

Transgressive Art «Before the Mirror» Swinburne, Hardy, Kristeva

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Abstract This article seeks to contrast and compare the function and effect of the aesthetic gaze in a group of «mirror» poems, focusing upon issues of representation and the male gaze in Swinburne's «Before the Mirror» and three poems by Hardy, «The Cheval Glass», «I Look into My Mirror» and «Lament of the Looking Glass». The analysis is focused and theorised with reference not only to the Lacanian mirror-phase but also the notation of aesthetic and cultural transgression in Bataille and Blanchot. Discussion focuses particularly on the 'ghostly' sensuality of Swinburne's 'pleasures' and 'pains' in terms of the aesthetics of decadence and the representation of the subject-in-process. It is argued that the symbolist ekphrasis of Swinburne's poetics gives way, in Hardy, to a poetic language which echoes and transmutes the fading materiality of dialect and folk speech.

Keywords Decadence. Materiality. Mirror-image. Selfhood.

There is no limit to what can be said in the text.
(Julia Kristeva)

A comparative reading of mirror poems by Swinburne and Hardy may illuminate elements of the «impure aesthetic» which became increasingly manifest in the transition period between Decadence and the Modern Movement. In particular, the figurations projected by these textual mirrors might be construed in Foucauldian terms as intermediate spaces suspended between utopia and heterotopia: the mirror, that is to say, is a placeless place in which the self is both sacrificed and regained – a notion which problematises or destabilises the Lacanian identification of the mirror-stage with the establishment of identity. The aesthetic gaze into or out of the mirror in Swinburne and Hardy serves both to endorse and to destroy the work of art, but the transgressive impulse is quite distinct in the two cases. In what Oscar Wilde characterised as Swinburne's «very perfect and poisonous poetry» (Wilde 2001, p. 20) it may be premised that the artist's gaze undermines the aesthetic object in a transgressive movement hinted at in a formulation of Maurice Blanchot:

Transgression belongs to neither day nor night. Never does it encounter the law that is however everywhere. Transgression: the unavoidable

accomplishment of what is *impossible* to accomplish - which might be called dying itself. (Blanchot 1992, p. 107)

In signalling or recording what might be termed the death of the art object, Swinburne's aesthetic acts of transgression, most notably in *Poems and Ballads*, break with the accepted rules of verse and are metaphorically equivalent to sexual transgression in their heady eroticism. Hardy's verse representations of the mirror, by contrast, emphasise a characteristically human world which, in Bataille's terms, «is finally but a hybrid of transgression and prohibition, so that the word *human* always denotes a *system* of contradictory impulses» (Bataille 1991, p. 342). The trajectory from the exoticism of *Poems and Ballads* to the more communal, quotidian world of Hardy represents a complex literary negotiation with the world of outer reality. Swinburne's mirror functions to undermine metaphorical and ego-centric stability, whilst for Hardy the mirror-image offers an ambivalent reassurance. The textual mirror representations of both poets, however, are shadowed or refracted by wider social determinants, since, as Graham McPhee has argued, the claim of aesthetic autonomy is only «made possible and is conditioned by the world of commodity production» in a cultural formation «within which the subject ironically comes to regard itself as the 'free producer' of the scene it confronts» (McPhee 2002, p. 115). In Swinburne's poetry the increasing pressure of the administered world compels an aesthetic adoption of distance and a cultivation of esoteric and erotic material felt to be at odds with commodification: this is, in effect, a poetry of refusal. Hardy's art, by contrast, even at its most inward and personal, retains potent echoes of a Lukácsian «integrated civilisation» with its linguistic and thematic memories of the culture and language patterns of the folk.

In terms of the creation of an imaginary space Swinburne's textual density, with its complex repetitions and symmetries, enables the reader to become the uniquely self-conscious spectator of his/her own imaginative processes, whilst the register of Hardy's verse gestures towards a more realist manner of address. Dee Reynolds's argument *vis à vis* Mallarmé might be relevant here, suggesting that the «ideal text (the 'livre') is a model of reflexive consciousness», and that «In reality, text and reader have need of each other to create this reflexivity». She goes on, «The modern reader, Mallarmé believes, wishes the text to function as a mirror» (Reynolds 1995, p. 87). In this writing project the text is experienced «as a 'mirror' of imaginary activity» in an oscillation between «textual and imaginary space» (p. 90). By contrast, what happens in Swinburne is suggested by Reynolds's observation, in relation to Rimbaud and Mallarmé, that «this apparently increased autonomy of the pictorial 'language' can lead to increased reliance on verbal language». This artistic process, however, may be modified by noting that Mallarmé, like Hardy, «believed that poetry should preserve links with orality» (pp. 196, 201).

In 1865 James McNeill Whistler exhibited a painting at the Royal Academy entitled *The Little White Girl*. Two years later the artist added the words «Symphony in White No. 2» to the title. It has been pertinently observed that these «two titles serve to symbolise Whistler's evolving aesthetic position, and to reflect his gradual disillusion with the earthy Realism he found in Courbet's pictures» (Dorment, MacDonald 1994, p. 78). The painting shows Whistler's Irish mistress, Joanna Hiffernan, gazing into the mirror over the chimney-piece in a room in Whistler's London home. It has been noted that the wedding-ring the model displays «draws attention to an implied narrative», but that the spectator «is finally denied a Victorian 'subject' of the sort beloved of Royal Academicians» (p. 78). Prior to the first exhibition of the painting, Swinburne composed his verse-ballad «Before the Mirror», which Whistler had printed on gold paper and pasted onto the frame, stanzas four and six being also incorporated into the catalogue. The poet assured Whistler that the poem was «entirely and only suggested [...] by the picture», in which he perceived «the metaphor of the rose and the notion of sad and glad mystery in the face languidly contemplative of its own phantom» (Hayes 2000, p. 348). The gaze here is enigmatically inclined, as the poet demands,

Behind the veil, forbidden,
 Shut up from sight,
 Love, is there sorrow hidden,
 Is there delight?
 (ll. 8-10) (Hayes 2000, p. 104)

Hillis Miller, interrogating D.G. Rossetti's poem «Body's Beauty», asks: «What is the secret that the distorting mirror always tells and keeps?», and responds, «Loss» (Miller 1991, p. 336).¹ And in exploring the Pre-Raphaélite valences of Whistler's painting, Anne Anderson reads the female subject as being «engrossed in the act of seeing her past» in a depiction which takes the form «of reflected memory which at once doubles and divides the mirror-gazing subject's identity» (Anderson 2010, pp. 126, 125). Certainly Swinburne's supplementary text, in imagining the thoughts of the young woman, projects a self-centred idiolect – «I watch my face, and wonder | At my bright hair» (ll. 24-25; Hayes 2000, p. 104) – in a construction which gestures, as Cassandra Laity observes, towards «a romantic and erotic portrait of female narcissism». The girl's «white» hand, Laity suggests, «may signify both the forbidden ethos of masturbation and the passive attitude of the girl's voyeurism» (Laity 1996, pp. 36, 77). In this somewhat baffling scenario the female subject remains uncommunicative

1 On the Victorian motif of the mirror also see J.B. Bullen (1998, pp. 123-148).

and inscrutable, and as William Wilson notes, «not only is she apart from nature, but her meaning resists the poet's attempts at interpretation» (Wilson 1984, p. 428). The dialectic of shifting sexual identities is played out by the enquiry,

Art thou the ghost, my sister,
White sister there,
Am I the ghost, who knows?
(ll. 31-33) (Hayes 2000, p. 104)

In surveying the literary history of lesbianism as «a history of derealisation», Terry Castle asks, «What better way to exorcise the threat of female homosexuality than by treating it as ghostly?». She perceives a series of «spectralising moments» in the literature of the nineteenth century, «a phantasmagorical association between ghosts and lesbians» to which Swinburne's lines may covertly allude as part of a literary project, as Castle phrases it, «to derealise the threat of lesbianism by associating it with the apparitional» (Castle 1993, pp. 34, 60, 62). Swinburne's poem thus poses the question of the instability of human emotion *vis à vis* the fixity of art, whilst the ghostly «sister» is transmuted, in the final section of the poem, with its echoes of «The Lady of Shalott», into the «glowing ghosts of flowers» which reflect and refract the passing of time:

Old loves and faded fears
Float down a stream that hears
The flowing of all men's tears beneath the sky.
(ll. 61-64) (Hayes 2000, p. 105)

Catherine Maxwell aptly discerns the contradictory impulse of this text, which subverts the Victorian trope of the «fragile or vulnerable maiden» with the suggestion that there is concealment surrounding the topic of sexual love which lies «Behind the veil» (Maxwell 2006, p. 33). Her analysis may be supplemented by the argument of Kathy Alexis Psomiades, in respect of the painting, that the young woman possesses «two selves, a manifest surface of lovely accessibility and a hidden depth of darker and more mysterious meaning». She perceives «two faces», «one beautiful and empty» and a «darker» one representing «the doubled figure of femininity» which «prefigures the inevitable abandonment of the female body to commodity culture». Psomiades notes how, in Swinburne's poem, the «domestic trappings of the painted room», notably the vase, are missing, an absence denoting a Swinburnian aestheticism which «eschews objects» apart from those which «reside in the aestheticised, eroticised, psychologised depths of femininity». She goes on:

By shifting the girl's gaze from the vase to her own face, Swinburne's stanzas focus on the way the mirror holds the girl and her reflection together in a self-enclosed narcissism structured like the self-enclosed space of autonomous art. (Psomiades 1997, pp. 108, 109, 110, 122)

Consideration of this type of «mirror» poem might inevitably call up some allusion to Lacanian theory, and certainly both Swinburne's text and Whistler's painting elicit a sense of that «spatial intuition» which Julia Kristeva, in her reading of Lacan, discerns «at the heart of the functioning of signification» (Kristeva 1984, p. 46). The constitution of the subject through the founding of the image, according to this account, serves to institute that primary narcissism which marks Swinburne's poem, with its «Dead mouths of many dreams that sing and sigh» (l. 56; Hayes 2000, p. 105). Kristeva contends, in this regard, that «Positing the imaged ego leads to the positing of the object, which is, likewise, separate and signifiable». The sign, that is to say, «can be conceived as the voice that is projected from the agitated body» (Kristeva 1984, p. 46):

«I cannot see what pleasures
Or what pains were;
What pale new loves and treasures
New years will bear».
(ll. 36-39) (Hayes 2000, p. 105)

If the mirror stage establishes the crucial separation from the mother's body, then as Kristeva claims, «the *fort-da* game, anality and orality all act as a permanent negativity that destroys the image» (Kristeva 1984, p. 47), in a process of splitting motivated by the castration complex hinted at in the girl's hand, visualised as «a fallen rose». The phallus which dominates Lacanian theory is notably hidden or occluded in this text, «Behind the veil, forbidden», and yet it is, Kristeva maintains, that which «makes enunciation possible». The enigmatic female subject portrayed by Whistler and Swinburne, it may be suggested, suffers the Lacanian severance from the mother through «the mirror stage and castration» (p. 48). But the drive towards signification, or the symbolic order, is, Kristeva suggests, disturbed and intermittent: «In the speaking subject, fantasies articulate this irruption of drives within the realm of the signifier», to the extent that they «disrupt the signifier and shift the metonymy of desire [...] onto a jouissance» which «turns back toward the autoerotic body», just as the girl gazes enigmatically at her self. Do Whistler's painting and Swinburne's poem, thus, enigmatically stage that «imaginary castration that must be evaded in order to return to the maternal *chora*»? (pp. 49, 51). In her account of Kristevan theory, Kelly Oliver appositely writes:

Whereas Lacan sees the mirror phase as the onset of the subject through its entry into the world of the signifier, Kristeva hears the murmur of subjectivity before the mirror stage in a subterranean world out of which the signifier develops. (Oliver 1998, p. 84)

It has been argued that, whilst the «image of the concave mirror, often called '*miroir concentrique*', is used by all kinds of writers [...] to mean whatever he likes», the «flat» mirror, by contrast, «signifies a photographic reproduction of concrete reality» (Iknayan 1983, p. 151). In *The Mirror and the Lamp* M.H. Abrams definitively traced the ways in which a work of art functioned as «a useful adjunct to the mirror for clarifying the less obvious mimetic quality of an art like poetry, which reflects the visible world indirectly». At the same time, Abrams persuasively annotated the Romantic movement's instigation of a symptomatic and widespread change «from imitation to expression, and from the mirror to the fountain, the lamp, and related analogues» (Abrams 1953, pp. 33, 57). Whistler's female subject appears to the (male?) viewer as a self-absorbed figure:

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. 24-28) (Hayes 2000, p. 104)

Swinburne's poem, however, may be interpreted as the type of discourse identified by Mieke Bal, «where female narcissism thinly veils male desire», staging a scenario in which the mirror is to be taken (by the male viewer) as «the sign of woman's vanity». This «traditional mirror function», Bal argues, is related to male sexuality, since «women's vanity is a desired feature of women» (Bal 1996, p. 38). In *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Luce Irigaray postulates à propos the male voyeur,

if this ego is to be valuable, some «mirror» is needed to reassure it and re-insure it of its value. Woman will be the foundation for this specular duplication, giving man back «his» image and repeating it as the «same». (Irigaray 1985, p. 54)

The poem, with its dialectic between the «pleasures» and «pains» of self-contemplation, «wanders in Pre-Raphaélite languor», as William Wilson phrases it, «while the White Girl anatomises her own beauty», ultimately to return «to the aesthetic image of the rose» in a process in which «she expresses the *self as other*» (Wilson 1984, p. 431):

Deep in the gleaming glass
 She sees all past things pass,
 And all sweet life that was lie down and die.
 (ll. 47-49) (Hayes 2000, p. 105)

Swinburne's contemporary Havelock Ellis, in his formulation of sexual desire, had explored male and female narcissism as a source of pleasure and identity, and late-nineteenth century ideology would notably focus upon the scene of the woman seeing herself, as Laurence Birken notes, «through the eyes of the man, desiring herself because she desires what the male desires». However there is, at this *fin de siècle* juncture, Birken maintains, a «dissolution of gender that accompanies the transition from a production-ist to a consumerist complex of values» (Birken 1988, pp. 54, 144).

Whistler's painting poses an interpretive challenge:

Love, is there sorrow hidden,
 Is there delight?
 Is joy thy dower or grief,
 White rose of weary leaf,
 Late rose whose life is brief, whose loves are light?
 (ll. 10-14) (Hayes 2000, p. 104)

This uncertainty arises because, as Kaja Silverman argues more generally, «no identity can be sustained in the absence of the gaze of the Other». For Silverman, «the mirror stage and the photo session» function as «emblems of femininity» at this historical moment, and her reading of this cultural formation possesses a peculiar implication for both painting and poem:

The fantasmatic generates erotic *tableaux* [...] in which the subject is arrestingly positioned – whose function is, in fact, precisely to display the subject in a given place. (Silverman 1998, pp. 149, 162, 216)

If, as Catherine Maxwell suggests, Swinburne's female subject serves as «a figure for the artist or poet», then it follows that «the mirror of art [...] allows ways of objectifying and aestheticising one's past» (Maxwell 2006, p. 39). Martin Danahay, in an analysis of D.G. Rossetti's poem «The Mirror», remarks how «even the image the subject perceives in the mirror is not a 'pure' representation of the perceiving 'I'». The artist, Danahay argues, «attempting to represent 'his own' must pass through the mediation of that which is not 'his own'». The cases of both Rossetti and Whistler exemplify how, as Danahay observes, «women's supposed narcissism held a powerful attraction for Victorian men» (Danahay 1994, p. 38). At the same time the contemplation of the female body through Swinburne's liquidly expressive medium accords with Kristeva's argument that «har-

mony, rhythm, the 'sweet', 'pleasant' sounds and poetic musicality found in symbolist poetry [...] may be interpreted as oralisation», in a structure of feeling gesturing towards «a devouring fusion» with the mother's body (Kristeva 1984, p. 153). Kristeva situates such a poetic within the pressures of the era, arguing that symbolist poetry strove to overcome «the symbolic order and the technocratic technologies» by disturbing «the logic that dominated the social order» (p. 83). This disturbance, as Maxwell's interpretation proposes, here also takes the form of a challenge to perceived late-Victorian gender roles, and Kristeva's diagnosis resonates notably with the valences of Swinburne's text:

Behind the veil, forbidden,
 Shut up from sight,
 Love, is there sorrow hidden,
 Is there delight?
 (ll. 8-11) (Hayes 2000, p. 104)

By raising the veil of mystery the nineteenth century had held over sexuality, Freud's discovery designated sexuality as the nexus between language and society, drives and the socio-symbolic order. (Kristeva 1984, p. 84)

In an explication of Kristeva's position, Kelly Oliver pertinently remarks, «if, as Lacan says, the Phallus can be effective only when veiled, behind the veil is the paternal body in all of its contingency and uncertainty» (Lechte, Zournazi 2003, p. 46). In an essay on Bergson, T.E. Hulme contended that «Between nature and ourselves, even between ourselves and our own consciousness, there is a veil, a veil that is dense with the ordinary man, transparent for the artist and the poet». It is the function of the artist, Hulme declares, to pierce «the veil placed between us and reality» (Csengeri 1994, pp. 198, 193). Irigaray argues that the «metaphorical veil of the eternal female covers up the sex organ seen as castrated»: «To sell herself, woman has to veil as best she can how priceless she is in the sexual economy». This is because, Irigaray maintains in terms relevant to Whistler's painting,

Woman has no gaze, no discourse for her specific specularisation that would allow her to identify with herself (as same) – to return into the self – or break free of the natural specular process that now holds her. (Irigaray 1985, pp. 82, 115, 224)

James Heffernan has appositely suggested that, in Romanticism, «the veil signifies precisely what poetic language imposes on natural objects»:

At once revealing and obscuring, allowing flashes of recognition and yet surrounding objects with an alien light, the transparent veil of language is the verbal counterpart of atmospheric transformation at its most intense. (Heffernan 1984, p. 160)

Angus Fletcher has pertinently argued that literary difficulty paradoxically serves as «a source of pleasure», because «Obscurity stirs curiosity; the reader wants to tear the veil aside» (Fletcher 1964, p. 235). The dialectical relation between Whistler's art-object and Swinburne's poem might productively be framed with reference to Walter Benjamin's analysis of Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, where he defines what he terms «semblance» as an aesthetic attribute «which belongs to the essentially beautiful as the veil and as the essential law of beauty». This entails that «beauty appears as such only when it is veiled», so that «the beautiful is neither the veil nor the veiled object but rather the object in its veil». The business of art criticism is thus crucially posited upon «the impossibility of unveiling»:

The task of art criticism is not to lift the veil but rather, through the most precise knowledge of it as a veil, to raise itself for the first time to the true view of the beautiful [...] to the view of the beautiful as that which is secret.

The work of art, Benjamin argues, could only be grasped «where it ineluctably represented itself as a secret», because «the divine ground of the being of beauty lies in the secret». Art and nature are the only spheres «where the duality of nakedness and veiling does not yet obtain», since «in veiless nakedness the essentially beautiful has withdrawn» (Benjamin 1996, pp. 350, 351). It may indeed be that for the female subject, as Hillis Miller speculates, there is a possibility that the mirror-stage functions not for «the discovery of one's self», but rather for «the discovery of a vacancy there, and an empty glass» (Miller 1991, p. 329).

The implications of Swinburne's text were to be potently refracted in a slightly later poem, Mary Coleridge's «The Other Side of a Mirror» (1882). Swinburne's contrastive «White rose in red rose-garden | Is not so white» is here reimagined as a more specifically sexualised and gendered image:

Her lips were open - not a sound
Came through the parted lines of red.
Whate'er it was, the hideous wound
In silence and in secret bled.
No sigh relieved her speechless woe,
She had no voice to speak her dread.
(Avery 2010, p. 33)

In her reading of the poem Christine Battersby relates this to Luce Irigaray's contrast between red and white blood in a scheme which suggests that

Whiteness is the language of purity, and a dead, static, specularised nature. Against this whiteness, «redness» is used to suggest a form of identity that bleeds onto otherness. (Battersby 1996, p. 263)

She further argues, in a comment also pertinent to Swinburne, that it is as if the poet «seems only to be able to sense her own interiority via an elaborate alignment of her body against the male gaze». Indeed, Battersby suggestively contends that the female poet «situates herself on both sides of the mirror, and on neither side of the mirror», in a scenario which elicits a revealingly polarised textual dialectic which is masked or submerged in Whistler and Swinburne:

On the one hand, there is the flesh that bleeds with a «hideous wound» [...] On the other hand, there is female flesh whitened into an unnatural purity. (pp. 253, 262, 264)

In an influential essay which sought to distinguish between romanticism and classicism, T.E. Hulme argued that the Romantic movement had «debauched» readers into a cult of «some form of vagueness», whilst himself advocating verse «strictly confined to the earthly and the definite». Romantic verse exists «at a certain pitch of rhetoric», Hulme argues, adding laconically, «The kind of thing you get in Hugo or Swinburne» (Csengeri 1994, pp. 66, 63). Hulme's definition helps to map the differences in textual procedure between «Before the Mirror» and a group of mirror poems by Thomas Hardy, of which «The Lament of the Looking-Glass» might serve as exemplar:

Words from the mirror softly pass
To the curtains with a sigh:
«Why should I trouble again to glass
These smileless things hard by,
Since she I pleased once, alas,
Is now no longer nigh!

«I've imaged shadows of the coursing cloud,
And of the plying limb
On the pensive pine when the air is loud
With its aerial hymn;
But never do they make me proud
To catch them within my rim!

«I flash back phantoms of the night
 That sometimes flit by me,
 I echo roses red and white –
 The loveliest blooms that be –
 But now I never hold to sight
 So sweet a flower as she».
 (Gibson 1981, pp. 674-675)

Such a juxtaposition emphasises crucial differences in poetic procedure between Swinburne and Hardy, differences relating to vocabulary (the characteristic awkwardness of «smileless», or the uncompromisingly utilitarian «rim»), metaphor and structure, factors peculiarly concentrated and compacted in the rhythmic patterns of the two poems.

Hardy's relationship with Swinburne was both admiring and ambivalent. As a young man he had been deeply influenced by the publication of *Poems and Ballads*, acknowledging in his elegy for the poet, «A Singer Asleep», the dramatic effect in «Victoria's formal middle time» of those «passionate pages»:

Fraught with hot sighs, sad laughters, kisses, tears;
 Fresh-fluted notes, yet from a minstrel who
 Blew them not natively, but as one who knew
 Full well why he thus blew.
 (p. 323)

In composing his most overtly «Decadent» novel, *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved*, (1892), Hardy was pleased to tell Swinburne, in a somewhat back-handed compliment, «I often thought of lines of yours during the writing» (Purdy, Millgate 1980, vol. 2, p. 158). However, Hardy's own verse sought to move beyond the «dilatatory space» of Decadence or Symbolism, and he would memorably bid farewell to these tendencies in the auratic closing lines of his elegy:

I leave him, while the daylight gleam declines
 Upon the capes and chines.
 (Gibson 1981, p. 325)²

William Empson appositely remarked upon «a quality in Hardy easiest called good rhythm» which is allied with «a certain clumsiness that fits his grim scenery». Crucially for Empson, in Hardy «it is a closeness to the accent of spoken English won through indifference to the poetic conven-

2 Hardy's elegy for Swinburne is discussed in Ebbatson (2013) and Karlin (2013).

tions of his time» (Empson 1988, p. 422). This insight lies at the heart of Hardy's verse structure, as for example in the clarity and yet the mystery inherent in the speech of the mirror, whose «echo» of «roses red and white» plays upon and yet distances itself from Swinburne's characteristic falling rhythm in «White rose of weary leaf». The sense of loss which counterbalances the energy of the «shadows of the coursing cloud», or the «plying limb», is confined to the «smileless thing hard by», whilst the treasured «she» «Is no longer nigh». Francesco Marroni has remarked that, for Hardy, «objects possess voices of their own that have something to say about the unfathomable and intricate networks of human experiences». Each object celebrated in the verse thus «seems to be immune to mortality» and thus enabled to «perform a double function by simultaneously offering and negating the presence of their [...] owners» (Marroni 2009, p. 19). «The Lament of the Looking-Glass» constitutes what Marroni designates an «object-poem» in which the object paradoxically comes to life with the absence or loss of the human in a trajectory which problematises the issue of being and stands in marked contrast to that Swinburnian eschewal of the object identified by Psomiades. It has been appositely observed, by Dennis Taylor, that for Hardy, «the poem is an archaic crystallisation of prose»:

The poem seems to recapitulate the historical process by which the fresh speech rhythms of the people become the metrical rhythms of the poet. (Taylor 1988, p. 114)

In this process, as Taylor tellingly argues, «a once living speech becomes a living echo», so that «the sound symbolism is an echo of once was». In this verse structure, «The relic of vitality [...] is caught beautifully in Hardy's classic image of a mirror series» (pp. 119, 136, 163).

A second Hardy mirror poem, «The Cheval-Glass», dramatises another scene of loss and regret, as the narrator quizzes a man apparently living in the colonies as to why, a «Picture of bachelor gloom», he gazes into «that great cheval-glass». The man explains that as a tenant-farmer at home in England he had admired «the parson's daughter, | A creature of nameless charm» who was won by a rival in a misalliance followed by the young woman's «ill-usage», mental affliction and subsequent demise. Upon the ensuing death of the parson «Everything was to be sold», and the speaker thus acquired the full-length mirror at auction:

«Well, I awaited the sale and bought it...
There by my bed it stands,
And as the dawn expands
Often I see her pale-faced form there
Brushing her hair's bright bands».
(Gibson 1981, pp. 360-361)

This is a text which invites interpretation as another Hardy-esque expression of lost opportunities and belated regret, and possessing a biographical resonance identified by F.B. Pinion, who conjectures that the text was «occasioned by the memory of Emma Hardy's pale-faced form in a mirror, as she brushed 'her hair's bright bands'» (Pinion 1976, p. 109). There is another dimension to this text, however, signalled in the disturbing concluding lines:

«So that it was for its revelations
I brought it oversea,
And drag it about with me...
Anon I shall break it and bury its fragments
Where my grave is to be».
(Gibson 1981, p. 361)

The mirror here functions as a record of what has passed away in the protagonist's «ancient England» with its traditional indices of valley farm and village parsonage, whilst the plot of the poem hints at a class tension which has debarred the man, as a tenant-farmer, from marrying above him. In its staging of the reminiscent human voice the poem alludes to what Sue Edney describes, à propos of William Barnes, as a «sense of what was familiar and stable in the life of the small farmhouse [...] always underpinned by anxiety over change» (Edney 2009, p. 212). The removal overseas and the obsessive clinging to the awkwardly-sized mirror which fills the man's «narrow room» refracts a deep-seated sense of upheaval and crisis focused in the loss of the beloved object. The direct speech utterance of the man's riposte gestures towards what Paul de Man defined as language's «*errance*, a kind of permanent exile», whilst he added in a phrase germane to Hardy's poem, «it is not really an exile, for there is no homeland, nothing from which one has been exiled» (De Man 1986, p. 92). The young female subject of «The Cheval-Glass» appears to have exchanged the law of one father for another with dire results, illustrating what Anne-Marie Smith, in a Kristevan commentary, has observed, namely that:

Woman's foothold in the phallic order of the symbolic is precarious and for this reason when that order fails, her love life [...] falters, she is open to the estrangement and marginality of her condition. For this she is more susceptible to depression. (Lechte, Zournazi 2003, p. 137)

The «far rumours of her ill-usage | Came, like a chilling breath», her lover recalls, and in the end «her mind lost balance». His fantasised recollection of the young woman gazing into the mirror to brush her hair refracts, in its pitiable scenario, the process whereby, according to Kristeva, the «narcissistic self» «projects out of itself what it experiences as danger-

ous or unpleasant», enacting a figure of the double «as a defence put up by a distraught self» (Kristeva 1991, p. 183). Such self-alienation is common to both Hardy's protagonists: the tenant-farmer has moved to the colonies in order to forget in a Kristevan trajectory outlined by Miglena Nikolchina, who observes that it is deprivation which «initiates the entry of the speaking being into language». She suggests further that language «unfolds like a foreign country out of the loss of the motherland», in what is «always a language of want, of lack», to the extent that «the speaking being is constituted, therefore, *as an exile*». Indeed, Nikolchina concludes in terms relevant to Hardy's farmer, «Exile is thus the eternal destiny of the speaking being» (Lechte, Zournazi 2003, p. 162). In such Hardy-esque textualisation poetry functions as what may be termed the memory of language.

At «pallid midnight moments», the lover fantasises,
 Quick will she come to my call,
 Smile from the frame withal
 Ponderingly, as she used to regard me
 Passing her father's wall.
 (Gibson 1981, p. 361)

The farmer has transported the mirror «oversea» for the sake of its «revelations», whilst also planning its ultimate fragmentation and burial. Such an action, it might be suggested, embodies not only the destruction of the aesthetic/erotic object of desire but also the collapse of the old life-ways. Indeed, in her study of Wessex folklore, Ruth Firor records that breaking a mirror was interpreted as marking «the death of a friend». She further notes,

The broken mirror is only a small part of a larger primitive fear, and the same is true of the falling portrait. Shadows, reflections in shining surfaces like water or mirrors, any image or likeness, were once thought to hold the soul of their original, a soul which might too readily be coaxed or driven away from its body. (Firor 1962, pp. 15-16)

The plan of Hardy's speaker in this poem refracts that wider social disintegration which was marked, in Barnes and Hardy, by the loss of the verbal materiality of dialect speech as marker of the rooted culture of Wessex. The proposed burial of the mirror answers to the farmer's erotic loss and also to his displacement and alienation from his native agricultural roots. The male lover's insistence that he will in time break and bury the fragments of the cheval-glass refracts or reimagines a masculinist question posed by Hillis Miller à propos Rossetti:

Why is it that when we men contemplate not ourselves in the mirror but our incongruous other self, a desirable woman contemplating herself, our own integrity is mutilated, destroyed? (Miller 1991, p. 334)

Danahay sees the male viewer as being «mutilated in this exchange», in which the woman functions as «both object of desire and as a *femme fatale*, a woman who destroys the male as subject» (Danahay 1994, p. 40). Such a diagnosis suggests that the destructive action of Hardy's protagonist is in the last analysis the staging of a self-mutilation or even castration.

It is the estrangement of one's own mirror image which motivates Hardy's poem, «I Look into My Glass»:

I look into my glass,
And view my wasting skin,
And say, «Would God it came to pass
My heart had shrunk so thin!»

For then, I, undistrest
By hearts grown cold to me,
Could lonely wait my endless rest
With equanimity.

But Time, to make me grieve,
Part steals, lets part abide;
And shakes this fragile frame at eve
With throbbings of noontide.
(Gibson 1981, p. 81)

Kristeva maintains that it was through the Romantic movement that the «heterogeneous notion of the *unconscious* sprang forth», creating «within the assumed unity of human beings an *otherness*» to the extent that «we are our own foreigners, we are divided». Hardy's poem, in its self-alienation, enacts the Freudian lesson of «how to detect foreigners in ourselves» (Kristeva 1991, pp. 181, 191). There is, however, also an element of what Rodolphe Gasché terms «recapturing recognition» on the author's part here, embodying Gasché's contention that

In the reflection of the mirror-subject as an annulment of the mirroring subject's former alienation, the reflection of the Other becomes a reflection of self. The mirror's self-reflection is the embracing whole that allows it to release itself into Other, which explains why it faces an object in the first place and why it returns reflexively to itself. (Gasché 1986, p. 21)

Thus it is, according to Gasché, that the «alienation of the mirror in its Other and the reflection of the object are linked together in such a way as to form a totality» (p. 21). For Swinburne and Whistler, it may be suggested, the work of art functions as what Gerald Bruns defines as «another object that consciousness constructs for itself – a non-mimetic or purely formal object, one determined by traditional canons of beauty», whereas in the more exploratory mode adopted, for example by Hardy, «the work is now defined precisely as a limit of consciousness». «I Look into My Glass», that is to say, exhibits a Levinasian «materiality of being» which overwhelms the ageing poet (Bruns 2002, p. 211). Levinas maintains, in terms resonant with implications for a reading of Hardy's text, that

The face is not in front of me, but above me; it is the other before death, looking through and exposing death [...] the face is the other who asks him not to die alone. (Cohen 1986, p. 24)

In his poem Hardy confronts the issue of identity by staging the manifestation of the figure of the double, of the self as Other. In such a case, as has been argued in relation to Kafka, «the individual will have ceded its place to the *doppelgänger*, to the subject who is not permitted to ever say 'I am I'» (Vardoulakis 2010, p. 227). Indeed, «I Look into My Glass» is open to the kind of Lacanian reading posited by Thomas Weiskel's account of the sublime, which suggests that

The self is originally constituted as an Other in the moment of identifying with an image which appears to exist «outside», typically its own reflection. (Weiskel 1976, p. 150)

In sum, it may be suggested, whilst Swinburne, in his mirror poem, exploits and elaborates the possibilities of the self-referential reflexivity entailed in the *fin de siècle* symbolist creed, Hardy by contrast chooses literally to face the metaphysical and textual problems posed by an endlessly challenging self-alienation in his willing embrace of the «impure aesthetic» of artistic realism. It is thus a postulate of this argument that the self-evidently transgressive valence of Swinburne's poem, in its sensationalist projection of the mirror-stage and the male gaze, in effect marks a certain complicity with an evolving market economy. Hardy's mirror poems, through their staging of an echoic folk voice, by contrast articulate a more radical response to the cultural damage inflicted by the emergence of the administered society.

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