

Auden's *The Sea and the Mirror* and Kierkegaard's "Negative Theology"

Matthew Mutter's article "'The Power to Enchant That Comes from Disillusion': W.H. Auden's Criticism of Magical Poetics" claims that W.H. Auden uses *The Sea and The Mirror* in order to critique the magical poetics of many of his contemporary modernists. Mutter claims that Auden writes his poetics of disenchantment based on the notion that magic is simply a "strategy by which poets try to recuperate the perceived existential losses of secular modernity" (Mutter 60). He believes that poets of the modernist movement use magical poetics out of a desire to end alienation from the world and all natural energies. Mutter uses Auden's adaptation to demonstrate that Auden shared this exact point of view and that the poem *The Sea and the Mirror* as a whole is aimed towards expressing that this sort of poetics fails, in part, because it tries to collapse necessary dualisms.

I would like to look at Mutter's arguments in light of another article by Edward Ragg, "Apophatic Auden, Abstract Stevens: From Kierkegaard to Cezanne in 'The Sea and the Mirror' and 'The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet,'" which claims that *The Sea and the Mirror* demonstrates the ways that Auden adopted Kierkegaard's "negative theology" (Ragg 200) as a part of his personal poetics. Auden's adaptation of *The Tempest* exemplifies Kierkegaard's negative theology in several ways. First, he magnifies the dualisms present in *The Tempest* in a way that allows for many different dualisms to be discussed at once. The dualism between magic and reality, serves the poem as a way to talk about the dualism between art and nature and

between the finite and the infinite. Secondly, Ragg compares Auden's Prospero to Kierkegaard's "Knight of Resignation" because Prospero realizes that there is a gap between reality and art in the same way Kierkegaard's Knight realizes the gap between the finite (man) and the eternal (God). Thirdly, Auden's Caliban is adapted to guide the audience through Kierkegaard's three existential modes of being (Ragg 213). Lastly, I would like to discuss the ways that a Kierkegaardian interpretation of *The Sea and the Mirror* demonstrates that the desire to reconcile dualisms, especially between man and nature, is not necessarily a purely modernist writer instinct, as Mutter frames it. The fact that this is a Shakespearean adaptation demonstrates that this has been a concern of artists for a much longer time, and while Mutter's definition of magic may be a reaction to a sense "of alienation from the world," the inclination he is describing is the same that has been the inclination of the poet for much of history whether they make use of the occult or not.

The overall critique given by Mutter is that magical thinking is by its very nature subjective and so is doomed to fail. However, I believe that Auden's motivation was not so much to condemn magical poetics, but to critique its tendency to remain unaware of itself as a way of exemplifying the concepts found in Kierkegaardian literature. This relationship between Auden and Kierkegaard is something that Mutter does not consider in his article, but is deemed important in Edward Ragg's article in which he discusses Auden's return to the Christian church in 1939. Auden was captivated by the "negative theology" of Kierkegaard, and the embrace of his concepts impacted his work tremendously (Ragg 202). This "negative theology," or "apophatic theology" is at its core a "Knowledge of God: obtained through negation" (Ragg 201). One of the more important dualisms in Kierkegaard's work is the tension between the

infinite and the finite, the result of which can only be “faith not by means of rational argument but by the patently absurd...It relegates formal logic in favor of incredible paradox” (Ragg 200)

By examining closer what this sort of theology entails, it will be possible to delineate how exactly Auden enacts these concepts in *The Sea and the Mirror*.

Kierkegaard writes about three specific existential modes of being throughout the course of his work: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious mode. Within the discussion of these modes, Kierkegaard introduces the important concept of “despair” (a concept that becomes integral to Auden’s poetics of disenchantment). Kierkegaard writes of the Aesthetic mode: “The aesthetic in a man is that by which he immediately is what he is.” (“Either/Or” 87). The aesthetic mode is the most basic form of being: a person in this mode is bound up in their own solipsistic existence based on immediate pleasure and pain. They remain ignorant of the “existential contradiction” (Ragg 203) between the self and the external world. It is important to note that Kierkegaard believes that although we are contained in a finite existence, we also contain an eternal self. The person in the aesthetic mode focuses only their finite selves and the happiness they can experience. Michelle Kosch’s article “‘Despair’ in Kierkegaard’s Either/Or” asserts that it is within this mode that we exist inherently in our despair. The judge (the character Kierkegaard uses within “Either/Or” as a pseudonym) claims that every single person has despair and that the majority of people do not even realize it (“Either/Or” 99). Despair, as a Kierkegaardian concept, differs from our general notion of the word. Kosch defines this despair as “the conscious or unconscious assumption of a passive or fatalistic attitude toward one’s existence, motivated by a misconstrual of the nature of one’s agency” (86). This is, in other words, an inability to accept the reality of human existence with all of the conditions that it

comes with. Those who are unconscious of their despair exist in the aesthetic mode: they live according to whether external things are agreeable or disagreeable. This despair stems from our finite reality and the gap between human existence and the transcendental or infinite that much of Kierkegaard's work remains fixated on. Once a person recognizes their despair, they begin to move into the ethical mode.

The ethical mode of existence is the next step up from the aesthetic: within this mode "his personality declares itself in its inner infinity" (*Either/Or* 103). The ethicist begins to think of himself as a social self because he sees himself as part of a universal human beyond his bodily self. To Kierkegaard, this mode includes the majority of the people in the Christian Church, which he considers "crypto-aesthete" (Ragg 203). While they recognize the existential contradiction between the infinite and the finite, their desires are aimed at self gratification instead of achieving a relationship with God. (Ragg 203). But as Kierkegaard writes: "It is a fundamental confusion... to mistake the abstract consideration of a standpoint with existence, so that when a man has knowledge of this or that standpoint he supposes himself to exist in it." (*Concluding Unscientific Postscript* 226). Most Christians, Kierkegaard claims, use the recognition of the distinction as a claim to being more spiritual.

Becoming aware of despair does not necessarily allow a person to move from the ethical mode into the religious mode. It all depends on how they manifest their own despair. A person has the choice to blame our despair on circumstances and revert to a more passive despair, or as Kosch puts it, make "a choice of oneself as agent" (94). Kierkegaard believes that we must actively confront our own finitude by taking responsibility: "But what is it then, that I choose—is it this or that? ... I choose absolutely precisely by having chosen not to choose this or that. I

choose the absolute, and what is the absolute? It is myself in my eternal validity.” (*Either/Or* 30). A person must recognize that despair does not always lead them directly to our realization and embrace of the incredible paradox between our finite bound infinite selves. Often it leads them to desire to be a different self, or to change things about the self which ignores the true nature of despair in which one should really have despair over oneself, but about the eternal (Kosch 95). Kosch says, referring to Kierkegaard’s notion of despair, that “ the problem to which Kierkegaard addresses himself is not that of getting out of this state , but rather that of freeing oneself from the false self-conception that gives rise to it.” (96). This notion of the “false self-conception” that can arise from the awareness of despair figures prominently in *The Sea and the Mirror*, especially in Caliban’s relationship to the audience which will later be discussed.

Lastly, the religious mode, is the existential mode of being which Kierkegaard holds in the highest esteem. This mode demands that a person realize the impossibility of having a relationship with the infinite, while still having faith in it. Kierkegaard illustrates this paradox in his work “Fear and Trembling.” Here, Kierkegaard discusses the leap of faith that the biblical Abraham takes when he is asked to sacrifice his son. He does so through characters of the Knight of Infinite Resignation and the Knight of Faith. The Knight of Infinite Resignation is the person who has realized the impossibility of having a relationship with the infinite. Kierkegaard states “The infinite resignation is the last stage prior to faith... only in the infinite resignation do I become clear to myself with respect to my eternal validity” (“Fear and Trembling” 125). The Knight of Faith accepts the paradox that “the particular is higher than the universal” (“Fear and Trembling” 130), that as a finitely bound being we can’t possibly have a relationship with the finite, and yet through faith we can. The Knight of Faith and the religious mode of being are

ideas that work very parallel with one another. Kierkegaard uses the Knight of Faith as a way of talking about what someone who exists within the religious mode would be like. Faith is what distinguishes the Knight of Faith from the Knight of Infinite Resignation in the way that the ability to accept despair as well as claim “eternal validity” is the difference between the ethical mode and the religious mode.

Looking at how Auden has adapted *The Tempest*, it is clear that Auden recognizes that the Prospero at the end of Shakespeare’s play has become a Knight of Infinite Resignation when he relinquishes all of his powers.

Now I want
Spirits to enforce, art to enchant;
And my ending is despair
Unless I be relieved by prayer... (*The Tempest* Epilogue 13-16)

The choice to write *The Sea and the Mirror* as a continuation of *The Tempest* then sets up character who have become disenchanted with magic. In his lecture on Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* Auden notes that “Prospero’s magic depends upon his books and his robes. By himself he is an ordinary man” (*Lectures on Shakespeare* 306). Prospero’s relinquishing of magic is similar to a person who moves from the ethical mode to religious mode. Just as the person in the ethical mode uses their knowledge of an existent infinite as means for self-gratification, Prospero used his books as means to control the people around him. Just as the person turning to the religious mode must accept the finite boundaries they exist within, Prospero learns that magic cannot really do anything besides give an experience: “it cannot dictate what people do with that experience” (*Lectures on Shakespeare* 306). Auden even makes a direct reference to the Knight of Infinite Resignation in the line “Sailing alone out over seventy thousand fathoms”, which alludes specifically to Kierkegaard’s discussion of the leap of faith in “Postscript”, stating

“Without risk there is no faith...I must constantly ...remain upon the deep, over seventy thousand fathoms, in order to find God.” (*Concluding Unscientific Postscript* 253) Ragg further argues that Prospero represents The Knight of Infinite Resignation because of his use of silence (210). Because the ways of the religious mode cannot accurately be expressed, in “Fear and Trembling,” Abraham (Kierkegaard’s main example of the Knight of Faith) “remains silent” about his choices. Similarly, Prospero states “I never suspected the way of truth / Was a way of silence.” (*The Sea and the Mirror* 11). Here Prospero appears to represent the Knight of Infinite Resignation making a leap of faith, accepting the necessary paradox in order to become a Knight of Faith. At the end of Prospero’s speech to Ariel he says: “Trembling he takes/ the silent passage / Into discomfort.” (Auden 12). While the word “trembling” seems to reference “Fear and Trembling,” the work in which Kierkegaard discusses Abraham’s journey to becoming a Knight of Faith, these lines also speak to the conditions one must accept to enter this state. To truly consider the paradox between the finite and infinite is an uncomfortable one and to explain the faith is impossible.

Auden also adapts Caliban and the audience in a way that serves Kierkegaardian negative theology. The audience’s questions (spoken by Caliban) demonstrate that they exist within the ethical mode. As such, they are highly critical of the aesthetic mode which is represented by Ariel. They approve of Antonio who, in *The Tempest*, would fall under the ethical as well. He wishes “to have no screen between this part he played / And him he played it for” (*The Tempest* 1.2.107-8), meaning, he does not want to be accused of artifice (Ragg 211). Ragg notes that this is reminiscent of Kierkegaard’s “official Christian” who does not want to be seen as playing the role he has taken up (Ragg 211). It is also very important to realize that Caliban’s audience

never criticizes Prospero, instead they critique Ariel because he represents the aesthetic mode. Caliban's audience says that art transforms using "orphic spell...greedy beasts into grateful guides and oracles" (*The Sea and the Mirror* 34). This critique of art as being "orphic" definitely echoes the critique of magical poetics that Mutter claims that Auden is making. However, while the audience's disenchantment with art represents a step in the right direction, Caliban's role is to lead the audience to a realization. He at first follows the lead of the audience by attacking Ariel, but then continues to point out the same aesthetic existence within himself (as a representation of the author) (Ragg 212). He discusses the things that would "maintain the low aesthete "one bout of flu per winter, an occasional twinge of toothache and enough tobacco to keep me in good temper while you composed you melting eclogues of rustic piety..." (Ragg 212). This self examination as the author helps to lead the audience to realize their hypocrisy. Similar to the way Kierkegaard claims that most Christians use their larger spiritual goals as means of self-gratification, Caliban points out to the audience that their rejection of the idealism of Ariel is a symptom of the false self-conception that occurs when they misidentify their despair. He identifies their aesthetic desires by having the audience say "O Cupid, Cupid... take us home. We have never felt really well in this climate of distinct ideas...Science, Religion, Art...have, frankly, not been very kind. (*The Sea and the Mirror* 44). Here he presents the audience's dilemma. Now that they have become aware of their own finitude, they will still turn to either Caliban or Ariel for relief. Caliban represents a harsh reality--he tells the audience that when they call on him he will "have no option but to...transport you...to that downright state of itself. Here you are....a full moon casts a circle of dazzling light without any penumbra, exactly circumscribing it's desolation in which every object is extraordinarily still and sharp" (*The Sea*

and the Mirror 45). Caliban offers the audience “infinite passivity” (*The Sea and the Mirror* 45) that comes with historical perspective. With this option they will “plunge headlong into despair and fall through silence fathomless and dry” (46). The other option, Caliban says, is to call upon Ariel, the representation of the ideal and transcendent we search for in art, who will “lead you forthwith into a nightmare which has all the wealth of exciting action and all the emotional poverty of an adventure story for boys...everlasting improvisation where all is need and change (*The Sea and the Mirror* 47). Either one the audience chooses will lead them back to despair. The point of Caliban’s speech at this point is to demonstrate for the audience that there absolutely no hope. To become a Knight of Infinite Resignation, one must have no hope that there can be a reconciliation between the ideal and reality, between the infinite and the finite. Caliban says “your refusal to be yourself become[s] a serious despair” (*The Sea and the Mirror* 49). This statement seems to refer to the notion of the despair at not willing to be oneself versus the preferred despair of a willingness to be oneself. The audience’s inability to accept their predicament only leads them on a circular route. Until they can recognize their despair as a result of their inability to reconcile these dualisms instead of blaming one or the other, they will remain in the despair at not willing to be oneself.

Caliban discusses the paradox more explicitly on page 50 when he says “doomed to fail the more he succeeds, for the more truthfully he paints the condition, the less clearly can he indicate the truth from which he is estranged, the brighter his revelation of the truth in its order, its justice, its joy, the fainter shows his picture of the actual condition in all its drabness and sham.” For the most part, this speech does not seem to be offering any hope; it simply reiterates the hopelessness of trying to portray the truth. However, further down the page he says “an

awareness of the gap is in itself a bridge, your interest in your imprisonment a release” (*The Sea and the Mirror* 50). Finally Caliban reveals what his true intentions have been in leading the audience through this speech on the hopelessness of their predicament. Just as Kierkegaard says that a Knight of Faith must first become a Knight of Infinite Resignation, Caliban needs the audience to at least recognize their own predicament as finite if they are even to have the possibility of taking the leap of faith. They need to choose to take responsibility and agency over their own despair.

While *The Sea and the Mirror* as a whole contains echoes of Kierkegaardian figures and concepts, it is the longest section, Caliban’s, that leads the audience eventually to an understanding of the subversive logic of Kierkegaard’s negative theology. At the end of his speech Caliban says “it is precisely in its negative image of Judgement that we can positively envisage Mercy; it is just here, among the ruins and the bones, that we may rejoice in the perfected Work which is not ours” (*The Sea and the Mirror* 52). Why does Auden choose Caliban as the vehicle for this message as well as the earlier message from the author to aspiring artists? Auden supplies Caliban as his alter ego in order to achieve the sort of ironic distance that Kierkegaard achieves when he wrote under the various pseudonyms. Furthermore, it is also somewhat a way of staying true to Shakespeare. Kierkegaard was aesthetically influenced by Shakespeare. He says in “Sickness unto Death”: “and then read Shakespeare-and thou shalt shrink from the collisions” (358). Kierkegaard praises Shakespeare throughout his work for his ability to harness the many conflicting energies that he identifies as existing within himself. James E. Ruoff says in his article discussing Shakespeare’s influence on Kierkegaard that Kierkegaard “came to look upon Shakespeare as a kindred spirit with some deep, ineffable

"secret" he could not utter except by artistic sublimation" (345). In his M.A. dissertation "On the Concept of Irony," Kierkegaard calls Shakespeare "the great master of irony" ("The Concept of Irony" 336) which he defines as

"a psychological process wherein the ironist, presupposing that his listener understands him, and yet, paradoxically, not really wishing to be 'universally understood,' negates his subjective impulses (the 'phenomenon') and emancipates himself through the objective work of art (the 'essence') until phenomenon and essence become one harmonious activity" (Ruoff 346-7).

Kierkegaard believes that Shakespeare's success lies largely in his ability to use ironic distance as a way to master inner turbulence. He takes hold of his own collisions "by objectifying it in manifold artistic forms"(Ruoff 347). Caliban provides this same sort of ironic distance for Auden. It is extremely appropriate that in his effort to exemplify the philosophy of Kierkegaard in his Shakespearean adaptation, Auden incorporates a more exaggerated version of the ironic distance that Kierkegaard admired in Shakespeare himself's work. Furthermore, it is worth noting, Ruoff believes that Kierkegaard was inspired by Shakespeare's plays and characters in a way that lead him to develop his modes of existential being. The fact that Auden uses Shakespeare to as a vehicle for discussing these modes of being is fascinating because in a way it allows for the concepts to come full circle. It's possible this is why Shakespeare's characters are kept for the most part as they appear in the play, only wiser and more disillusioned. Caliban for example serves the voice Auden quite well. Because the subversive logic required to take the leap of faith can not be truly communicated (as Caliban notes in his "doomed to fail the more he succeeds" section on page 50), Caliban can only enact the sort of despair and reconciliation that he wants the audience to understand. Because he has been under the domination of Prospero for

so long, it is not really strange that he would have such so much to say. The form that this manifests in Auden's case, is a long, one-sided, semi-rant from which the essence of despair and confusion emerges.

Returning to Mutter's reading of Auden's critique, if *The Sea and the Mirror* is an example of Kierkegaard's philosophy, then Mutter's argument, that Auden believes magical poetics fails because it tries to collapse necessary dualisms, would be misplaced. Auden is more concerned with demonstrating that the ways the dualism between art and reality can be compared to the dualism between the finite and the infinite. His disenchantment serves as a representation of the concept of despair--something that we all have and need to come face to face with. While I am inclined to think that Auden's *The Sea and the Mirror* does critique magical poetics, it does so coincidentally, and in the way that Kierkegaard critiques Christianity for having a lack of awareness and knowledge of its separation from the eternal. Kierkegaard believes that while there can be no reconciliation of the dualism, that man still has the capacity to have a relationship with the infinite through his own resignation from it. Mutter employs magic as "an umbrella term that incorporates more general ontological, psychological and poetic orientations of other analytic categories such as occultism, spiritualism, animism, alchemy, enchantment or neo-paganism" (Mutter 59). If we consider magic through the abstract tensions of what Mutter has defined, then there is nothing about Auden's thinking that condones religious thinking and condemns magical thinking. Instead *The Sea and the Mirror* continues a dialogue about these dualisms and the tension between the poet and the material world without coming to the conclusion magical thinking must collapse dualisms. Auden's critique is of the subjective mode of poetry which is not exclusive of magical poetics but is also not necessarily equivalent. By

maintaining a sense of otherness from the ideal/transcendental, magical poetics could still establish a faith in it, or at least this is what Auden would hold.

Auden's decision to adapt *The Tempest* has less to do with criticizing the modernist inclination towards occult interests as it does with the fact that Shakespeare is already directly tied to the concepts and problems that Auden wanted to tackle in art and philosophy. The text of *The Sea and the Mirror* works much more parallel with the tangled movements of Kierkegaardian negative theology than with a directed criticism at a specific, time period constrained, poetics. Mutter claims that "magical poetics" was a uniquely modernist technique used to "recuperate the perceived existential losses of secular modernity" (Mutter 60). However if we are to believe that at its core magic is "more capacious and abstract for Auden than any of its historical manifestations" (59) then it should also be acknowledged that magical poetics is a label for a poetics that extends far beyond the modernist context. The secondary conversation regarding poetics that exists does in *The Sea and the Mirror* is a part of a much larger conversation that has taken on many forms.

For example in Jane Hirshfield's essay "Two Secrets: On Poetry's Inward and Outward Looking," Hirshfield designates that there are three stances that poetry which uses outer images can take: the subjective, the reflective, and the objective modes. The subjective mode uses the world beyond the self to serve the poets interior thinking, the reflective mode is a dialogue between the poet and the outer world, and the objective mode uses language "as an intermediary, a medium through [which] the world of objects and nature beyond human consciousness may speak" (131). She goes on to discuss in her essay the ways that poetry "speaks the world beyond the self" (Hirshfield 141) is very rare, that even in the most objective, purely observational

poetry, that act of perception does not disappear. She asks the question: is it possible for the poet to exist in a poem that treats itself equally with the world as an “other?” In the process of exploring this question Hirshfield discusses *The Tempest* as an example of the dynamics between man and nature. Prospero’s “unnatural enchantment” (Hirshfield 151) and domination over Ariel and Caliban represent for Hirshfield the tempting subjective stance that a poet can take over the outer world. For Prospero to step into his proper role, he must allow the spirits to go free. By resuming his position as a duke, he takes up a place in a community and allows himself to become vulnerable once again (Hirshfield 151). These sentiments echo the call made by Kierkegaard to take responsibility and agency over our own despair. *The Tempest* has a wide variation of readings and critical lenses, however, for most poets, it seems to strike a particular chord. The tension between man and the natural world is all too familiar to the poet.

Matthew Mutter interprets Auden’s adaptation of the play as a very specific critique of the magical poetics of many of Auden’s contemporary Modernist writers. Auden writes that there are “Two theories of poetry... Poetry as a magical means for inducing desirable emotions and repelling undesirable emotions in oneself and others, or Poetry as a game of knowledge, a bringing to consciousness, by naming them, of emotions and their hidden relationships” (Mutter 78). Mutter describes Auden’s “poetics of disenchantment” as being the latter of the two. He says that his poems “insist on the unalterable, mechanistic necessity of natural events.” (Mutter 72). Auden’s poetics are described in opposition to the “magical poetics” that Mutter uses to label the first of the possible theories of poetry. Magical poetics, according to Mutter, are the result of man’s desire to remedy the “estrangement between the inner life of the self and its ‘external,’ material embodiment” (60). The claim Mutter makes is that Auden believes while in

the process of trying to bridge this gap between man and external environment, the poet collapses necessary dualisms and conflates his desires with the energies of the external world. We can compare this problem with the pitfall that Jane Hirshfield describes as being the major problem of many of the Romantic writers who wrote in what she calls the subjective mode. In this mode of writing, the poet uses the external world to serve the interior emotions of the poet. Hirshfield's hesitancy towards this mode stems from its tendency to "lapse into solipsism" (131). Hirshfield's "subjective mode," which anthropomorphizes the poet's mind in the external world can be equated with Mutter's take on the "magical poetics" that he believes Auden critiques. In both cases the effort to unite the self with the external world results in the domination of the poet over the external world.

Auden's *The Sea and the Mirror*, as an adaptation, focuses on prolonging the conversations that begin in *The Tempest*. In the same way that Hirshfield asks if the poet can approach the world as "other" as an equal, Auden asks whether we can confront our finitude and still assert an infinite self. While there is a commentary on a specific type of poetics, it takes place on a much broader level than that of a specific criticism of poets who were influenced by the occult. Mutter's argument that Auden used *The Sea and the Mirror* to discuss these particular tensions ignores the issues that were of utmost importance to Auden at the time as well as omits the established dialogue between Shakespeare and Kierkegaard. Auden's adaptation of *The Tempest* explores the tensions already present between man and the natural world through the framework of Kierkegaard's negative theology.

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