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**THE FIFTH COMMANDMENT OF THE JANTE LAW AND THE
THEME OF SELF-KNOWLEDGE IN SANDEMOSÉ'S
*EN FLYKTNING KRYSSER SITT SPOR***

The subject matter of Aksel Sandemose's well-known novel *En flyktning krysser sitt spor* (1933)¹ is the psychological trauma of a man who has killed another man. The crime, which has never been discovered, has not destroyed his personality. It has induced him to engage in intensive self-reflection which eventually enables him to shake off the shackles of his past and come to terms with himself; it has set him on the way to inner liberation. His search for personal integrity rests on the idea of self-knowledge. The present article focuses on this main theme of the novel.

I

The fate of the main character and narrator of the novel, Espen Arnakke, seems to be determined by the environment in which he grew up, a fictional Danish town called Jante. As the narrator wants to show, the extremely conservative provincial town had a crippling effect on him during his childhood. He sums up the unwritten life rules of his birthplace in what he calls the Jante Law, which is a mock-biblical set of ten commandments serving as a code of behavior for every decent citizen of Jante. The first of the commandments, „du skal ikke tro at du er noe“ (56), encapsulates, in a way, all the others and expresses in a nutshell the general imperative of the narrow-minded small-town environment: you shall by no means stick out of the crowd.

¹ Sandemose republished the novel in a thoroughly reworked version in 1955, which is usually seen as inferior to the text from 1933. In my own discussion and in citations, I use the text of the first edition, reprinted in the series „Norges Nasjonallitteratur“ (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1967).

The sensitive soul of the young Espen suffers from the fact that any deviation from the prohibitive and hypocritical moral rules of his hometown has painful consequences for him. When he finally leaves home at the age of fifteen, he is paralyzed by the Jante Law, capable only of leading the life of a rootless fugitive and drowning his life potential in alcohol. At one point, while working on a ship headed for Canada, he decides to jump overboard to escape the harsh conditions that rule on board, and swims to the coast of Newfoundland. His temporary happiness in Canada comes to a halt in a town ominously called Misery Harbor. There he becomes part of a love triangle in which a former friend and now a hated enemy John Wakefield takes away the woman he loves, Eva. Espen kills John and hides his dead body in a swamp. Although no one ever finds out about this crime, Espen is constantly on the run since then – not so much literally, but first of all metaphorically: he is running away from himself and his past.²

He begins to tell the story of his life much later, 17 years after the killing of John. He is now a 34-year-old married man with two children. He attempts to recall various events, feelings and dreams from his childhood, as well as from later years, in all their painful intimacy, and he dissects them mercilessly with a sharp knife of thorough reflection. He presumably tries to purge himself of his guilt and find some explanation for his criminal act: „[D]et er lenge siden jeg klamret mig til den tanke at jeg ikke var John Wakefields eneste morder, og det mener jeg stadig jeg har rett i. Selv var han medskyldig, og jeg var bare skyldig på linje med alle dem som hadde gjort mig til den jeg var“ (196). By means of the detailed psychological analysis of his past he eventually manages to „opbygge sig et forsvar“ (296) and make the society co-responsible, whereby he gains a greater personal integrity.

II

So much for the plot, if one may call it that. The narrative actually lacks any plot in the traditional sense of the word. The reader gains the knowledge of the above described course of events only by gradually putting together the fragments of information that are strewn all over the narrative. The narrator chooses his topics rather accidentally, or on the basis of free associations. He mixes the narrated events with his present reflections, jumps from one recollection to another and back again to his deliberations and psychological conclusions. The incessant alternation between different time levels corresponds to the narrator's conviction that the past experiences determine the present life and that all things past are interconnected with the present. The text is therefore difficult to term a

² The word „flyktning“ has many different meanings in the novel, from strictly literal to very figurative. For some of them, see Einar Eggen, *Espen Arnakke og hans verden: Bidrag til en analyse av „En flyktning krysser sitt spor“* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1981), pp. 34-37, 50, 60, 108, and 121.

novel, as the narrator himself admits: „[D]ette er ingen roman, og kommer det en komposisjon ut av det, har jeg ikke hatt bud efter den“ (192); „[D]ette er liv og ikke roman“ (194). Perhaps the word that may best characterize the composition is *mosaic*. The text is made up of very short (sometimes only a few lines long) chapters which often do not follow one another either chronologically or thematically. The illusion of epic continuation, typical for most novels, is absent. The frequently missing data concerning the time and place of events only make the reader's orientation more difficult. The only leitmotif that gives the text some coherence is the narrator's effort to find an identity through acquiring a better knowledge of himself. The narration is thus accumulative: it heaps up the individual pieces of a personal history until they begin to seem to hang together.

The chief purpose of Espen's narration is clearly therapeutic. He attempts to convince himself that his crime was caused by his growing up in an extremely narrow-minded and conservative community. Accordingly, the memories of his childhood take up the major part of the text – note that the subtitle of the novel reads „Fortelling om en morders barndom.“ In the beginning the narrator speaks of Jante as a fairy-tale land, but the reader soon learns that the expression „Eventyrland“ is deeply ambiguous: on the one hand, it denotes certain places in Jante where Espen was indeed happy; on the other hand, the name ironically points out the discrepancy between the generally accepted image of childhood as a time of happiness and the protagonist's actual depressing experiences. The entire childhood is but one great neurosis for Espen:

Hvilke disharmonier møter et barn? Ja, slik spør den som har slått en strek over sin egen barndom. Alt er for barnet disharmoni, selve veksten. (82)

Barndommen er livets hårdeste dager. (99)

Det største bedrag i verden er dette at i barndommen er vi lykkelige, og siden får vi det vondere. Sannheten er at vi får det stadig bedre, og vondest av alt var begynnelsen og veksten. (149)

This is all the more terrifying in light of Espen's view of childhood as decisive for the make-up of an individual's psyche („Barnet er bestemmende for mannen....“ [21]) and in light of his view of the development of a human being in general: „Mennesket er en pyramide. Organisk vekst spisser sig op til sluttresultatet“ (135).

The basic mechanics of the way Espen's earliest experiences determine his later life are adopted from psychoanalytic theories.³ His narration is, in a way,

³ Many scholars have discussed this aspect. Besides the above mentioned book by Einar Eggen, see also, for example, Petter Larsen, „En morders barndom: En litteratur-psykologisk analyse av Sandemoses Espen Arnakke-skikkelse,“ *Vinduet* 16 (1962): 93-101, and Jorunn Hareide Aarbakke, *Høyt på en vinget hest: En studie i drømmer og syner i Aksel Sandemo-*

an attempt to perform psychoanalysis on himself: he uncovers the repressed moments from his childhood and interprets them in order to cure himself. It turns out that repressed feelings, desires and instincts – among which frustrated sexuality (including a semi-concealed Oedipus complex) plays a significant role – were the major driving force behind his act of aggression against John Wakefield. Thus the text reveals that the Jante environment creates conditions for an unnatural psychosexual development.⁴

III

Espen identifies the cause of the Jante people's repressive behavior as ignorance and unwillingness to think and learn. The inhabitants of Jante reduce everything to simplified formulas and follow blindly fixed rituals without questioning their *raison d'être*. It is in this sense that the narrator speaks of the Jante people's adherence to „formalism“ and of „formene som har mistet sitt innhold eller muligens aldri har hatt det“ (166):

Den offisielle religion var nærmest det å gjøre hvad alle de andre gjorde. Dette var dypt inngravd i sjelene. Denne religionen hviler på janteloven.... Det har intet med kristendom å gjøre.... Det er en religion at man forfølger avvikelse fra normen som en pest. Det er en religion å strebe efter en sjelelig og legemlig standardtype. (166)

Hovedsaken er ikke i jantereligionen at en ting blir gjort, men at den blir gjort på den måten som er fastslått. Janteredselen forbyr enhver avvikelse. (169)

Vi blir opdradd til formalisme og til et jomfruelig forhold til essensen i tingene. (239)

This resistance to learning about the real essence of things and life phenomena seems to be the root of all evil: „[D]et ligger utenfor dikteres evne å skape en verre djevel enn det uvitende menneske“ (39). It is no wonder, then, that Espen's chief goal in life has become learning, knowing and understanding, and that his narrative project has self-knowledge as its aim: „Jeg tror ikke nu at jeg noensinne har hatt annet mål enn oppklaringen av hvem jeg er, og hvad mennesket er“ (97); „Jeg har ingen andre guder, ingen andre drømmer enn erkjennelse, alltid mer erkjennelse“ (263).

Espen only becomes fully aware of his need for knowledge as an adult, but he had an instinctive urge for self-learning already as a boy. At that time, however, Jante put obstacles in his way, because the fifth commandment of the Jante Law says: „Du skal ikke tro at du vet mere enn oss“ (56). As Espen later claims, this

ses forfatterskap (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1976).

⁴ For example, Espen's feelings for his sister Agnes have a clearly incestuous character. On this topic, see Hareide Aarbakke, *Høyt på en vinget hest*, pp. 97-99, and Eggen, *Espen Arnakke og hans verden*, pp. 54-56.

commandment still fills him with more horror than all the others: „Av de ti bud fins det bare ett som ennu er omgitt med full terror, og det er det femte. De øvrige ni blekner bort på bakgrunn av janteloven“ (227).

The Jante Law instills the feeling of inferiority into people, curbs all individual initiative and prohibits thinking outside the established patterns: „Forbudet mot å tenke og tale var det verste av alt som stod mig i veien dengang jeg måtte og vilde frem til erkjennelse“ (117). Espen's dream of becoming a zoologist was thus crushed early on, at the age of fourteen. Despite his attempts at learning more about the world, Jante inoculated him with a certain amount of resistance to knowledge, something which he residually feels even many years afterwards: „Jeg kan ikke si annet enn at jeg ennu ligger under for tvangen fra Jante, hvor tanken går med kyskhetsbelte: Du må intet vite, for da er du en skjensel“ (116). Only after his killing of John did this resistance begin to wane: „På en måte kan man si at jeg har hatt det lett siden ... siden Misery Harbor. Motstanden mot erkjennelse blev svak siden da, fordi jeg fikk bruk for erkjennelse“ (88).

Espen later picks up his dream of becoming a zoologist by learning to use the methods of a psychologist. Psychology helps him come to terms with his trauma, because it enables him to shift responsibility on to the Jante people:

Zoologien blev til psykologi. Også psykologien var et middel til erkjennelse, og den var mere, en kniv i hånden på den undløpne træl fra Jante. De trådte på drømmene mine og fikk min boomerang i nakken.

Psykologien er trælens våpen. (52)

This quote might seem to indicate that Espen wants to take revenge on Jante. This is, however, only partially true. On the one hand, Espen still bears some hatred against his former fellow citizens, but, on the other hand, he is aware of the fact that this residual hatred is the result of growing up in Jante and that getting to know himself better should curb the aggression implanted in him: „Livet er mindre farlig når man har lært sig selv å kjenne, enn det var i barndommen og tidlig ungdom“ (36). In order to bridle his built-in aggression, he must not try to forget Jante, but, on the contrary, bring all his memories to light, because „'glemselen' rummer en stor fare, den betyr jo at man samler på sprengstoff“ (196).

Making good use of his memory thus becomes a truly existential issue for him: „[N]oen bruker hukommelsen, og noen bruker den ikke. Det er et spørsmål om valg av våpen i kampen for tilværelsen“ (177). Besides, one cannot repudiate one's past even if one wanted to, therefore one has to deal with it: „[J]eg kom til dette landet for å fornekte alt som er skjedd i mitt liv, for å begynne forfra... Men jeg så at det ingen annen fornektelse fins enn erkjennelse“ (263).

The main reason Espen strives for a thorough self-knowledge is that it seems to be the key to finding his own identity, something which Jante did not allow him to possess: „Det største i verden er å være menneske og vinne herredømme over de tusen motsetninger innenfor personen, undersøke dem én for én, og siden spenne dem sammen til et hele“ (97). Espen thus expects that the steady

accumulation of the manifold information about his life and the weaving together of all the many strands of his personality will eventually bring some sort of personal catharsis. He is convinced that „[l]ykkefølelse og selvrespekt vokser med viden“ (116). The killing of John served as a catalyst for his self-reflection and has led to satisfaction: „[H]ans død tvang mig til å tenke.... Det har skaffet mig varige og dype gleder“ (296). The catharsis indeed seems to come in the end: Espen feels liberated and reasonably happy, as also the title of one of the last chapters – „En lykkelig mann“ (292) – indicates.

And yet the final catharsis appears to be somewhat imperfect, and the narrative lacks a real closure. It seems that Espen realizes at the end of his project that, despite having clarified many aspects of his life that were hitherto veiled in mystery to him, he has not managed to create an identity for himself. The novel ends with question marks: Can one really possess an identity? Can one become a truly well-integrated personality? Many remarks in the text such as the following imply that Espen has doubted this possibility from the very start: „Man snakker om en helstøpt personlighet ved hvert tredje menneskes død. Det har neppe vært et sånt individ i verden“ (97). The last chapter called „Epilog“ only confirms this suspicion. The narrator speaks of a mountain in Newfoundland which looks different each time the observer changes his position. The mountain clearly serves as an allegorical image of the human being, and the problems concerning the validity and reliability of its description evoke the impossible task of acquiring an exhaustive knowledge of oneself:

[D]et er rart å se hvorledes et sånt fjell er blitt noe helt annet enn før hver gang man har beveget sig et stykke og ser på det igjen. Tusen forskjellige beskrivelser kan du få av Halfway Mountain og alle er like riktige. Jeg kjenner en sterk trang til å si dig dette nu, at fjellet er stort og mangesidet, men den som lå i lenker på jorden så bare Halfway Mountain fra det stedet hvor han lå. (299)

Thus the narrator concedes in the end that one can never fully understand oneself, one can only do it partially – „halfway,“ as the name of the mountain suggests.⁵ Even if one recounts a plethora of details about oneself, there will always be something which surpasses one's comprehension: „Man vet ikke hvor meget man sier om sig selv, og hvor meget man utleverer med et enkelt ord. Meget av det man forteller om sig selv vet man ikke om. Jeg håper at jeg sier meget mere enn jeg vet“ (179). At the same time, however, the text of the novel as a whole is one great moral imperative: it is vital to *try* to understand oneself. Although the narrative shows that the foundations of a human being are, to a

⁵ I disagree, however, with the critics who indicate that Espen's project ends in failure or defeat, since, in my opinion, he does achieve a great degree of inner liberation. For the opposing view, see Randi Birn, *Aksel Sandemose: Exile in Search of a Home* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1984), p. 30, and Erik M. Christensen, „Jante eller Anarki,“ in Thaly Nilsson (ed.), *Nytt lys på Aksel Sandemose* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1998), pp. 199-234, esp. 203, 214, and 224-226. It is worth noting in this regard that Christensen uses the 1955-edition of the novel.

great extent, determined by the irrational forces within the mind, it also strongly suggests that striving for knowledge and self-knowledge is a necessary prerequisite for achieving humanity – if for no other reason, then because it may preclude an act of aggression.

