

The Mirror, the Text and self-reflection

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Today it seems that we are obsessed with our own self-images. We wouldn't think of leaving the house without first checking ourselves in the mirror. Lifts in buildings have mirrored walls so we can pass the time by looking at ourselves as we ascend or descend. We spend countless billions on lotions and potions in attempts to beautify ourselves and to ward off the aging process. Beauty, and youth, are idolized in glossy magazines and on the big and small screen, and the way to happiness is often touted as being as easy as a few deft swipes of the plastic surgeon's knife – of course with accompanying wads of cash (or credit) to pay for it. The idea is that we're only as worthwhile as our outward appearance. If we don't look good, we cannot be happy. In this way, the mirror is powerful because we allow it to have power.

However, the mirror is hardly a new obsession. Mirrors have been around for a long time, in one form or another. Herbert Grabes observes that “The employment of the mirror in metaphorical contexts is so frequent and deliberate a strategy in the English literature of the thirteenth to seventeenth centuries that the mirror can be said to constitute the central image for a particular world view.”¹ However, as Grabes points out, there was a particular boost of interest in the mirror from the thirteenth century onwards because

Twelfth century Europe had relearned the ancient art of making glass mirrors, and the thirteenth century saw the beginnings of a process whereby the polished metal mirrors of Antiquity and the Middle Ages gradually became ousted by their glassy rivals; by the early 1500s, the Venetian glass-manufacturers had advanced their technical expertise to a stage where relatively inexpensive, small-format, mass-produced looking-glasses were made available to the general public. Backings of steel, lead or silver were supplanted by an amalgam of tin and mercury, and the convex, round or oval segments cut from blown cylinders of glass gradually became larger and flatter.²

Before that time, in Antiquity, and in the early medieval period, mirrors were imperfect reflectors, made out of small convex disks of metal – tin or bronze or silver. As such they

¹ Herbert Grabes. *The Mutable Glass*. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press. 1982, 4.

² Ibid.

were imperfect reflectors but nonetheless important because a concern with the self as it appears to others, is clearly of paramount interest in philosophical, theological and literary texts throughout history.

From the 1st century A.D. Ovid has provided us with the earliest extant version of the Narcissus myth. In this myth the medium of reflection is a still, clear pool in a forest. Narcissus, a youth of apparently incredible beauty, comes to the pool to drink and, bending to do so, finds reflected there the most beautiful person he has ever seen. Unaware that he is captivated by his own face and body, he cannot bear to leave his new beloved who seems to exist just below the water's surface. Thus, transfixed by love, Narcissus remains reclining next to the pool until he dies from self-neglect. It's a moral tale – in many ways – it demonstrates an early awareness of the dangers posed by vanity, self-love and a fixation on outward appearance, as opposed to a concentration on moral and personal qualities such as strength of character, courage, intelligence and integrity.³

The association between the mirror and spiritual matters, too, has long been an area of concern as evidenced, for example, by the scriptural reference in 1 Corinthians 13.12 in which Paul highlights the impossibility of truly “seeing” and “knowing” in this life: “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.”⁴ St. Augustine, taking up the theme in the late 3rd century, similarly considered that “we see in the mirror ... an image that is unlike as well as like the interior image of reality we have in our mind”⁵ Despite the imperfection of the mirror image, St Augustine afforded sight the position of the pre-eminent sense. He also considered that the eye, the instrument of the visual sense, had already long been regarded as a sort of mirror because “... its permits a virtual image to be made.”⁶ As Grabes notes, “[the eye's] significance also rests in large measure on the fact that the Augustinian theory of perception accorded to the eye the function of a mirror ... the sense of vision is, according to this theory and, indeed, since Plato, paradigmatic for sense-perception as a whole, vision being considered as the most efficient of all the senses.”⁷ Augustine's elaboration was so firmly entrenched by the Middle Ages that, as Edward Nolan explains,

³ In the Middle Ages, the distinction between self-love and selfless love was represented by *caritas* and *cupiditas*.

⁴ “videmus nunc per speculum in aenigmate: tunc autem facie ad faciem. Nunc cognosco ex parte: tunc autem cognoscam sicut et cognitus sum”. Paul, I Corinthians 13.12.

⁵ Quoted in Edward Nolan. *Now Through a Glass Darkly: Specular Images of Being and Knowing from Virgil to Chaucer*. Ann Arbor, University of Michigan, 1990, 278.

⁶ Grabes, 83.

⁷ Grabes, *Ibid*.

One saw, in medieval mirrors, either an image that showed the world as it is or one that showed the world as it should be; mirrors reflected either reality or ideality. And one saw images of the Other (God or neighbor) or of the self. Thus one could extrapolate, by contemplating the discrepancy between what one saw and what one was, agendas for reform or despair.⁸

That is, by the later Middle Ages, the mirror was both a literal and metaphorical image which could represent the actual and the aspirational ideal. And the ideal image in the mirror was, first and foremost, God. As early as the third century Origen had spoken “of the soul being a mirror in which it can see the image of the Father ... when the soul has put off every stain of sin”.⁹ As religious texts of the early and later Middle Ages stress, “The chief precondition for a true image is the purity of the mirror: this has always been closely associated with the mirror-metaphor and was, especially in Antiquity, a first essential for knowledge of the Divine.”¹⁰ That is, the soul can only truly reflect the Divine when it is pure, unsullied.

More recent views of the mirror and its role in self-reflection are often in line with the view of the 20th century philosopher, Henri Lefebvre, who regards the mirror as a surface at once pure and impure, almost material yet virtually unreal; it presents the Ego with its own material presence, calling up its counterpart, its absence from – and at the same time its inherence in – this ‘other’ space (185).

Lefebvre’s definition is surprisingly resonant with some of the ideas expressed by mystical writers of the medieval period, in particular an anonymous author referred to now as “The *Cloud* author” because of his most influential text *The Cloud of Unknowing*. In this text the *Cloud* author recommends to his readers that they enter a metaphorical space between “the cloud of forgetting” and “the cloud of unknowing”, and that by doing so they, in effect, accomplish an abandonment of the ego and of the consciousness of the self to the extent that they become the “counterpart” of the self in the material world, a negative image of their “own material presence” and an “absence” in an “other’ space”.

⁸ Nolan, 116. Grabes warns against taking an image as metaphor (in this case, the mirror) and believing it to have the same figurative meaning wherever it appears. He cautions that context and author’s intention are paramount in matters of interpretation (39). With this in view, he elaborates four basic types of mirrors (in literature): 1. The mirror reflects things as they are ... (informative); 2. It shows the way things should or should not be ... (exemplary); 3. It shows the way things will be ... (prognostic); 4. It shows what only exists in the mirror or in the writer’s imagination ... (fantastic) (1982/1973, 39).

⁹ Andrew Louth. *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition, from Plato to Denys*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981, p.79.

¹⁰ Grabes, 105.

Lefebvre goes further, stating that

The mirror discloses the relationship between me and myself, my body and the consciousness of my body – not because the reflection constitutes my unity qua subject, but because it transforms what I am into the sign of what I am. This ice-smooth barrier, itself merely an inert sheen, reproduces and displays what I am - in a word, signifies what I am – within an imaginary sphere which is yet quite real (Ibid.).

Similarly, for the *Cloud* author's readers, the disclosure of the relationship between the self in the material world and the self in the contemplative world reveals a deep sorrow which "cleanses the soul, not only of sin, but also of the pain it has deserved for sin"¹¹ and institutes an accompanying desire which paradoxically produces an awareness of one's being and the "unceasing desire to be free of the knowledge and feeling of his being."¹² That is, there is an awareness of self and, in the contemplative space, a desire for a liberation from the knowledge and feeling of that being – a simultaneous reinstatement of being and erasure of it and a need for presence in order to replace it with absence.

The absence which is substituted for the presence is, in fact, a bare acknowledgment of being which finds its reflection in God.

Further, the *Cloud* author's stressing of the difference between God and the reader, which is that "he is your being & not you his", is indicative of the way in which a mirror reflects. Thus, as Julia Kristeva has pointed out in terms of the physical sense of sight, the eye "sees only because it reflects the light of a single source" (1987, 120).¹³ In the *Cloud* author's elaboration, the "source" is God and a human being reflects the source in the simple actuality of his being.¹⁴ This "being", unencumbered and unembellished by knowledge, is offered back to God who IS. That is, the reader, as all humanity, has his being *in* God and offers his being *to* God.

Northrop Frye's postulation of God as a verb, as a process rather than a noun, a thing, is of relevance here. The *Cloud* author offers no qualification for God other than "he is" and, likewise, the reader is reminded only that "you are". In the *Cloud* author's view, then, the

¹¹ "clensip þe soule, not only of synne, bot also of peyne þat he haþ deseruid for synne"(Cl.44.84:3-4).

¹² "desire vnseingly for to lakke þe wetyng & þe feylng of his beyng"(Cl.44.85:1-2).

¹³ See Julia Kristeva. 1987. "Narcissus: the New Insanity" in *Tales of Love*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press. 103-121. Here, Kristeva discusses in detail the idea of God and reflection, in particular regard to the Narcissus myth.

¹⁴ Augustine had observed God as the source of all reflection and was insistent "that the soul can only be reformed in the image of God by God: 'the beginning of the image's reforming must come from him who first formed it' (xiv.xvi.22)" (Louth 1981, 157).

dynamic effects of process rather than static materiality are foregrounded. In such a view, ‘no-thing’ and ‘no-where’ seem to be far more legitimate descriptors than nouns with connotations tied to earthly images. Thus, when the *Cloud* author advises his reader to “Let humble darkness be your mirror and your whole mind”¹⁵ he is recommending that the reader’s mind literally reflect nothing of the world or the self; instead, ‘naked being’ and ‘naked intent’ represent the being and the will, stripped of the earthly props of imagination, knowledge and even language.

The *Cloud* author’s elaboration of the mirror metaphor is certainly one of the more theologically sophisticated examples of the use of this image in medieval religious texts but there are many others that all play, to some extent, on the necessity of keeping the soul pure and free from sin in order to allow it to truly reflect the Divine. Such texts stress the importance of the soul as the mirror of goodness (or badness, as the case may be) while simultaneously admonishing those who use a literal mirror for their own vain purposes and vanity, under the more general rubric “Luxuria” or “Lust”¹⁶ was firmly regarded as one of the 7 deadly sons.

Nevertheless, by far the most popular use of the mirror in texts – in both literal and metaphorical applications – is to explore and exploit the possibilities of the reflection of the self and its association with vanity and self-centredness.

In the late 19th century, Oscar Wilde observed, perhaps not entirely facetiously, that “To love oneself is the beginning of a life-long romance.”¹⁷ In his novel, *The Picture of Dorian Grey* we see a clever mix of all the issues to which I’ve been referring in regard to the mirror – the Narcissus myth, vanity as a deadly sin, and the soul as a reflection of the Divine, or, in this case, the “not so divine”. Wilde also adds the idea of the human face as a mirror of the soul, a not uncommon motif. In the story, Dorian is an exceptionally attractive young man whose portrait is painted by a prominent artist. Dorian takes the painting home to hang in his living room and presses on with his very selfish and self-absorbed lifestyle. This self-absorption leads him to treat a young actress so cruelly that she takes her own life but Dorian feels no remorse for her death, nor will he accept that his behaviour had any part in it. He decides that, for his own sake, he’ll simply, and quickly, forget all about it. However, the painting is not so “unfeeling” and Dorian notices that, after his dismissal of the young woman’s death,

¹⁵ “Þat meek derknes be þi mirour & þi mynde hole”

¹⁶ For a thorough consideration of these terms see Alison V. Scott, *Language of Luxury*. London: Ashgate, 2008.

¹⁷ Oscar Wilde. *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*. G.F.Maine, editor. London: 1992, p.??

his face in the portrait has developed a cruel twist to the previously perfect mouth. Subsequently, Dorian realizes that the portrait has some kind of life of its own and so he hides it away and ploughs headlong into a life of debauchery, sensuality, and absolute self-centredness. Over the years he takes a peep at the painting now and then and sees that, while his own face has maintained an unchanging youthful beauty, the portrait has become increasingly ugly. That is, all his life's sins and excesses are imprinted on the face in the portrait. It becomes the true barometer, the reflection, of his lifestyle.

Wilde takes up the theme of vanity again in one of his prose poems, *The Disciple*.

The Disciple

When Narcissus died the pool of his pleasure changed from a cup of sweet waters into a cup of salt tears, and the Oreads came weeping through the woodland that they might sing to the pool and give it comfort.

And when they saw that the pool had changed from a cup of sweet waters into a cup of salt tears, they loosened the green tresses of their hair and cried to the pool and said, "We do not wonder that you should mourn in this manner for Narcissus, so beautiful was he."

"But was Narcissus beautiful?" said the pool.

"Who should know better than you?" answered the Oreads.

"Us did he ever pass by, but you he sought for, and would lie on your banks and look down at you, and in the mirror of your waters he would mirror his own beauty."

And the pool answered, "But I loved Narcissus because, as he lay on my banks and looked down at me, in the mirror of his eyes I saw ever my own beauty mirrored."¹⁸

Here, Wilde reworks the Narcissus myth, giving it a very different perspective in which the pool is as obsessed with its own beauty as Narcissus was with his own. Neither the pool nor Narcissus can see beyond themselves.

(Some reference to/discussion of Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem, *The Lady of Shalott* (1832) will also be made here but I have not included a copy in this printed paper as is quite long and can be found readily on the web.)

¹⁸ Ibid.

The 20th century poet, Sylvia Plath, also has a mirror poem, featuring both a silvered mirror and a “watery” (lake) mirror. Both are put forward as capable of reflecting absolute truth in regard to self-image.

Mirror

I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.
Whatever I see, I swallow immediately.
Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike
I am not cruel, only truthful –
The eye of a little god, four-cornered.
Most of the time I meditate on the opposite wall.
It is pink, with speckles. I have looked at it so long
I think it is a part of my heart. But it flickers.
Faces and darkness separate us over and over.

Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me.
Searching my reaches for what she really is.
Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon.
I see her back, and reflect it faithfully
She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands.
I am important to her. She comes and goes.
Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness.
In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman
Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish.

Absolute truth in a mirror is also the focus of the fairy tale, *Snow White*. This traditional tale features a Narcissus character in the person of the evil queen and a reflective device in the “person” of the magic mirror. Unlike the Narcissus of Ovid, however, the queen is so in love with her own image that she is prepared to inflict evil on anyone more beautiful than she. Her vanity is the essence of her evil, the point from which she seeks to destroy Snow White. That her vanity becomes her downfall is the moralizing point of the story because her vanity is punished ultimately. But, the queen’s rapid descent towards her

demise is brought about by her mirror's innate quality of absolute truth. When the queen is no longer the "loveliest of all", the mirror tells her so and the queen cannot cope with it.

Today, it seems that many cannot cope with the "truth" of the mirror and readily resort to plastic surgery at the first sign of physical imperfection. Like Dorian Grey we seek to erase physical signs of our living and lifestyle but, who do we fool – others or ourselves?

However, the mirror only tells part of the story of each person. And, no matter how perfect the reflecting surface, it is still possible to be deceived. Our eyes play tricks on us quite often. So, I want to conclude by offering some "double pictures" for your consideration. As someone once said: "What you see depends on what you're looking for." (Examples of these double images can be found on numerous websites including <http://members.lycos.nl/AmazingArt/E/12.html>)