

Jekyll/Hyde

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Jekyll/Hyde

Like such mythopoetic figures as Frankenstein, Dracula, and, even, Alice (“in Wonderland”), Dr.-Jekyll-and-Mr.-Hyde has become, in the century following the publication of Robert Louis Stevenson’s famous novella, what might be called an autonomous creation. That is, people who have never read the novella—people who do not in fact “read” at all—know by way of popular culture who Jekyll-Hyde is. (Though they are apt to speak of him, not altogether accurately, as two disparate beings: *Dr. Jekyll, Mr. Hyde*.) A character out of prose fiction, Jekyll-Hyde seems nonetheless autogenetic in the way that vampires and werewolves and (more benignly) fairies seem autogenetic: surely he has always existed in the collective imagination, or, like Jack the Ripper, in actual history? (As “Dracula” is both the specific creation of the novelist Bram Stoker and a nightmare figure out of middle European history.) It is ironic that, in being so effaced, Robert Louis Stevenson has become immortalized by way of his private fantasy—which came to him, by his own testimony, unbidden, in a dream.

The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1886) will strike contemporary readers as a characteristically Victorian moral parable, not nearly so sensational (nor so piously lurid) as Stoker’s *Dracula*; in the tradition, perhaps, of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, in which a horrific tale is conscientiously subordinated to the author’s didactic intention. Though melodramatic in conception it is not melodramatic in execution since virtually all its scenes are narrated and summarized after the fact. There is no ironic ambiguity, no Wildean subtlety, in the doomed Dr. Jekyll’s confession: he presents himself to the reader as a congenital “double dealer” who has nonetheless “an almost morbid sense of shame” and who, in typically Victorian middle-class fashion, must act to dissociate “himself” (i.e., his reputation as a highly regarded physician) from his

baser instincts. He can no longer bear to suppress them and it is impossible to eradicate them. His discovery that "Man is not truly one, but two" is seen to be a scientific fact, not a cause for despair. (And, in time, it may be revealed that man is "a mere polity of multifarious, incongruous and independent denizens"—which is to say that the ego contains multitudes: multiple personalities inhabit us all. It cannot be incidental that Robert Louis Stevenson was himself a man enamoured of consciously playing roles and assuming personae: his friend Arthur Symonds said of him that he was "never really himself except when he was in some fantastic disguise.")

Thus Dr. Jekyll's uncivilized self, to which he gives the symbolic name Hyde, is at once the consequence of a scientific experiment (as the creation of Frankenstein's monster was a scientific experiment) and a shameless indulgence of appetites that cannot be assimilated into the propriety of everyday Victorian life. There is a sense in which Hyde, for all his monstrosity, is but an addiction like alcohol, nicotine, drugs: "The moment I choose," Dr. Jekyll says, "I can be rid of him." Hyde must be hidden not simply because he is wicked but because Dr. Jekyll is a willfully good man—an example to others, like the much-admired lawyer Mr. Utterson who is "lean, long, dusty, dreary and yet somehow [improbably?] lovable." Had the Victorian ideal been less hypocritically ideal or had Dr. Jekyll been content with a less perfect public reputation his tragedy would not have occurred. (As Wilde's Basil Hallward says in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: "We in our madness have separated the two [body and soul] and have invented a realism that is vulgar, and an ideality that is void." The key term here is surely "madness.")

Dr. Jekyll's initial experience, however, approaches ecstasy as if he were, indeed, discovering the Kingdom of God that lies within. The magic drug causes nausea and a grinding in the bones and a "horror of the spirit that cannot be exceeded at the hour of birth or death." Then:

I came to myself as if out of a great sickness. There was something strange in my sensations, something indescribably new and, from its very novelty, incredibly sweet. I felt younger, lighter, happier in body; within I was conscious of a heady recklessness, a

current of disordered sensual images running like a mill race in my fancy, a solution of the bonds of obligation, an unknown but not an innocent freedom of the soul. I knew myself, at the first breath of this new life, to be more wicked, tenfold more wicked, sold a slave to my original evil; and the thought, in that moment, braced and delighted in me like wine.

Unlike Frankenstein's monster, who is nearly twice the size of an average man, Jekyll's monster is dwarfed: "less robust and less developed" than the good self since Jekyll's rigorously suppressed life has been the consequence of unrelenting "effort, virtue and control." (Stevenson's anatomy of the human psyche is as grim as Freud's—virtually all a "good" man's waking energies are required in beating back and denying the "badness" in him!) That Hyde's frenzied pleasures are even in part specifically sexual is never confirmed, given the Victorian cast of the narrative itself, but, to extrapolate from an incident recounted by an eyewitness, one is led to suspect they are: Hyde is observed running down a ten-year-old girl in the street and calmly trampling over her body. Much is made subsequently of the girl's "screaming"; and of the fact that money is paid to her family as recompense for her violation.

Viewed from without Hyde is detestable in the abstract: "I never saw a man I so disliked," the lawyer Enfield says, "and yet I scarce know why. He must be deformed somewhere. . . ." Another witness testifies to his mysteriously intangible deformity "without any nameable malformation." But when Jekyll looks in the mirror he is conscious of no repugnance, "rather of a leap of welcome. This, too, was myself. It seemed natural and human." When Jekyll returns to himself after having been Hyde he is plunged into wonder rather than remorse at his "vicarious depravity." The creature summoned out of his soul and sent forth to do his pleasure is a being "inherently malign and villainous; his every act and thought centered on self; drinking pleasure with bestial avidity from any degree of torture to another; relentless like a man of stone." Yet Hyde is safely *other*—"It was Hyde, after all, and Hyde alone, that was guilty."

Oscar Wilde's equally didactic but far more suggestive and poetic *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) makes the disturbing

point that Dorian Gray, the *unblemished* paragon of evil, “is the type of which the age is searching for, and what it is afraid it has found.” (Just as Wilde’s Lord Henry defends insincerity “as a method by which we can multiply our personalities.”) By contrast Jekyll’s Hyde is a very nearly Bosch-like creature, proclaiming his wickedness to the naked eye as if, in Utterson’s words, he is a “troglodyte . . . the mere radiance of a foul soul that thus transpires through, and transfigures, its clay continent.” One is reminded of nineteenth-century theories of criminology advanced by C. S. Lombroso and Henry Maudsley, among others, who argued that outward physical defects and deformities are the visible signs of inward and invisible faults: the criminal is a type that can be easily identified by experts. Dr. Jekyll is the more reprehensible in his infatuation with Hyde in that, as a well-trained physician, he should have recognized at once the telltale symptoms of mental and moral degeneracy in his alter ego’s very face.

By degrees, like any addict, Jekyll surrenders his autonomy. His ego ceases being “I” and splits into two distinct and eventually warring selves, which share memory as they share a common body. Only after Hyde commits murder does Jekyll make the effort to regain control; but by this time, of course, it is too late. What had been “Jekyll”—that precarious cuticle of a self, that field of tensions in perpetual opposition to desire—has irrevocably split. It is significant that the narrator of Jekyll’s confession speaks of both Jekyll and Hyde as if from the outside. And with a passionate eloquence otherwise absent from Stevenson’s prose:

The powers of Hyde seemed to have grown with the sickliness of Jekyll. And certainly the hate that now divided them was equal on each side. With Jekyll, it was a thing of vital instinct. He had now seen the full deformity of that creature that shared with him some of the phenomena of consciousness, and was co-heir with him to death: and beyond these links of community, which in themselves made the most poignant part of his distress, he thought of Hyde, for all his energy of life, as of something not only hellish but inorganic. This was the shocking thing; that the slime of the pit seemed to utter cries and voices; that the amorphous dust gesticulated and sinned; that what was dead, and had no shape, should usurp the offices of life. And this again, that that insurgent horror was knit to him closer than a wife, closer

than an eye; lay caged in his flesh, where he heard it mutter and felt it struggle to be born; and at every hour of weakness, and in the confidence of slumber, prevailed against him, and deposed him out of life.

"Think of it," Jekyll had gloated at the start, "—I did not even exist!" And the purely metaphorical becomes literally true.

The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, though stimulated by a dream, is not without its literary antecedents: among them Edgar Allan Poe's "William Wilson" (1839), in which, paradoxically, the "evil" self is the narrator and the "good" self, or conscience, the double; and Charles Dickens' uncompleted *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870), in which the Choir-master Jack Jasper, an opium addict, oscillates between "good" and "evil" impulses in his personality with an anguish so convincingly calibrated as to suggest that, had Dickens lived to complete the novel, it would have been one of his masterpieces—and would have made *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* redundant. Cautionary tales of malevolent, often diabolical doubles abound in folklore and oral tradition, and in Plato's *Symposium* it was whimsically suggested that each human being has a double to whom he was once *physically* attached—a bond of Eros that constituted in fact a third, and higher, sex in which male and female were conjoined.

The visionary starkness of *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* anticipates that of Freud in such late melancholy meditations as *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1929–30): there is a split in man's psyche between ego and instinct, between civilization and "nature," and the split can never be healed. Freud saw ethics as a reluctant concession of the individual to the group, veneer of a sort overlaid upon an unregenerate primordial self. The various stratagems of culture—including, not incidentally, the "sublimation" of raw aggression by way of art and science—are ultimately powerless to contain the discontent, which must erupt at certain periodic times, on a collective scale, as war. Stevenson's quintessentially Victorian parable is unique in that the protagonist initiates his tragedy of doubleness out of a fully lucid sensibility—one might say a scientific sensibility. Dr. Jekyll knows what he is doing, and

why he is doing it, though he cannot, of course, know how it will turn out. What is unquestioned throughout the narrative, by either Jekyll or his circle of friends, is mankind's fallen nature: sin is *original*, and *irremediable*. For Hyde, though hidden, will not remain so. And when Jekyll finally destroys him he must destroy Jekyll too.

Robert Louis Stevenson died suddenly, in 1894, aged forty-four, not of tuberculosis as he'd long feared but of a cerebral hemorrhage. According to his wife's testimony he had just come up from the basement of their house when, stricken with pain, he cried out to her: "What's the matter with me, what is this strangeness, *has my face changed?*"