortress identity' and feels that Hyde is 'caged in his flesh', expressing his sense of having one secret self hidden within another.[28] This disparity between internal reality and external appearance is foregrounded by the setting of both novels. The houses on the street where Jekyll lives are like 'rows of smiling saleswomen', and the doctor's respectable house wears 'a great air of wealth and comfort. Behind this façade is a 'sinister block of building'[29], which is revealed

[24] J. Derrida, 'Whom To Give To', The Gift of Death, trans. David Wills. (London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p.68.
[25] S. Kierkegaard, 'Anxiety as Explaining Hereditory Sin Progressively', Concept of Anxiety, A Simple Psychological Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditory Sin, Vol. 8 of Kierkegaard's Writings, Ed. and trans. by Reidar Thompte, in collaboration with Albert B. Anderson, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980)
[26] S. Kierkegaard, Concept of Anxiety, p.40.
[27] S. Kierkegaard, Concept of Anxiety, p.40.
[28] Jekyll and Hyde, p.62.
[29] Jekyll and Hyde, p.22.

later to be the refuge of Hyde and is representative of Hyde's secret existence in the recesses of Jekyll's mind. Both Stevenson and Lewis make reference to the fact that external appearance is often deceptive. Behind the walls of the abbey Sister Ursula is free to enact her horrific torture of Agnes in the deepest, darkest recesses of the building, while the sinful monk is hidden from the judgement of the outside world as he employs demonic arts in order to satiate his lustful desire for Antonia, ending up guilty of rape and murder. Rather than "living in the light" they have become representative of exactly the kind of evil which they preach against, and worse still because they live under the façade of virtue and piety. Like Ambrosio, Jekyll persuades himself that it is possible to lead a dual life, not realizing that the more he indulges his secret desires the harder it is to control them. The fear that his multi-formed ego will unravel at some point and reveal everything to the world is expressed by Jekyll in his reflection that 'All things therefore seemed to point to this; that I was slowly losing hold of my original and better self, and slowly becoming incorporated with my second and worse.'[30] The lust of Ambrosio becomes increasingly insatiable, driving him into a downward spiral of sin and self-deception, since 'as his fears of detection died away, he paid less attention to the reproaches of remorse.'[31] The inability to control the Other within has a detrimental effect on any attempt to lead a dual life, and it is only a matter of time before the external character is revealed to be nothing more than a surface illusion.

As the final disintegration of surface effect and internal reality ensues, we are left to reflect on the extent to which Ambrosio and Jekyll can be seen as culpable for their behaviour. My argument is that the process by which we gain an awareness of our inner alterity is reciprocal in the sense that it demands a moral response, and so the question of responsibility lies in the choices made by the individual following the moment of revelation. That the human condition is fragmented is emphasised throughout both novels in the form of multiple narrative viewpoints, split-personalities and the hypocrisy that is revealed to be at work in both subtle and obvious ways. The message is clear: alterity is a crucial aspect of our experience in the world, which is evident both in the divided state of the universe and in the dichotomies of the inner psyche. The process by which we are forced to recognize this alterity begins with a confrontation with the Other and ends with an internal battle against an inherently divided self. Ambrosio and Jekyll can therefore each be judged as ultimately responsible for their eventual downfall because they fail to respond ethically to this awakened sense of alterity and believe themselves to be above human weakness. It is only when this alterity is revealed to us that we can be described as ethical agents in a real sense, since we cannot defeat our demons when they are clouded in obscurity.

[30] Jekyll and Hyde, p.90.
[31] The Monk, p.266.

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