

# Chapter 1

## Divine Doubt

There were moments in his life when the Danish poet and philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813-55) believed he was going mad. Famed for his Socratic irony and self-parody, in this matter, as in all others, he was deadly serious. Indeed, he consulted his doctors about the possibility on several occasions. If Jean-Paul Sartre was right in asserting a century later that ‘Hell is other people’, then there were grounds enough for Kierkegaard’s concern. He was a tortured soul, having suffered a traumatic childhood and he carried the scars throughout his life. It was a background that predisposed him to an agonisingly lonely adulthood. Yet he also bore the mark of genius from his earliest days and even his uncomplicated, loving and rejected mother recognised in her youngest son the brilliance of his star.

The eminent Kierkegaard scholar and translator, Walter Lowrie, in a ‘Background’ to his brief biography *A Short Life of Kierkegaard* warns how problematic is any attempt to disentangle mental disarray from genius, of the perils of making ‘observation upon a superior mind’.<sup>1</sup> He quotes Kierkegaard recalling Seneca, himself citing Aristotle: *nullum unquam exstetit magnum ingenium sine aliqua ementia*, (‘There never was great genius without some madness’), to which Kierkegaard adds, ‘For this dementia is the suffering allotted to genius, it is the expression if I may say so, of the divine jealousy, whereas the gift of genius is the expression of the divine favour.’<sup>2</sup> So

---

1. Lowrie, *Short Life of Kierkegaard*, p. 28.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28.



Unfinished sketch of Kierkegaard by his cousin Niels Christian Kierkegaard, circa. 1840, in a private collection.

Kierkegaard introduces the idea of an equivocal element in genius, present from the outset but maintained and amplified with the experience of living out of kilter with the universal: a form of intrinsic 'madness' registered as an insoluble paradox. Faced with this inner conundrum, the sufferer – for it is a suffering – may either reject the sense of impotence it imposes upon him by denying all his limitations and so stray into the realm of hubris, or else seek refuge in religion. Either way, genius uniquely and definitively isolates the bearer.

How then is any critic or commentator to go about remarking on the origin of genius? Who dare tread such hallowed ground? The poet, the philosopher, a great artist of any kind pays dear for his gift. The doctors having failed him, Søren Kierkegaard became his own physician, and no professional could have been more rigorous a seeker after psychopathology, diagnosis and cure. Central to Kierkegaard's search for existential truth was a thorough and remorseless mining of his childhood for clues to his later experience and response to life. No

aspect of parental or sibling influence on his own psyche escaped him, with one exception, to be discussed. His self-examination extended to interrogation of the strengths and weaknesses of the wider society into which he had been born, and to the established Danish Church which had played so prominent a part in his upbringing and which, far from escaping his forensic eye, became its ultimate focus.

He loved the land of his birth and its people and held in his heart very real affection for the city of Copenhagen, revelling in its commonplaces and modesty in relation to other grander European cities. He revered and championed the Danish language, even at its most parochial, and delighted in engaging in conversation with all and sundry on the streets during his daily walks. A gifted listener, he humbly adopted ideas gleaned in such encounters, recognising and valuing the wisdom of the 'Everyman'; preoccupied always with the individual rather than the body politic, he had no time for specious, showy argument. Yet, as Lowrie insists, despite such pragmatism, Kierkegaard would recoil from any analysis of his works and life predicated purely upon his personal history; for him the individual was capable of absolute transcendence over hereditary and material circumstance and the individual stood above the race.

Although his own character and the background factors Kierkegaard unearthed in exploring his response to life might easily have led such a man to conclude insanity to be his unavoidable fate, there was another variable. He was also a poet, in the original sense of being a maker, a writer, or at least of possessing a poetic imagination; and, given that psychology may be described as an inexact science, the same must be said of art. According to the psychiatrist and psychologist Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961) 'both these spheres of the mind have something in reserve that is peculiar to them and can be explained only in its own terms'.<sup>3</sup>

\* \* \*

If Kierkegaard spent his life commuting self-knowledge into the fathoming of humankind's relationship to God, an absolute

---

3. Carl Gustav Jung, 'On the Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetry', a lecture first delivered to the Society for German Language and Literature, Zurich, May 1922, in C.G. Jung, *The Spirit in Man, Art, and Literature* (Collected Works of C.G. Jung, Volume 15) (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 66.

methodological antithesis may be found in his contemporary, friend and literary sparring partner, the storyteller Hans Christian Andersen (1805-75). Kierkegaard's senior by eight years and a month, almost to the day, Andersen was as tall, gauche, ugly and awkward a figure as his younger counterpart was slight, delicate, charismatic and handsome. The two men were youthful drinking companions. They followed one another's career and at least spasmodically read each other's work, reviewing and/or commenting on it. Each went through life noting their differing philosophical and literary paths, and where they converged. The strange spiky attraction between the two surely rested upon something close to filial love, or at least a measure of unspoken mutual compassion.

Andersen too dreaded losing his mind. He also knew himself marked by catastrophic childhood and sexual trauma, but Andersen found his salvation lay in evasion. His escapism was radical and took many forms, from travel to sexual fantasy to fairy tale. It was not that Andersen denied the devastation of his early experience; often, as his circumstances improved, he boasted of and capitalised on it. He knew how damaged he was and was haunted by an awareness of mental derangement which had plagued him from early childhood, a thread of insanity which ran through both sides of his family. His father had lost his mind, and a paternal grandfather earned the taunt of 'Mad Anders' from the Odense village louts for wandering the forest, laurelled with a coronet of wild flowers, as he whittled strange creatures from bits of wood. Andersen's alcoholic mother would die in the madhouse.

There was no length to which Andersen would not go to avoid the same fate, and if this involved some deep repudiation of his background and the lifelong cultivation of those he considered his social betters, so be it. However, just beneath the surface of this enervating daily effort lurked always truths as lurid and threatening as those of a fairy tale. Andersen's compulsion to mythologise his own life is epitomised in what he considered his definitive autobiography, in which he sublimates and embroiders reality to a quite extraordinary degree. This in marked contrast to the realism of his stories, which always ring true. In composing the fairy tales he never loses sight of the bald facts of human existence or shrinks from exposing us, often brutally, to our weaknesses. It is this purity that lies at the heart of his oeuvre and which renders it so universal, compelling and consoling,

however swathed in sentimentality, however consciously we absorb or resist his message.

Writing at the age of 30 to his closest friend, Edvard Collin, the first man with whom he fell deeply and hopelessly in love, Andersen pleads for compassion; if Edvard could look into the depths of his soul he would understand ‘the source of my longing’.<sup>4</sup> The waters of the clearest lake had unknown depths to which no diver had descended. This letter coincides with the first stories to come from his pen. It was Edvard’s marriage plans which precipitated the vengeful agony that animates *The Little Mermaid*, the most famous, macabre and lauded of Andersen’s stories. It is a parable that perfectly embodies the ferocious power of its author to distance himself from painful reality by walking us slowly through the darkness.

\* \* \*

Both Andersen and Kierkegaard recognised their own genius. While one embraced his tortured truth and the other found ways of evading it, each endowed the world with literary works that would shape the soul of modern Europe and spread their influence far beyond it. Their private interchange sprang from mutual recognition of extraordinary literary effort and output, fuelled by a life of agonising loneliness and alienation, the impossibility for each of ‘realising the universal’.<sup>5</sup> It was this suffering that drove each individually to the brink and which underpinned their unspoken kinship. The contact between the two might shift from fraught to tenuous, but it was no less real for that. Each recognised the other’s response to their time as Europe emerged from the ‘age of reason’. The early years of the nineteenth century saw the ousting of old order, radical review and replacement of personal and social values. The arrival of German Romanticism led on from the *Sturm und Drang* of the inner man, matched by turbulent external change as the country and continent moved towards modernity.

The relationship between genius and madness has been much debated and never resolved. Genius is an equally contested central theme in European Romanticism, and a salient feature of its characterisation. Jung surely came closest to the truth in admitting

---

4. Wullschläger, *Hans Christian Andersen*, p. 2.

5. Kierkegaard’s term, used throughout his writings to indicate the normal course of events leading to marriage and the founding of a family.

the deep ambiguities and difficulties involved in dissecting psychology free of art. There being no consanguinity between art and science, he confined himself and his entire discipline to treating only that aspect of art which may be ‘submitted to psychological scrutiny without violating its nature’ by moving beyond the process of artistic creation to probe its ‘innermost essence’.<sup>6</sup> This essence could no more be explained by the psychologist than feeling might be grasped or described by the intellect.<sup>7</sup> Jung goes on to stress the discrete nature of art as opposed to science, expressed in fundamental differences which long ago impressed themselves upon the human mind and led to their separation. He was concerned about reductive scientific attitudes, specifically an oversimplification of highly developed states of mind, such as the creative, by eliminating its more nebulous nature in trying to trace it back to an underlying undifferentiated state. In thus disallowing unification between disparate areas, science sought to tether them to a simple causal link and so subordinate them to a general but more elementary principle.<sup>8</sup>

Jung could identify no fundamental unifying principle that justified so reductive a step, be that the undifferentiated chaos of the primeval or infant mind, or magical mentality, or the absence of demonstrable ‘mind’ in animals.<sup>9</sup> He expands on the similarity between this and another then current reductive tendency, that of applying the same technique to art and literary criticism, particularly poetry. To dissect and generalise a poem, said Jung, not only turns it into nothing more than a crude psychological pen-portrait of the poet but renders it susceptible to confusion with psychopathology. Such distraction does disservice to both the artist and the work but succeeds in disarming and rendering it safely distanced from the viewer or reader, who may now take cover from any challenge or threat posed to their peace of mind – an easy but deeply flawed approach. The material and treatment in a poet’s work is easily traced back to seminal formative experience and primal relationships, but so are neuroses and psychoses: everyone has been a child, has good and bad habits, preferences, passions, etc, but common aetiology stops there:

---

6. Jung, ‘On the relation...’ in *The Spirit in Man*, p. 66.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

‘If a work of art is explained in the same way as a neurosis, then either the work of art is a neurosis or a neurosis is a work of art. This explanation is all very well as a play on words, but sound common sense rebels against putting a work of art on the same level as a neurosis.’<sup>10</sup>

As Jung points out, all of us have had parents, the nervy intellectual, the poet, or the bricklayer, all take into adult life a father- or a mother-complex, all experience the common difficulties associated with knowing about sex. In the work of one may be detected the overriding influence of the father, in another that of the mother, and a poet may show obvious signs of sexual repression in their poetry. These traits being universal and so shared by the neurotic and every other person, nothing is gained by applying the criteria to a work of art. So, Jung concluded, by studying the artist we may at most improve our understanding of the psychological antecedents of a work of art, but not much else.<sup>11</sup>

This observation marks yet another of the small and greater fractures and differences which led to his final departure from the path laid out for him by his former mentor, Sigmund Freud, whom Jung felt ‘encouraged the literary historian to bring certain peculiarities of a work of art into relation with the intimate, personal life of the poet.’<sup>12</sup> It was an attitude Jung deplored, an indelicacy he attributed particularly to the medical psychologist and one which led to flagrant abuses. ‘A slight whiff’ of scandal might spice up a biography, but a pinch more amounted to prurient curiosity – ‘bad taste masquerading as science’; the poet becomes a clinical case, very likely yet another addition to ‘the curiosa of *psychopathia sexualis* ...’,<sup>13</sup> and the psychoanalysis of art turns aside from its proper objective into a province as broad as mankind, not in the least specific to the artist and of even less relevance to his art. This may be easily recognised for the ubiquitous trait it is today, in a western society insatiably hungry for sex and scandal, where boundaries have been jettisoned and individual understanding of the human body, mind and spirit is regressed to the point of totemic response to symbol and image. Here

---

10. Ibid., p. 67.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid., p. 68.

the beauty and profundity of a work of art may be either elevated or entirely subsumed beneath transitory moral judgement of its creator: the mindless culture of celebrity and pariah.

A work of art, then, is not born of disease. Yet Jung gave full credit to the biographies of great artists in attesting to the tyrannical character of the creative urge, which may take hostage the entire personality of the artist, subjecting their very humanity to the work and casting aside along the way every pleasurable distraction, health, and even ordinary human happiness. The unborn work of art, Jung suggests, may be seen as a force of nature, so insistent in its need to be realised that it renders the personal fate of the artist immaterial, a mere vehicle, and makes of the creative process a living entity implanted in the human psyche. Jung termed this in the language of analytical psychology 'an *autonomous complex*: a split-off portion of the psyche which leads a life of its own outside the hierarchy of consciousness.'<sup>14</sup> Imagine how it might feel to the artist to sense this mysterious dichotomy at work beyond their conscious control but within the context of day-to-day reality. The struggle to reconcile the demands of everyday life with an overriding compulsion to mould meaning from it. The constant and exhaustive search demanded by their chosen medium – or the medium which has chosen them – for the means and energy to do so. Most of all, the conflict between external and interior worlds which might impede progress in either, so suggesting or proving to the artist's rationale their own hopelessly inadequate, flawed and fragmented personality. It is not hard to conjure up moments in which this conviction triumphs and they sense the nearness of the madhouse.

The clandestine nature of an autonomous complex such as the creative urge is described by Jung as being incapable of open expression unless and until it 'outs' itself in the nascent work of art, during which process 'the divine frenzy of the artist comes perilously close to a pathological state, though the two things are not identical.'<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, it gathers the strength and momentum within the psyche with which to carry itself over the threshold into consciousness. Up until this point it is not susceptible to control, but independent of the will. In this it imitates pathological processes, as these too are characterised by the presence of such complexes, especially in the case

---

14. Ibid., p. 75.

15. Ibid., p. 78.