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In the Looking Glass: Mirror Symbolism in Victorian Poetry and Painting

In his seminal study on the Romantic theories of art, *The Mirror and The Lamp* (1953), Meyer H. Abrams suggests that until the Romantics, literature and the creative mind were usually understood as mirrors, reflecting the real world in a mimetic fashion; in Romanticism, in contrast, literature may be compared to a lamp: it is believed to shed some additional light on reality, to show it in a new way, as the light "spills out" from the mind, its fountain. This paper attempts to examine mirror symbolism, which is repeatedly used in Victorian cultural and literary texts. In the poems and paintings which will be subjected to analysis, the mirror does not function as a purely mimetic tool. Instead, the surface of the looking glass seems to interpret rather than reflect, to add new meanings to the seemingly realistic scene verbally described.

One of the most famous texts about Victorian mirrors is Alfred Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott." Mirroring is obviously crucial in the story: as the secluded woman weaves a bright web (her embroidery), she is allowed to look only at the scenes reflected in the mirror; if she looks through the window, we are told, it will result in the coming of a mysterious curse. The poem depicts two strictly divided spheres: the lady inhabits Shalott, the world of four grey walls and four grey towers, characterized by silence, lack of any visible activity apart from the lady's weaving, and solitude. In contrast, the scenes which get reflected in the mirror figure colorful, active life, movement, work and food production (fields and barley), various relationships (the knights riding "two and two," a couple newlywed). As many critics have demonstrated, one of the possible readings of the mirror/window symbolism in Tennyson's narrative is to see the woman as an allegory of the artist (Culler 1977: 46, Alaya 1979: 273, Psomiades 1992: 33). As long as she remains in her seclusion, she may weave a tapestry – i.e. create a new work of art. The moment when she resolves to participate directly in experience, in the poem dramatized as her decision to leave the solitary tower and to drift to Camelot, the mirror cracks, the web, her artistic product, "float[s] wide" (l.114), and the woman artist dies. Art and life seem to be mutually exclusive. Tennyson himself suggested the binary nature of art and life in the poem, commenting that "[t]he new-born love for something, for someone in the wide world from which she has been so long secluded, takes her out of the region of shadows into that of realities" (qtd. in Bloom 1999:27). Dwight Culler reads the story as a myth of the poetic imagination, and concludes that "the poet cannot directly participate in reality but must view it through the mirror of the imagination and weave it into the tapestry of his art" (Culler 46). In a similar vein, Edgar F. Shannon suggests that the poem "examines conflicting attitudes toward art and life" (1981: 207). In each of these readings the mirror denotes unreality; although it reflects the scenes from the real life, its glassy surface becomes synonymous with shadows, the realm of imagination and dream as opposed to the surrounding world.

Many of the paintings which illustrate "The Lady of Shalott" draw upon the symbol of the mirror. In John William Waterhouse's *The Lady of Shalott [looking at Lancelot]* the surface of the

mirror is an important element. The painting depicts a climactic moment of transformation: after a crucial realization that she does not want to stay forever in the realm of dreams, the lady gets up violently and becomes entangled in the threads of her embroidery, an apt image of the entrapment of both the Victorian woman and the artist. She intently stares at the outside world, but by a trick of the perspective the viewers of the picture become the window; she gazes upon the spectator. The mirror is depicted behind her, and it shows passing Lancelot, the main reason of the lady's rebellion – the moment she saw his reflection, she could not stay content with the world of shadows. The cracks in the mirror visually symbolize the end of her life and of her artistic activity. The reflection of Lancelot is a symbol of reality but also an embodiment of the woman's romantic yearnings. In a similar vein, William Holman Hunt's *The Lady of Shalott* presents the same scene, but unlike Waterhouse's picture, which was sympathetic to the lady and her tragic fate, Hunt reinterprets the Lady of Shalott as both a witch and a fallen woman: the upper part of the painting is dominated by the lady's red hair, flaring wildly across the composition. The mirror has two large roundels on either side, one representing the humility of the Virgin Mary (to the left of the lady) in accepting her fate, very much unlike Tennyson's protagonist, and the heroism of Hercules in doing his duty in the Garden of Hesperides. Both scenes, hence, are moral examples which the lady fails to follow. Additionally, the head of Hercules is encircled by a halo, indicating that typologically he is linked to Christ (Barringer et al. 2012: 226). Finally, the surface of the mirror reflects the figure of Lancelot who rides away from the lady, figuring the futility of her rebellion.

Hunt executed at least one more painting in which the mirror clearly has a central function. *The Awakening Conscience* belongs to Hunt's pictures with easily discernible didactic intention. It shows a young woman who leaps up from the knees of a man who definitely is not her husband (as the lady displays her clasped hands, it soon becomes evident that she has many rings on all fingers but the wedding ring is missing). Moreover, her ruffled state of mind is reflected in her strangely mismatched, odd assortment of garments: a loose blouse, a petticoat, and a shawl. No respectable Victorian lady could have been painted in such attire. She is a kept woman, a prostitute, whom the man visits for sexual pleasure. The man and the woman are sitting by the piano, on which we see the music composed to Thomas Moore's poem – "Oft in the Stilly Night," the song they probably were singing together. On the floor there is a scroll with the equally elegiac music setting to Tennyson's lyric "Tears, Idle Tears." Both texts have allegedly triggered in the woman the memories of the past innocence and contributed to her awakening, as she now realizes that she has led a morally wrong life. The room on its own is also deeply significant; it is furnished with expensive, flashy objects which testify to wealth but not to virtue: the brightly colored Turkey carpet, veneered rosewood piano, embroidered pull-bell show the status which can be acquired by money. The Pre-Raphaelite art is renowned for its use of symbolic details which can be decoded into a coherent narrative. Hunt's painting shows a clearly outlined timeline: the past is depicted as the lost innocence, idealized as an outside scene, scenery of a green, sunny garden reflected in the mirror behind the woman. In contrast, the present denotes the sinful life she is now leading, accepting her position as a kept mistress; the future, in turn, may be glimpsed in symbolic objects scattered on the floor. This juxtaposition of the past and the present corresponds to the binary of virtue versus sin and may also be seen as figuring the opposition of the inside/outside, in which the inside becomes linked with money, artificiality, and vice, while the outside symbolizes nature, righteousness, and morality. The

mirror, hence, functions on both symbolic and realistic levels. Literally, it reflects a scene outside a window into which the female is looking and, like in Waterhouse's painting, the viewer becomes the object of the gaze. On the symbolic level, the mirror reflects the past with its idealized, nostalgic tones. The future, in turn, is constructed as a warning, also embodied in symbols. The cat pawing a dead bird, the discarded glove on the carpet and skeins of the girl's embroidery convey her captive status and the precariousness of her situation (Barringer at al. 134), but also they show her future fate: as the bird and the glove, she will be similarly discarded and eventually dead, if she neglects the warning. Interestingly, *The Awakening Conscience* was conceived as a companion picture to *The Light of the World,* which represents the figure of Jesus preparing to knock on an overgrown and long-unopened door, illustrating Revelation 3:20: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any man hear My voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with Me." As Hunt elucidates, "[t]he closed door was the obstinately shut mind, the weeds the cumber of daily neglect, the accumulated hindrances of sloth; the orchard the garden of delectable fruit for the dainty feast of the soul." Later, he continues: "In making it a night scene, lit mainly by the lantern carried by Christ, I had followed metaphorical explanation in the Psalms, 'Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path,' with also the accordant allusions by St. Paul to the sleeping soul, 'The night is far spent, the day is at hand'" (qtd. in Landow 1979). The door, significantly without a handle, is the door of the soul, and the lantern symbolizes the light of revelation. The outcome of this revelation is the miraculous transformation of the fallen woman in *The Awakening Conscience* who will renounce the life of sin.

A similar use of the mirror, as triggering the memory of the past, is employed by Dante Gabriel Rossetti in one of his best-known paintings, *Lady Lilith.* The picture is a visual counterpart of a sonnet entitled "Body's Beauty," from which we learn that the painting presents an enchantress, an apotheosis of dangerous female charm. The figure of Lilith, the demonic, independent woman, became a synonym both of the Victorian *femme fatale* and the New Woman, the early feminist icon. In Hebrew mythology Lilith was believed to be Adam's first wife, who refused to submit to her husband and having left heaven for the region of the air, entered into a relationship with the devil. Unlike Eve, she was created simultaneously with Adam, hence equal to him. Silke Binias notes how the consecutive accounts of the story of Lilith make her more and more predatory. While in the anonymous Sumerian Gilgamesh epic she features only briefly and is not depicted in negative terms, in the *Zohar*, the commentary on the Torah, Lilith becomes a deity, the female side of God. She embodies the punishing trait of the divine personality and is associated with perilous sexuality. She grows to be linked with the devil and is believed to visit women during childbirth trying to strangle their newborn children (Binias 2007: 55-57). However, read carefully, the Lilith story allows also to see her as victimized and punished for her lack of submission. Virginia Allen notes that because she refused to return to Adam, her own demon-begot infants die daily, and she preys on the babies of others (1984: 286). In Rossetti's painting Lilith reposes on an armchair and, looking into a mirror, combs her luxuriant auburn hair, the "bright web" from the poem. Her hair is the most important visual element in the painting, and it gets an equally important status in the sonnet, as it becomes the main reason for fatal attraction men feel towards Lilith. There are two mirrors in the painting: apart from the hand mirror held by Lilith who admires her own reflection in its surface, another mirror is depicted in the upper right hand corner of the picture, and it has a similar function to the one in

Holman Hunt's *The Awakening Conscience*; it also reflects the window which is not present in the painted scene. In *The Rossetti Archive*, Jerome McGann suggests that "[i]t is as if the mirror in Lilith's enclosed and fantastic realm (or room) magically preserved a memory of the Edenic garden which she fled" (*The Rossetti Archive*). Lilith sits with her back towards this mirror/window, symbolically spurning paradise in which she would have to admit Adam's dominance and her own submission. Moreover, the view of the Edenic garden further brings to rememberence the events which happened there – the temptation, the encounter with the serpent and, consequently, the fall of man. It is plausible to suggest that, like in Rossetti's other poem, "Eden Bower," Lilith actually becomes the serpent, the agent of temptation and fall, threatening the world of male dominance with her hissing sounds, a mass of wavy, serpent-like hair, and her independence. In Griselda Pollock's words, "Lilith is primordial in another sense more intimately related to contemporary ideologies. Lilith represents woman saturated in sexuality, never in the state of innocence" (1990: 144).

The mirror image becomes a central theme of the painting/poem pair *Symphony in White no. 2* by James McNeil Whistler and "Before the Mirror" by Charles Algernon Swinburne. The picture was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1865 as *The Little White Girl*. It shows a young woman, dressed in white, leaning against a mantelpiece and gazing dreamily into a mirror as she contemplates her own reflection. In the surface of the mirror, however, we see a different face: older, sadder and more careworn. The woman is a wife, or even possibly a newly-wedded bride, since apart from the whiteness of her dress she displays a wedding ring on her finger. In her other hand she is holding a Japanese fan. The model is Joanna Heffernan, the artist's mistress. The portrait combines Whistler's fascination with Oriental motifs and the Pre-Raphaelite attention to color and detail. In order to show his emphasis on formal rather than symbolic qualities of the picture and to underline the fact that the painting should be admired aesthetically rather than read as a symbolic narrative, Whistler decided to change its title to *Symphony in White no. 2*. Despite the artist's intention, however, the viewer is tempted to notice and interpret the content of the painting symbolically. Why is the woman's face different on the canvas? Why is her glance so nostalgic? Is there any connection between the melancholy of the picture and the wedding ring, so apparently displayed? What is the function of the mirror image in this work of art?

Charles Algernon Swinburne's ekphrastic poem "Before the Mirror," which Whistler had printed on a golden sheet and attached to the picture's frame, offers a reading of the picture. The poem consists of three parts: the middle one relates most to the portrait itself, as it gives voice to the woman standing before the mirror. The other two parts are the speaker's impressionistic musings on the scene. The poem operates within binary notions of youth and age, innocence and experience, purity and fallenness. To express them, Swinburne subverts the traditional symbol of whiteness and flowers (roses), which typically denote youth, innocence and purity. Already in the first stanza, however, the girl, conventionally named a white flower – a white rose – is disclosed as a woman with a past, not so white any more; she is a "Late rose whose life is brief, whose loves are light" (l. 14). Her whiteness is similarly questioned in the first line: white rose/not so white. The poem resounds with allusions to fallenness and transience. The woman's bower is the flowerless garden whom men, after feasting, left; her hand is a fallen rose; the summer gave way to chilly winter winds and snow.

Crucially, however, in the only part of the poem in which Swinburne employs prosopopeia and invoices the girl before the mirror we hear her proud, independent, defiant tone. Instead of regretting

her past, as the woman in *The Awakening Conscience* does, Swinburne's woman savours the present, fully engrossed in the contemplation of her beauty. At this moment it is the only thing she wants to know:

> Come snow, come wind or thunder
> High up in air,
> I watch my face, and wonder
> At my bright hair;
> Nought else exalts or grieves
> The rose at heart, that heaves
> With love of her own leaves and lips that pair.
> (ll. 22-28)

The "lips that pair" reference the reflection in the mirror, later on addressed as "the ghost, my sister, / White sister there" (ll.31-32). As Angela Leighton has shown, nineteenth-century poems by women that employ the image of mirror manifest the split between the woman and her reflection, wherein the reflection shows a woman's most private thoughts (qtd. in Maxwell 2006: 36), in Swinburne's poem referenced as "behind the veil, forbidden/shut up from sight" (ll.7-8). The woman, self-sufficient and proud, sees in the ghost sister from the mirror her other self, which, as Catherine Maxwell suggests, "has a plentitude and self-sufficiency this woman finds admirable" (37). This is her mature self, not girlish and inexperienced, but neither bowed down by experience. This is the self described in the last part of the poem, which has learned one of life's greatest secrets: the inseparability of joy and pain. Although the woman now anticipates her own growing old, with "Face fallen and white throat lifted, / With sleepless eye" (ll.57-58), she reacts to this fact with nostalgic acceptance:

> Glad, but not flushed with gladness,
> Since joys go by;
> Sad, but not bent with sadness,
> Since sorrows die.
> (ll.43-46)

Thus, the poem reads the painting as a narrative, and the mirror image both foreshadows the future and offers self-knowledge, which testifies to the girl's integrity and maturity. Recognizing her own self in the white, older sister, Swinburne's woman knows that the present will become the past and float into oblivion; consequently, the best she can do is focus on the present as it lasts: "But one thing knows the flower; the flower is fair" (l. 42).

To conclude, the symbol of the mirror examined in selected Victorian paintings and poems does not denote a reflection of reality. On the contrary, it functions as a lens of the protagonist's consciousness, featuring its dreams, memories, and fears. Quite often, the mirror is also a tool in the construction of the temporal narrative – it may show the past or glimpse the future. Crucially, a look into a mirror brings about change: it leads to a radical reviewing of the present and results in the maturing and self-development of the female protagonist. The decision taken as a result of the

encounter with the mirror reflection may lead to death ("The Lady of Shalott"), offer a new beginning (*The Awakening Conscience*), or reassure the woman in her self-sufficiency (*Lady Lilith*, "Before the Mirror"), but it always has a transformative power.

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W powyższym artykule autorka analizuje motyw lustra i odbicia lustrzanego w wybranych wierszach i obrazach z epoki wiktoriańskiej. Pomimo iż zazwyczaj symbol lustra w sztuce był łączony z pojęciem mimesis, czyli wiernym naśladowaniem rzeczywistości, w utworach poddanych analizie lustro nie pokazuje świata realnego. Lustrzane odbicie staje się natomiast pretekstem do wycieczki w głąb jaźni: może pokazywać ukryte nadzieje, lęki i wspomnienia lub stanowić pretekst do odczytania obrazu jako narracji. W tym przypadku scena odbita w lustrze stanowi wycieczkę w przeszłość lub nawet przyszłość bohaterki. Najważniejszym aspektem symboliki lustra jest jego siła sprawcza: po spojrzeniu w lustro patrzący przechodzi transformację, dojrzewa, podejmuje ważne decyzje, które na zawsze zmienią jego życie.