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Kierkegaard's Mirror (of Erised)

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1. Introduction

The Mirror of Erised appears twice in the *Harry Potter* series, both times in *Sorcerer's Stone*. This evocative magical object is one of J. K. Rowling's many delightful creations in the imagined world she has authored. It has been the subject of literary and philosophical analysis, particularly with respect to epistemology[1] and the philosophy and psychology of desire.[2] In this article I will present and defend an existentialist interpretation of the Mirror of Erised. The Mirror, I argue, symbolizes the human predicament of existential despair, and within the *Harry Potter* series functions as an instrument of existential diagnosis and catalyst for the birth of genuine subjectivity. The Mirror confronts the viewer with the self's strongest point of attachment to the aesthetic stage of life and therefore with the chief obstacle to be overcome in the task of attaining true selfhood.

No magical object (which I hasten to equate with a technological device) can of itself impart any other imperative than its own use. One must gain a sufficiently broad perspective to determine good aims. However, the existential dimension of the Mirror of Erised is concealed by its technological character in the empirical dimension. "What does it do?" and "How does it do it?" are the evasive questions of fact that, in virtue of the object's captivating power, defer the important questions of value.

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[1] Shawn E. Klein, "The Mirror of Erised: Why We Should Heed Dumbledore's Warning," in *Harry Potter and Philosophy: If Aristotle Ran Hogwarts*, ed. David Baggett and Shawn E. Klein (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 2004), pp. 92-104.

[2] David Lay Williams and Alan J. Kellner, "Dumbledore, Plato, and the Lust for Power," in *The Ultimate Harry Potter and Philosophy: Hogwarts for Muggles*, ed. Gregory Bassham (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), pp. 128-40; David Jones, "Interpret Your Findings Correctly," in *Hog's Head Conversations: Essays on Harry Potter, Volume 1*, ed. Travis Prinzi (Allentown, PA: Zossima Press, 2009), pp. 189-204; Taija Piipo, "Is Desire Beneficial or Harmful in the Harry Potter Series?" in *Critical Perspectives on Harry Potter*, ed. Elizabeth E. Heilman, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 65-82.

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The Mirror of Erised is a dangerous device for one living in the aesthetic sphere of life, because its lessons cannot be learned from a vantage point *within* the aesthetic sphere. The self gazes upon an image of one enjoying the "deepest, most desperate desire of [one's] heart" (*SS* p. 213). An ontological no-man's land of virtual interiority and exteriority is created. The subject becomes an onlooker to a self than which none better can be conceived, that is, the highest aesthetic self one envisions. But the subject is not (yet?) that highest self nor is the objective self in the Mirror the actual self; neither self possesses genuine selfhood. The exterior subject presented in the Mirror is not a project resulting from decisive choice. The interior subject facing the Mirror and contemplating the fully happy self therein is evading the task of becoming an individual, even the individual he most desires to be. The viewer is paralyzed before the desired viewer-to-be, smitten with the image of the fully happy self.

With guidance, however, the Mirror becomes a means of leaping beyond and transcending the false self that is represented in the image as well as the false self that gazes into the Mirror. Both selves must be annulled to leap into the authentic selfhood of the ethical self. As others have shown,[3] one of the key themes in *Sorcerer's Stone* is Harry's wrestling with desire. The Mirror provides space for contemplation of his desire. Rowling prepares Harry for self-transcendence, but it is important to point out that this will be achieved not by extirpating desire but by transforming desire. Self-transcendence is not a move into an impersonal reality of no-self, but a transcendence of the false self characterized by selfish desires to an authentic self characterized by selfless desires. Since the Mirror enthralls the viewer by depicting the aesthetic self enjoying his or her greatest imaginable pleasure, the transformation begins by denying the pursuit of pleasure—sensual, emotional, or intellectual—as the highest aim of one's desires. Achieving authentic selfhood requires a decisive act to judge one's self in the aesthetic sphere to be false. Though the Mirror's purpose is ambiguous, a means that can both cure and wither, if handled properly it is an aid, a propaedeutic lesson for the initiatory act of self-judgment.

2. Kierkegaard's Spheres of Life

Soren Kierkegaard's aesthetic sphere of life is the lowest of the three existential stages in his account: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. Each sphere of life can be chosen voluntarily, but the aesthetic sphere is the default mode of existence. The aesthetic sphere is an entire world, and the dweller in this world adopts an aesthetic posture in life. That posture can be found across a wide spectrum: from uncouth to sophisticated, from Homer Simpson to Charles Bukowski to The Most Interesting Man in the World,

[3] See Klein, "The Mirror of Erised," and Piipo, "Is Desire Beneficial or Harmful in the Harry Potter Series?"; see also Colin Manlove, "The Literary Value of the *Harry Potter* Books," in *Hog's Head Conversations*, ed. Prinzi, pp. 1-21.

from the underclass to the aristocratic moneyed class. The unifying principle of the aesthetic sphere is hedonism. One's chief aim in life, whether unconsciously or consciously, is the pursuit of the pleasures of body or mind. Eventually, one finds that the preferred source of the pleasures becomes unreliable. Perhaps physical pleasures eventually fail to stimulate or to interest the aesthete. This leads to the condition famously described in "Rotation of Crops" in *Either/Or*: boredom.[4] The aesthete then seeks new forms of stimulation or diversion within the aesthetic sphere in order to cure the boredom. But the aesthetic sphere of life is oriented toward the external, pleasures coarse and fine, and these are subject to the caprices of contingency and fate. Glue or opium, Thunderbird or Dom Perignon, Air Jordans or stiletto heels with diamonds on their soles—the power of their gratifications rise and ebb beyond the control of the aesthete. If the hedonist finds herself unsatisfied by the coarser pleasures of the flesh, avoiding dissipation or addiction, the pursuit of pleasure becomes more sophisticated and efforts more byzantine in order to stave off the despair that no more meaningful life is available beyond that of the aesthetic life.

While the aesthetic sphere of life is a world of captivity to dissatisfaction and boredom, Kierkegaard's ethical sphere of life is the world of freedom. To enter this world one must will the extinction of one's old, sick, false self in order to gain the genuine selfhood of responsibility to an ethical code. The "leap" into the ethical sphere requires the commitment to self-perfection, the "I," and the commitment to other people, the "Thou." The false self that one denies is that collage of social roles one inhabits. These roles are imposed by society, and their rules and conventions entail a loss of freedom. It is one's will to moral commitment that unifies these fragmentary roles and moves one from the false self of scattered images we indwell in our various social roles. One loses the false, aesthetic self and gains ethical selfhood. The self takes on a definite form by one's passionate commitment to the ethical code and the practice of self-judgment. The individual attains this higher life by first judging oneself guilty of narcissism in the leap out of the aesthetic sphere and then holding oneself responsible in every future choice.

The ethical sphere of life requires an unrelenting self-scrutiny which can lead to ethical despair. For Kierkegaard, the solution to this despair is the leap into the religious sphere of life. The religious sphere is the world of faith. Kierkegaard describes this sphere through the famous analysis in *Fear and Trembling* of Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah.[5] Through the voice of his pseudonymous Johannes de Silentio, Kierkegaard explores the

[4] Soren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: Part I*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 281-300.

[5] Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983).

possibility and implications of transcending the ethical sphere of life. Through Johannes, Kierkegaard finds Abraham incomprehensible: "Abraham I cannot understand."[6] He cannot comprehend him as a moral exemplar, for he finds Abraham's willingness to murder his own son at the behest of a divine report to be absurd and repellent. Abraham is incomprehensible because of his certainty. He appears to transcend the religious paradox of divine reports[7] without effort. For example, once Abraham hears and agrees to obey the command to sacrifice his son Isaac, he tells his servants, "Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you" (Genesis 22:5). Abraham's act is thus a "double movement": first, of infinite resignation in accepting the loss of his only son by sacrificing him on an altar by his own hand; second, of faith in virtue of his inexplicable belief that he will nevertheless gain his son. He is able utterly to be committed to killing his son Isaac (only by the intervention of the angel of the Lord does Abraham desist) while simultaneously confident that "*we* will come back." The leap of faith is irrational; one renounces rational order, the world, society and its demands, even familial love. One loses one's very self and status as a moral agent, and gains the status of a "knight of faith." Kierkegaard describes the existential meaning of the first movement of the act of faith in *Fear and Trembling*:

> Infinite resignation is that shirt mentioned in an old legend. The thread is spun with tears, [the cloth] bleached with tears; the shirt is sewn in tears—but then it also gives protection better than iron or steel. The defect in the legend is that a third person can work up this linen. The secret in life is that each person must sew it himself . . . .[8]

We can broaden the application of Kierkegaard's claim: faith is required in becoming an ethical self, responsible to an ethical code. One must choose voluntarily the sphere of existence in which to dwell; social identities underdetermine selfhood.

Harry's task is to ascend from the aesthetic sphere of life to the ethical sphere of life. He must struggle against those desires that prevent him from beginning his transformation into a selfless individual. The Mirror of Erised confronts him with his greatest obstacle: his desire to know and be embraced by his parents, his desire to experience the love of his family. The image in the Mirror is a projection of Harry's slaking the thirst produced by his deepest desire. The Mirror, of its own accord, does not reveal to him that

[6] Ibid., pp. 37 and 112.

[7] See Josiah Royce, *The Sources of Religious Insight* (New York: Charles Scribner & Sons, 1912), pp. 3-34.

[8] Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 45 (footnote omitted).

this desire cannot be satisfied. It not only shows him his greatest obstacle, but in virtue of its power to do so is itself a part of that obstacle. Only by transforming his desires from the aesthetic sphere to the ethical sphere can Harry overcome this obstacle and become responsible for who he is and will become.

3. The Magical-Technological Imperative

Harry is ensnared by the powers of and the effects produced by the Mirror of Erised. But like Harry, we too are drawn irresistibly to our own Mirrors of Erised. The technological world is full of such Mirrors. How can we be awakened to this fact and become responsible to seek more than the pleasure bestowed by our Mirror? Let us first consider the claim that magic in the *Harry Potter* saga and technology in our world are equivalent.[9]

The following maxim has been attributed to science fiction writer Larry Niven: "Any sufficiently rigorously defined magic is indistinguishable from technology." (You may recognize this as an inversion of Arthur C. Clarke's third "law of prediction.") If a set of magical techniques or body of magical knowledge is "rigorously defined," then it is, equivalently, a rational system of knowledge. The magical rules that J. K. Rowling has devised in the *Harry Potter* series are a rational, cause-and-effect system obeying mechanistic laws. Therefore, magic in *Harry Potter* participates in the same logic as modern science and technology.

Technology, according to Jacques Ellul, is the totality, the systematic unity, of all rationalized techniques.[10] A technology is a rational method of efficient and effective action. Technology makes demands on our resources, energy, attention, intellect, and desires. Technological devices don't exist without a network of social forces and institutions developing, building, and propagating them. What powers does technology bestow? If we attend to the message broadcast by marketers and merchants of the latest schemes, styles, and gadgets, what are the recurrent themes? Technology will satisfy my desires. It will enhance my experiences. It will improve my quality of life. It will relieve my boredom. It will transform my life and society for the better. It is our greatest hope for advancing the cause of human progress. Technology can save us from harm, restlessness, sadness, wastefulness, ruin,

[9] For further elaboration of this equivalence, see Joel B. Hunter, "Technological Anarchism: The Meaning of Magic in Harry Potter," in *Harry Potter for Nerds: Essays for Fans, Academics, and Lit Geeks*, ed. Travis Prinzi (Oklahoma City, OK: Unlocking Press, 2011), pp. 105-34. See also Nicholas Sheltrown, "Harry Potter's World as a Morality Tale of Technology and Media," in *Critical Perspectives on Harry Potter*, ed. Heilman, pp. 52-64.

[10] Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, trans. John Wilkinson (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), pp. xxv and 13-21.

and meaninglessness. This makes the Mirror of Erised the ultimate personally customized, instantly gratifying satisfaction machine.

Technology acquires its irresistible power to mold individuals and society when individuals and communities cede their personal autonomy to defer always to the one best means of controlling and coordinating their choices, actions, and environment. Consider a relatively harmless example. I want some spending money for a night on the town. I go to the ATM to withdraw the money. There may be other techniques available for me to accomplish my end. I find the ATM not just a convenient tool for getting cash, but the *rational* method because it is the most efficient and effective one.[11] What makes the ATM the technological technique is not the sophisticated electronic and mechanical construction and automatic operation of the device, but rather, that it is the means of efficient and effective action to accomplish the desired operational aim. Note that before the ATM was available, the technique for withdrawing cash was by making a request for it from another person, a teller at a bank. This, too, is a technology in the sense I am using the term. A technology is the best means available at a given level of development in society to satisfy a desire. Why would I choose any other means? For by definition it will be less efficient or less effective, or both. We can distinguish cultural techniques of a natural scale and developed from natural human abilities from modern technology by examining the social effects of the technique. Does the technique isolate people from each other? Does it promote social polarization or splintering into specialties? Does the acceleration of techniques, their complexity, their power, and so on, enforce social change at a rate that rules out cultural precedents for norms and behavior?[12] Answers in the affirmative to any of these questions indicate that the technique serves principally to impose the demands of "artificial operational objectives" on the individual.[13] The individual is not free or independent of these techniques.

Magic in *Harry Potter* is not only a set of favored or culturally defined techniques, but is technological in this strict sense. Wizards have systematized magic into a compendium of practical and theoretical knowledge. Magical technique is universal in scope and absolute in its applicability. Magical technique is rational when natural techniques of indigenous variety, spontaneous or impulsive creation, or provincial scope are discarded for the specific technique determined institutionally to be the one best means to the desired end. The one best means is sought and applied to

[11] It should be noted that I am indirectly criticizing those conceptions of rationality that divorce means from ends; according to such conceptions, the measure of rationality is not at all affected by moral considerations, but only those of power and economy.

[12] Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality* (New York: Perennial, Harper & Row, 1973).

[13] Michael Sacasas, "Technique, Perception, and Friendship," accessed online at: http://thefrailestthing.com/2011/02/08/technique-perception-and-friendship/.

every possible field of inquiry and activity: commerce, government, education, communication, entertainment, health, and so on. Wizards and witches who rely on magic to satisfy their needs and urges, for protection, to relieve boredom or anguish, to distract them from the people and activity of the actual world, and comply without resistance with its recommendations, are living in a technologically saturated arrangement of Kierkegaard's aesthetic sphere.

It is the bewitching success of magic in *Harry Potter* and technology in our world, their irresistible expediency, that impels one to the inevitable conclusion that because X *can* be done it *ought* to be done and it *will* be done. This is the logic of the technological imperative taken to its natural conclusion. To refuse magic's and technology's effectiveness and efficiency would be irrational. But as Henry David Thoreau foresaw in machine technology's eschatological promises: "Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things. They are but improved means to an unimproved end."[14] Whither shall I go for guidance to know what ought to *be* my desire? By what light can we choose or reject what is technically achievable? Without a genuine alternative, a different imperative and hope for a less externally determined destiny, how are we to imagine or conceive improved ends to accompany ever more powerful means?

4. Harry and the Mirror of Erised

Eleven-year-old Harry Potter seeks his true identity. For Christmas he receives an anonymous gift, an Invisibility Cloak that had belonged to his father. During his first use of the cloak, he narrowly escapes being caught sneaking into the Library's Restricted Section ("Use it well," indeed [*SS* p. 202]). He evades his pursuers and in the nick of time discovers a door standing ajar. He slips into the room and soon discovers a huge mirror with the inscription: "Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsI" (*SS* p. 207), that is, in reverse, "I show not your face but your heart's desire." But Harry is too shocked and then smitten by what the mirror reveals to worry about the riddle. He quickly works out that, for the first time, he's looking at his parents and extended family in the glass, and they appear as if they are there in the room with him.

Rowling has masterfully prepared us to ache as deeply as Harry in this scene. And she wastes no time showing the alluring danger of the Mirror. Harry has important tasks before him that the delights of the Mirror would derail: "Harry couldn't eat. He had seen his parents and would be seeing them again tonight. He had almost forgotten about Flamel. It didn't seem very important anymore. Who cared what the three-headed dog was guarding? What did it matter if Snape stole it, really?" (*SS* pp. 209-10). Harry shares his

[14] Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, in *Walden and Other Writings* (New York: Modern Library, 2000 [1854]), p. 49.

discovery with Ron Weasley who sees a quite different, but no less appealing, picture of himself in the glass. Later, he and Harry quarrel over rights to occupy themselves with the Mirror. On the third night, Ron shows the moral awareness to worry about the Mirror's addictive power and resolves to deny himself its pleasures. He advises Harry not to go back to the Mirror, warning, "I've just got a bad feeling about it" (*SS* p. 212). But neither the vague worries of his friend nor the risk of being caught breaking school rules will deter Harry: "Harry only had one thought in his head, which was to get back in front of the mirror, and Ron wasn't going to stop him" (*SS* p. 212). With the powers of the Invisibility Cloak protecting him, he easily makes his way back to the room with the Mirror. Rowling writes:

> And there were his mother and father smiling at him again, and one of his grandfathers nodding happily. Harry sank down to sit on the floor in front of the mirror. There was nothing to stop him from staying here all night with his family. Nothing at all. (*SS* p. 212)

Nothing—except that Dumbledore is waiting for him this time. Harry, startled into the actual world, offers the excuse, " I—I didn't see you, sir" (*SS* p. 212).

The wise headmaster, always ready to help Harry emerge from his narrow perspective, gently and indirectly reminds him that he has not heeded the advice of the note that accompanied his Invisibility Cloak: "Strange how nearsighted being invisible can make you" (*SS* p. 213). Here, Dumbledore also hints that he aims to help Harry gain sufficient moral vision so that Harry can see things in their true proportion and relation. Dumbledore asks Harry whether he has figured out what the Mirror does. Harry surmises, "It shows us what we want . . . whatever we want" (*SS* p. 213). Dumbledore replies, "Yes and no." According to Dumbledore, the Mirror "shows us nothing more or less than the deepest, most desperate desire of our hearts." He warns that the Mirror "will give us neither knowledge [n]or truth." Nevertheless, "Men have wasted away before it . . . not knowing if what it shows is real or even possible." He advises Harry to learn this lesson, because "[i]t does not do to dwell on dreams and forget to live" (*SS* p. 213-14).

The Mirror of Erised discloses the identity the viewer yearns for. It detects the objects most deeply loved—wishes, fears, inclinations—all that of the viewer's aesthetic life which feels unfulfilled, stunted, discontent, languishing—and translates these into an image representing the desire whose satisfaction (so it is imagined) would relieve one of the burdens of imperfection and the miseries of affliction and incompleteness. This image is then supremely alluring and supremely treacherous.

The Mirror of Erised bestows a great yet dreadful gift: it shows us the reality of our inner life, what we crave as our highest good. If we interpret correctly the image it projects to us, we can acquire a deeper understanding of our true identity, a much more valuable gift than the pleasurable feeling we enjoy while gazing into it. But this true identity of our self may be painful to face. Though Harry desperately aches to know his parents more intimately

than through second-hand reports and an old photograph, the Mirror's bringing the Potter family together again is a fantasy. Harry must endure the pain of their physical absence, if he is to awaken to the task of self-understanding, raising himself from the aesthetic to the ethical life. He must make a commitment to live morally, to decide to be held to an ethical code, and not to dwell on the non-self of dreams. The task is not to get rid of the Mirror, but to transcend it.

We are in a similar predicament to Harry's. We are drawn to those objects that delight us with ourselves. We find it difficult to will the extinction of that pastiche of false selves mediated to the world by our computer. We lose ourselves in Pascalian *divertissement*. We hide our true condition and our captivity from ourselves. In this age we are present to that network of computing devices called the World Wide Web. This is another social role we inhabit. But in the material means of our connection to it, it simultaneously reflects back to us the identity we have transferred to its powers of determination. The aesthetic sphere of life is reduced to those experiences accessible through a screen and a set of speakers. In spite of the diminution, however, and the frequent report that new depths of boredom are reached therein, this mediated aesthetic sphere is declared to be a world of infinite possibilities. Muggle Mirrors of Erised are no less captivating than the magical one discovered by Harry Potter.

As long as our wishes, desires, perception, and judgment are determined by the possibilities which the Mirror extends to us, we live in self-imposed servitude to it. We must first become conscious that our perceptions of the images in the Mirror are not free, and then understand both the properties of the Mirror and the barriers of the aesthetic sphere of life that block us from the freedom of self-defined choices. The Mirror suspends one's future indefinitely. It conceals from the entranced viewer that the future does not exist. The viewer is unconscious of deferring her creation of herself through choices and decisive action. A wise guide can encourage the nascent self-to-be to overcome the dread, the fear of freedom and responsibility to act toward the project of self-creation. Harry has the help of Dumbledore to understand what he must do in order to leap from the aesthetic stage, but the decision to be an authentic, ethical self must be his own.

The technological imperative of the Mirror insists that the viewer become absorbed with the vision of the self he most desires and linger over its implied promise of permanent satisfaction. From the point of view of the ethical person, this immersion in a sensuous experience, the fragmentation of the self in an ontological no-man's land of virtual interiority and exteriority, is narcissistic. The Mirror invites the viewer to valorize the possible world it shows over the actual world in which the Mirror and viewer are situated. To transcend the vision given by the Mirror, the viewer must act from a conviction that the Mirror induces him to defer: to exercise commitment and accept responsibility for the self one is and pursue a higher selfhood. It is a tool that reveals the aesthetic life of the viewer, but in its solipsistic operation, it fails to reveal one's social obligations and communal existence. The Mirror

confronts the viewer with his or her lack of selfhood. How is this alienated person to get one? By choosing. "Choose thyself"—extirpate the old aesthetic self and lose oneself—leap, commit to hold oneself responsible to an ethical code. Harry isn't fully aware that he is doing this under Dumbledore's advice and warning about the Mirror, but in the final chapter of *Sorcerer's Stone*, he proves that he has entered the ethical sphere and begun the project of true selfhood when the Mirror works for him in his showdown with Quirrell-Voldemort. Only if Harry had committed to live in the ethical sphere would the Mirror have delivered the Stone into his possession.

Harry proves that he has learned the lesson of resisting the magical-technological imperative commanded by the Mirror of Erised. His desire is to find the Stone in order to thwart the progress of evil, not to use the Stone for the power it bestows to its owner. "You see," Dumbledore explains, "only one who wanted to *find* the Stone—find it, but not use it—would be able to get it, otherwise they'd just see themselves making gold or drinking Elixir of Life" (*SS* p. 300). It is the use of the magical object that is put into question and qualified. Its technological imperative no longer commands Harry's moral vision. Harry has attained the wisdom offered in his earlier encounter with the Mirror of Erised under Dumbledore's guidance. His desire is not for control of the power-bestowing magical object, but for the higher ends of defying evil and protecting his friends. But neither magical technique nor technology suggest such ends of their own accord, because their "artificial operational objectives" impose their own self-augmenting and self-justifying demands absolutely opposed to conditions like "find . . . , but not use." It is up to us to interrogate the technique so as to discover whether it may be used as an instrument of conviviality rather than captivity.

5. Conclusion

It is easy for us to be enthralled by what can be done and fail to ask what is worth doing. The technological imperative demands our strict compliance, and the technological system often elicits our "Gloria!" and "Hosanna!" in view of its power and promise. But to pose the question of worthy ends requires that the ethical life is a live option, and to deliberate over and will particular ends and commitments requires freedom—even if only provisional and temporary—from the aesthetic life. Our aesthetic life operates in the technological milieu and its attendant demands on our attention, desires, values, and aims. So if we are to gain the wisdom of young Harry Potter, we must ask: *What is the Mirror of Erised into which we are gazing?*

The Mirror of Erised brings the viewer up against a representation of the self that embodies the decisive barrier that must be overcome to enter the ethical stage of life. To remain paralyzed in front of the Mirror, unwilling to leap beyond that barrier, perhaps obsessed with the self the Mirror presents, is to wither and die existentially. One remains outside of one's life, a spectator, with no friendship, no love, no passionate commitment to any person,

community, or task. Those who waste away in front of the Mirror are stuck in a twilight zone of actual and possible selves, alienated from genuine ethical selfhood.

Harry chooses the self that he wills to be by renouncing the call and false promise of the Mirror. If he had not, he would have remained a splintered, false self, the sum total of the social roles and identities imposed upon him, both real and fabricated: orphan child of Lily and James Potter, despised nephew of Vernon and Petunia Dursley, the Boy Who Lived, the Quidditch hero, inmate at St. Brutus's Secure Center for Incurably Criminal Boys. Voldemort literally splinters his soul into the Horcruxes, but Harry also exists as a splintered self—his personae are not a unity and he has not yet lived out the individual ethical life he has chosen to become. Unless Harry freely chooses his ethical commitment, thereby attaining an authentic selfhood, he lives existentially the kind of life that Voldemort lives empirically.

The viewer stands before the Mirror of Erised in an external introversion. The Mirror is like Kierkegaard's "false door" behind which one supposes is the true self one wishes to have. But the existential inertness of the enjoyment of the Mirror's vision of oneself occasions wanting in despair to be the self the viewer refuses to be: "The false door of which we spoke then, and which had nothing behind it, is now a real door though kept carefully closed, and behind it the self sits, as it were, keeping watch on itself, preoccupied or filling time with not wanting to be itself."[15] The viewer is enraptured by the desired self and is not willing for the reflection to disappear, because that would negate the desired self. It is an irresolvable dilemma of existential despair: stay in front of the Mirror unable and unwilling to live and bring into the world one's desired self; leave the Mirror and the desired self evaporates. In either case, the dilemma can only be resolved with a death: either one wastes away in front of the Mirror in a living death or one nullifies the attachment to the aesthetic life *in excelsis*. It is the latter death, a phoenix-like transcendence to a new sphere of life, that is the condition for authentic selfhood, for it requires a decisive act to judge one's self in the aesthetic sphere to be false. The Mirror suspends indefinitely the self yet to be. Thus, the self proves to be an act and not an object, when one wills to choose for oneself what and who one will be in relation to one's self and others. This is the existential meaning of Dumbledore's assurance to Harry in the denouement to *Chamber of Secrets*, that "it is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities" (*CoS* p. 333).

[15] Soren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, ed. and trans. Alastair Hanny (New York: Penguin, 2004), p. 94.