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A Tale of Two Geniuses— with Opposing Views of Tales— and an Ingenious Critic of Both: H.C. Andersen, Søren Kierkegaard, and Georg Brandes

by Poul Houe

I

The year 2005 marks the 200th anniversary of Hans Christian Andersen's birth and the 150th anniversary of Søren Kierkegaard's death. Kierkegaard's critique of Andersen as a novelist was merciless, and Andersen's relation to Kierkegaard the man and the thinker was not easygoing either. Both of these towering nineteenth century Golden Age Danes were first portrayed in a big way by the same Danish critic, Georg Brandes, himself a pivotal figure in nineteenth century European criticism. I thought it appropriate, therefore, to focus my paper on Andersen, Kierkegaard, and Brandes as three cornerstones of nineteenth century Danish culture.

More specifically, I wish to consider how their appropriation of (fairy) tales—from different, if not opposing viewpoints—situates this genre as a burning glass for three ingeniously powerful aesthetic, intellectual, and existential worldviews. What are Andersen's and Kierkegaard's conflicting views of fairy tales, and how are these views embedded in Brandes's treatments of the two authors? Has he cast either one or both of them in his own fairy tale paradigm? And is there an over-arching fairy tale to be told that encapsulates the entire trio in its "message"?

Why look to fairy tales for a common denominator for our three writers? For one thing, they all looked to this genre *themselves* for a better understanding of themselves—or of each other. And secondly, this angle of incidence is particularly relevant today, when fairy tales seem to enjoy a renaissance,¹ as they did in the Romantic era, in which—and against which—Andersen and Kierkegaard wrote their works, and to which even Brandes in many ways was indebted.

"That's what I like so much about fairy tales. Fairy tales contain a lot of cruelty and suffering, but there's almost always a liberating element at the end. Maybe that's the task of literature, I don't know," says Annika Idström, a modern Finnish novelist.² Her words speak for many contemporary writers at the same time as they capture a shared endeavor behind the lives and works of Andersen, Kierkegaard, and Brandes. The question, however, is what "liberating" means in each of these three cases.

II

It's no longer a matter of controversy that Andersen wrote his fairy tales for children *and* adults, and did so in such a way that *the child per se* would be liberated from adult repression while *the child within the adult* would be stimulated in a deeper sense.³ A shared humanity would gather around Andersen's storytelling, and the sharp division between righteous grown-ups and inferior little ones would temporarily be dispensed with.

And not surprisingly so, for the adult Hans Christian Andersen harbored a most vivid child within himself and refused to "grow up" or be a "grown-up" at the expense of this priceless existential and artistic resource at the bottom of his heart and soul. Human spirit, by his experience and faith, was ultimately childlike, open-minded, and open-ended. Hence, the fairy tale about the ugly duckling that after going through so much suffering finally is recognized as the beautiful swan it always had been inside, became the foundational myth about Andersen's own life, thanks in part to his biographers, in part to his own autobiographies. Georg Brandes, for one, read Andersen's text as the expression "of the very essence of its author's personal character."⁴

Nevertheless, the tale is, and remains, a myth in the sense that it seeks to apply the harmonious model of *Bildung* in nineteenth century thinking and novels to a story about escape and flight that doesn't end up reconciled with its point of departure, and that isn't teleologically bound to affirm that the world is, after all, an orderly cosmos. Indeed, reality is purely accidental; it just happens to be part of the accident that it looks as though it were not an accident!⁵

Still, if the so-called duckling was born a swan, its recognition, by itself and others, as the being it had been since birth, has the character of a rebirth. And the desire, or the drive, towards this rebirth is as fundamental as any archetypical or religious longing: a bondage and a liberating force in one gesture, to refer once again to Johan de Mylius, whom I cited before, and whose most recent book concludes on the note that the drive in question is both personal and artistic and thus unifies the author with his tales, or at least blurs the boundary between fiction and person.⁶

One might say that Andersen's life was a tale insofar as he invested himself in his fairy tale writing; but it was not the sentimental tale he envisioned when, unbound by artistic strictures, he portrayed himself as deserving of tenderness and pity, and even superimposed this self-perception on his works of art.⁷

Presumably, the discrepancy between his genuine artistic tale(s) about his own life, and his private sentimentalization of his life—its predicaments as well as its good fortunes—is indicative of Andersen's incomplete self-realization. If true fairy tales are narratives about the coming into being of selfhood, then these artistic tales also give authentic testimony to the actual shortcomings of this process. Conversely, the sentimental tales constructed outside artistic perimeters confirm said shortcomings by merely postulating an accomplished integration. Their inadvertent contradictions evidence what their artistic counterparts deliberately say about a conflict-ridden life.

III

If Andersen only gradually came to realize that his lasting fame as a writer for better or worse rested upon his production of fairy tales, Søren Kierkegaard was *always* quite a "fairy tale freak." The expression is coined by Jens Andersen, whose new and large Hans Christian Andersen biography contains a rather satisfactory account—to which I am beholden here—of the relation between the two men and the difference between their fairy tale conceptions.⁸

Kierkegaard's enduring critique of Andersen was initially aimed at one of his novels, but it somewhat pertains to his fairy tales as well. While the two authors shared—among other things—an

interest in childhood and a delight in fairy tales, then precisely those character traits I just mentioned as typical of the ugly duckling myth appeared in Kierkegaard's spectacles to be those of a spineless, wimpy, and unmanly individual named Hans Christian Andersen. As someone thriving in head wind, Kierkegaard was contemptuous of someone like Andersen who always pleaded for tail wind. From Kierkegaard's standpoint, Andersen's was sorely lacking a coherent worldview, or outlook, and so his fairy tales were naïve, and not at all the rough-and-ready refreshments and stimulants for adults that Kierkegaard preferred.

In short, it was the ambiguity, open-endedness, and decenteredness in Andersen's personality and tales—the very features that foregrounded modernism in this body of literature—that so offended his philosophical counterpart and *his* demand for existential responsibility and integrity. Of his attack on Andersen, Kierkegaard himself said it was an effort “to vouchsafe Andersen's clustered and motley poetic existence in all its curvings, twinings, turnings, twistings, and grimacings.”⁹ He wanted to straighten out the irregular poet.

In Kierkegaard's view, a disharmonious person like Andersen was not the right one to tell fairy tales to children. For he was not an adult who had a harmonious enough childhood behind him to tell them about; rather, he was a childish individual whose stories would but confuse and discourage children from fully growing up. Children needed fairy tales to purify and work through the angst that even they experienced as part of the human condition—an idea much in the vein of Bruno Bettelheim's later uses of fairy tale enchantment, but quite at odds with everything Andersen stood for, personally and artistically. And for all his astuteness, Kierkegaard failed to appreciate Andersen's radical vitalization of the child, be it within the adult or outside adult confines.

IV

Whereas Andersen called his principal autobiography *The Fairy Tale of My Life*, and mythologized the role of his fairy tale heroes in order to articulate his self-understanding, Kierkegaard viewed fairy tales not as metaphors or symbols of *his* journey of life and work, but

rather as insightful and illustrative companion pieces to his various writings—and to the respective existential and religious stages he went through and interpreted in the course of his journey.

Jens Andersen, in his outline of Kierkegaard's fairy tale conception, seems to rely quite heavily on Grethe Kjær's book from 1991 on the world of the fairy tale in Kierkegaard's oeuvre. Permit me, in the following five paragraphs, to extract from her well-documented discussion some of the most central observations and conclusions.¹⁰

When fairy tales were not simply being read for relaxation from personal problems (16), Kierkegaard considered them, whether they be folk tales or myths, as valuable expositions of life and existence (20). He compared them to "hypothetical sentences in the indicative," grasping the eternal in temporal forms (18). He found their irony of life positive, as opposed to the negative irony of the Romantics (13-14)—and found their description of human development as pertinent to the single individual as to human kind as a whole. Historical periods with a dominant interest in myths and tales must correspond to a time in a particular child's life when a similar susceptibility prevails; indeed, Kierkegaard increasingly turns from the ethnological study of tales and their role within mankind's development in general to the relevance of this art form for the single individual's development seen in the light of psychology and from an ethico-religious standpoint (27-30, 109).

To the extent Kierkegaard distinguishes between myths and tales, he finds the latter more universal, at once down to earth and supernatural (34). Their world is an *other* world—to be taken seriously (30) because tales may lead to individuation, or self-realization, which in turn will enable the individual to choose itself as the individual that God posited it to be (35, 36, 39). Again the anthropological stages for human development reflect the individual human being's search for selfhood (51), which in its deepest sense means a movement of resignation from this world into a deeper awareness of the eternal (56).

At this point Kierkegaard's philosophy of life collides with the fairy tale's anthropology, for the self-realization afforded here is insufficient compared to his demands. While the tale seeks justice

and eternity by moving reality toward ideality, Kierkegaard's ethico-religious move went in the opposite direction, so as to bring ideality into the real world (82, 90). Humans are composite beings, and fairy tales are important means to the end of realizing this fact as part of the human condition; only through self-realization and the freedom it entails, does angst, the reality of sin and of not always choosing the good, come to mind (82).

Whenever Kierkegaard leaves the aesthetical for the religious stage, fairy tales tend to recede from his discourse. They resonate well with the Socratic notion of man's ability to find the truth within, unlike man the sinner who is beholden to god's truth; but as god enters time as truth, man is compelled to realize his or her own untruth (85-86). Even this transition calls for fairy tale accompaniment, though, but now on Kierkegaard's own terms. Hence the nexus between the god's entrance into the temporal and man's actual angst about his precarious condition. Angst as spirit bound in corporeal form holds the promise of both freedom and perdition. But in order for it to bear on freedom and to fulfill its spiritual promise, angst must be learned the right way, and fairy tales leading the individual towards selfhood have—since the Grimm Brothers—been considered roadmaps serving this retrograde goal (93, 95, 96, 102).

There is no denying that Kierkegaard's use of fairy tales mirrors his intellectual development overall. His reading of these tales in the context of aesthetical-ethical concerns is clearly for self-identification. Like Scheherezade, who kept herself alive by telling stories to the sultan that were important to *his* life, Kierkegaard's fairy tale connection hits both ways. It serves his reader with means to identify his or her deeper self, while it saves Kierkegaard's own life by committing him to his authorship (102, 104, 111-14). And like Scheherezade, Kierkegaard at the religious stage enables his listener and reader to give and receive love (114).

We began comparing Kierkegaard and Andersen with respect to their notions of tales and the like; now, let's come full circle and compare their *Agnete and the Mermaid* works to which both writers have devoted serious attention. Andersen's drama by this name was by far his most daring investment for the stage, and the female

protagonist named in its title was supposed to be his own inquiring spirit.¹¹ Yet her indecisive male counterpart was precisely the anathema Kierkegaard loathed in Andersen. The male and the female were innocently, undramatically, and sentimentally positioned on the same stem, like certain flowers.¹²

In Kierkegaard's, or his pseudonym Johannes de Silentio's, merman (in *Fear and Trembling*), striving is resolutely directed towards *otherness*, as the author preferred it. This Agnete is not innocent, and when the merman approaches her humbly, to make her save his soul, she rather reignites his passion; and never has it raged so demonically as it does together with this supposedly saving female grace. The merman signifies a human who cannot be saved by another human, and he belongs to a traditional tale devoid of remedies. Only through faith, by dint of the absurd, may he arrive at a new beginning, a new innocence.

Agnete and the Merman may be the title of one of Kierkegaard's better, and one of Andersen's worse, artistic products; yet comparing the two is telling. It tells quite a bit about Andersen's and Kierkegaard's understanding and appropriation of tales, and about the affinity between this genre and the two authors' respective existential and authorial personas. And it draws a demarcation line between them as adversarial administrators of the fairy tale corpus.

V

Georg Brandes' groundbreaking work on Andersen consists primarily of three consecutive articles from 1869, followed by a retrospective introduction to the so-called world edition of his tales and stories from 1900, and by a shorter feature article on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of Andersen's birth (in 1905). The entire material is collated by Elias Bredsdorff in his *H.C. Andersen og Georg Brandes* (1994).¹³ Brandes's work on Kierkegaard, on the other hand, is one seminal book, *Søren Kierkegaard* (1877), amended in 1880 with a postscript on Kierkegaard's posthumous papers.¹⁴

In both instances, considerable admiration and rebuke have been heaped on the author over time. Controversy has always surrounded Brandes's activities, and arguments pro et contra the man and his work have been leveled from various directions to this

day. While I will not review this massive body of reactions here, it is possible, I believe, to center the major criticisms against Brandes on the fairy tale template that he encountered in Andersen and came to apply broadly in his own criticism.

To illustrate the point, let me cite the final lines of a critical reevaluation of the entire modern breakthrough ushered in by Brandes. Taken from a plenary paper delivered by Sven H. Rossel at a 1986 Gothenburg conference on "The Modern Breakthrough," the quote resonates with many a past and present criticism of Brandes. "Georg Brandes," says Rossel, "sought to draw a picture of himself as the grand lonesome intellectual, once again ahead of his time and therefore once again misunderstood and persecuted—yet another myth in the history of Brandesianism that awaits its destruction."¹⁵

Without deciding about the validity of the point made—it is clearly polemical, but not without foundation in Brandes's writings—it takes no rocket science to identify the nature of Rossel's claim. He simply states that Brandes has employed the ugly duckling myth to characterize his—Brandes's—own development. Had he—Rossel—made the additional point (which he hasn't!) that such a myth is marred with inner contradictions, he might have substituted deconstruction for destruction ["aflivning"].

If Brandes, as many have argued, has molded a myth about himself on a fairy tale template, his deception is not simply aimed at typecasting a much more nuanced and contradictory reality in his own favor; no, the range of his alleged misrepresentation is such that even his critics have been misled by its mythical form to overlook the mythical content. To prevent myths, which are not untruths but partial truths, from perpetuating themselves, they must indeed be deconstructed, not destroyed.

Reading Rossel's critical lines into the context of the ugly duckling myth, by the way, was no intrusion on my part. Johan de Mylius, in the book I cited earlier, more than once reminds us of Brandes's objection to Andersen's conclusion to "The Ugly Duckling." Instead of ending up as the tame and hand-fed creature in the manor house's pond, the young swan should have expressed an heroic and defiant individualism by flying away in solitude and proud, exclusive

suffering.¹⁶ What Brandes is obviously missing in the text, as in so many texts by Andersen, is a firm philosophy of life that could keep under lid a disquieting lack of continuity and personality, standpoints and engagement, as Mylius puts it.¹⁷

If the ugly duckling myth superficially served to reinforce the supposedly modern critic Georg Brandes's view of himself as someone in possession of the qualities just mentioned, then its deeper significance lies in revealing Brandes's uneasiness about ambiguousness and atomistic lack of central perspective, his restless receptivity to impressions of change—in Andersen—that happened to be far more central to the modern agenda than any of the character traits Brandes himself laid claim to.¹⁸

VI

I have argued elsewhere in some detail that what appears to be a critical construction of Andersen by Brandes is rather a reconstruction and deconstruction of received notions of the poet and storyteller, both of which interventions prove indispensable for Brandes's critical construction of himself.¹⁹ So, instead of belaboring this point I simply pose a question to Brandes's overt pronouncements about Andersen's lability: Where did we hear something like this before? Correct—from Kierkegaard, who repeatedly objected to Andersen's "lack of an outlook." Mylius rightly calls Brandes's critique of Andersen a "sort of a naturalistic match to Kierkegaard's Bildung's-idealistic critique."²⁰ So it is, but it is also a match to the fairy tale template—as Kierkegaard stamped it.

At the Gothenburg conference where Sven Rossel took issue with Brandes's allegedly mythological self-portrait on the basis of a variety of texts, Finn Hauberg Mortensen discussed persuasively Brandes's 1877 book on Kierkegaard. Where Rossel queried whether *The Modern Breakthrough* (but essentially Brandes himself) was truly "modern," Mortensen puts the same question directly to one of Brandes's pivotal texts. But unlike Rossel, Mortensen answers both yes and no—and, in addition, he explains the connection between the two.²¹

On the one hand, Brandes adopts both Kirkegaard's critical passion and passionate language *and* his demand for personal truth

to which *The Modern Breakthrough* itself was strongly committed. On the other hand, Brandes decouples these loans from their contextual meaning in Kierkegaard's oeuvre. Kierkegaard's philosophy of personality and religiosity are conveniently passed over in silence, and the antithetical trope that the younger critic has also imported from his precursor basically serves him to distinguish himself, as the mouthpiece of modernity, from Kierkegaard's anachronism.

Even so, it turns out that Brandes's bourgeois affiliations were far more centered on the idea of a unified personality than was the period of split and doubled personalities to which Kierkegaard's generation belonged. By adopting Kierkegaard selectively, so as to warn *The Modern Breakthrough* against his paradoxical and religious temptations, Brandes simplified, for instance, Kierkegaard's concept of personality to fit his modern audience; but the complexity that he merely dispensed with, and didn't deal with, in his Kierkegaardian source of inspiration, would later come back to haunt its censor as an integral part of the modernism to which he—Brandes—had even fewer attachments than Kierkegaard had.

The road to freedom thus turned out to be much less straightforward than Brandes had anticipated. As Mortensen notes, Brandes already in his Kierkegaard book finds people unexpectedly impersonal and mass-oriented, and himself driven to thinking and acting in lofty solitude.²² His personal twisting of the ugly duckling myth is back in force.

But, strictly speaking, so is Kierkegaard's take on the fairy tale. Tales as search engines serving the ultimate search for selfhood were precisely the driving forces Brandes could translate from the philosopher-poet into his own modern breakthrough without breaking the latter. Such orderly tales were comforting, unlike Andersen's confusing multifariousness, but comforting only to the point where divine intervention rendered the tales' self-realization insufficient and where the course of the tales had to be altered by Kierkegaard's own creation in order for their characters to meet their creator.

At this point Brandes disembarks his reading—of Kierkegaard as well as of Andersen—as no longer instrumental for *his* self-

realization, and chooses instead self-imposition on his source of inspiration as a shortcut to self-identification. And he does so at his critical peril.

VII

The lesson to be learned from Georg Brandes's tales about Andersen and Kierkegaard is this: even someone with a critical genius for personality nuance both profits and suffers from casting his observations in a totalizing view. While the art fairy tale at first glance lends itself strongly to such a view—deep in its insight, integrated in its worldview and attitude—it also holds an abundance of secrets that are relevant to the self-realization process despite the surface impression this process may leave of an orderly cosmos. Both Andersen and Kierkegaard realized as much and sought to draw each their consequences thereof. For both of them, tales were either liberating or had to be liberated.

Brandes, by contrast, believed he could enclose his liberal individualism and psychological observation within the rationalist and positivist dogmas of his time without having to pay the price for the enclosure, i.e., without acknowledging that his pursuit of truth must at some point be at the expense of the received order and knowledge he also relished. Ignoring the conditions of possibility for his critical endeavor, he increasingly substituted a mythical fortification of insights he already possessed for the more risky fairy tale mode of truth-seeking. This is not the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth about Brandes. But it is an important part of it: that he rose like an open-ended fairy tale and set like a self-affirming myth.

It's a pitfall that awaits us all.

¹ Grethe Kjær, *Eventyrets verden i Kierkegaards forfatterskab* (C.A. Reitzel, Cph., 1991), 5.

² "Between imagination and reality: An interview [by Adriaan van der Hoeven] with Finnish writer Annika Idström." *Scandinavian Newsletter* (1988).

³ Johan de Mylius, *Forvandlingens pris—H.C. Andersen og hans eventyr* (Høst & Søn, Cph., 2005), 26-27.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 65-66; tr. mine.

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- ⁵ Ibid., 63-72
- ⁶ Ibid., 358-59.
- ⁷ See Jens Andersen, *Andersen*, Vol. 2 (Gyldendal, Cph., 2003), 14-24.
- ⁸ Ibid., Vol. 1, 387-411.
- ⁹ Ibid., 401; tr. mine.
- ¹⁰ Kjær, *Eventyrets verden*, op cit. Subsequent page references in the main text.
- ¹¹ Jens Andersen, *Andersen*, Vol. 1, op. cit., 306.
- ¹² Ibid., 396.
- ¹³ Elias Bredsdorff, *H.C. Andersen og Georg Brandes* (Aschehoug, Cph., 1994).
- ¹⁴ Georg Brandes, *Søren Kierkegaard: En kritisk fremstilling i grundrids* (1877; Gyldendal, Cph., 1967).
- ¹⁵ Sven H. Rossel, "Var det moderne gennembrud "moderne"? En kritisk omvurdering." In *The Modern Breakthrough in Scandinavian Literature 1870-1905: Proceedings of the 16th Study Conference of the International Association of Scandinavian Studies, Held in Gothenburg August 4-8, 1986*. Eds. Bertil Nolin & Peter Forsgren (Gothenburg: Göteborgs universitet, 1988), 106; tr. mine.
- ¹⁶ Mylius, *Forvandlingens pris*, op. cit., 64 and 180.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., 357.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., 358.
- ¹⁹ Poul Houe, "Georg Brandes' (kritiske konstruktion af) H.C. Andersen." *Anderseniana* (1996), 49-58.
- ²⁰ Mylius, *Forvandlingens pris*, op. cit., 356.
- ²¹ Finn Hauberg Mortensen, "Var Brandes moderne?" In *The Modern Breakthrough in Scandinavian Literature 1870-1905*, op. cit., 289-97.
- ²² Ibid., 294.