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Through Pictures and Mirrors: Fictions 1860-1950

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Portraits and Mirrors

Portraits and mirrors feature extensively, and often centrally, as motifs or *topoi* in Gothic, 'sensational', and Victorian fiction, and in the first half of the 20th century. In the first instance, they appear as animated portraits, moving in or out of the frame with uncanny and perturbing effects; then as prophetic or tell-tale portraits, revealing the disquieting nature, fate, and future, of either the sitters, the artist, or both; eventually as 'killing portraits,' bringing death on account of the diabolic connotations traditionally associated with portraiture, and of an intrinsic, deadly opposition perceived or dramatized between art and life.

In portraits, moreover, one can perceive or discover a potential double, an *alter ego*, a different self, or *Doppelgänger*. The mirror motif, in turn, can act as a troublesome interference, beginning with the legend of Narcissus, who falls in love with his own image or 'double' reflected in the water surface (*aequor* in Latin, or even better *specchio d'acqua*, in Italian), and wishing to embrace it, falls in and drowns. Conversely, in the myth of Perseus, the hero is saved from the mortal gaze of the Gorgon or Medusa, and can destroy her, by looking at her image reflected in a mirror – which can therefore possess a saving, rather than lethal, power. As Giulio Guidorizzi has noted, "The mirror can recall to its surface frightening figures ... and evoke ghosts; the use of mirrors to generate alienating sensations is

recorded by Pausanias himself [2nd cent. BC]”, who “speaks of deforming mirrors that cannot reproduce a human face, but can make divine images emerge – evidently through a play of crossed reflections.” Water springs or pools, too, could be used as divining mirrors.

The culmination and best example of the first motif is in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), where Oscar Wilde contaminates and interweaves it with the second, that of the mirror. While being painted, Gray wishes to “change places” with his portrait, in which, by definition, the image remains fixed, ‘arrested’ in time, while the sitter changes with the passing of time. Here instead, by a kind of diabolical pact, Gray manages to keep his youth and beauty intact, while the portrait ages and takes on the burden of his corruption (ch. 7). The face on the canvas becomes cruel, wrinkled, old; it hides – but will eventually betray – Gray’s true nature: explicitly, it “would be to him the most magical of mirrors” (ch. 8). Now, while the portrait arrests and fixes time, the mirror image is coeval and coterminous with the viewer: *aequaevus*, as classic writers wrote, with the person facing it, showing every phase and moment of our changing, whereas the portrait, once painted, is a ‘still life’, in every sense of the word.

Wilde instead uses the portrait as a mirror, making “subject to time a painted picture that by its very nature should not be so,” and turning it into an instrument of death (as Maurizio Bettini observes in his *The Portrait of the Lover*, where the remote prototype of the lethal image of the face, the Greek *gorgóneion*, is also discussed). This reversal of roles and functions was so crucial, that Wilde emphasized it in two scenes (chs. 11 and 20), in which Dorian confronts his changing portrait with a mirror he holds in his hands – a mirror that reflects his unchanging features and unblemished youth. These two scenes enact a sort of ballet *à trois*, in which the portrait acts as mirror, and the mirror as portrait. This is why his loathsome portrait must be hidden, so that it does not reveal Gray’s foulness and corruption. It is as if it “sweated blood”; it torments his soul in an uncanny, *unheimlich*, perturbing way, and will finally destroy him. Gray stabs and disfigures it with the same knife he had used for his murder, and it is as if he killed his painted, and at the same time living, self. “You told me you had destroyed it,” his friend Basil wonders, and Gray: “I was wrong. It has destroyed me” (chs. 12-13).

Anticipations of this kind of entanglements can be found in Nathaniel Hawthorne's 'Roman' novel, *The Marble Faun* (1860), where various pictures feature in crucial and complicated ways. One scene is particularly relevant. In chapter 23, Hilda, the angel-like American copyist, is working in her painting-room at a copy of the then world-famous and omnipresent portrait of Beatrice Cenci: the peculiarity of this picture, we are told, is that "its profoundest expression eludes a straightforward glance, and can only be caught by side glimpses" – as if the painted face had a life and consciousness of its own. "Opposite the easel, hung a looking glass, in which Beatrice's face and Hilda's were both reflected;" with an unpremeditated glance, not without horror, Hilda fancies "that Beatrice's expression, seen aside and vanishing in a moment, had been depicted in her own face, likewise." Portrait and mirror juxtaposed concur on an ominous premonition that will run through the book, fraught with symbolical connotations and dire consequences: is innocent Hilda also "stained with guilt"?

Side aspects of the picture-mirror correlation surface elsewhere. In Sheridan Le Fanu's short novel, *Carmilla* (1872), a story of doubles and vampires, with strong connotations of lesbian love, a 1698 portrait of an ancestor whose name (Mircalla) is an anagram of Carmilla, shows the same features of the young protagonist (ch. 5), who is then frightened when facing a looking-glass (ch. 8), possibly seeing horrors or *not* seeing herself reflected. I mention this advisedly, because this is a characteristic of vampires, invisible in mirrors, from which they recoil, so as not to be detected by the absence of their image. Two such memorable scenes are in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), and spectacularly in most of the movies, plays or TV shows based on it.

Ten years before, in the conclusion of Maupassant's *Le Horla* (1887 version), a horror story in diary-form of a mysterious, haunting double, the protagonist does not see himself in a mirror, being possibly concealed by his persecutor; then his image gradually re-emerges. (More of both tales below.) A few years later, in Montague Rhodes James's "The Mezzotint" (in *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*, 1904), an old crime is re-enacted when a mysterious figure, who was not there before, appears in it. Then a moon becomes visible, a window is at first open, then closed; someone crosses the scene with a bundle, and disappears. After a while the mezzotint stops

changing – having worked as a sort of *moving picture*, the illustration of a possible murder, half-way between a mirror of crimes (as in Wilde) and one of the very short, pioneering silent films of the period.

The mirror motif has an even greater mystery value, and more than the portrait can potentially muddle our clear view or sight. *Per speculum in aenigmate*, St Paul has written in the first letter to the Corinthians: through a mirror one sees confusedly, as in the dark. In King James's Bible, it becomes *through a glass, darkly* (13: 12): both forms became proverbial and frequently cited. Paul means that only after death shall we see God face to face; in our life, we have a dark and blurred image of Him. But the phrase has come to mean that in a looking glass our vision is generally blurred, troubled, and obscure, and such obfuscation is often and potentially inherent in, or a *de facto* condition of, our confrontation with what is reflected in it. What a mirror reveals, of us or others, confounds and disquiets just as the occultation to be unveiled, and may prove an illusion and an enigma. This is one of the reasons why the mirror's attraction is irresistible: looking at it or in it, one can lose or enhance the notion of the self.

Hence the irrepressible wish to go through the looking glass, to plunge into a world where our world is *reversed*. Portraits and mirror images influence what we do in our lives and at the same time suggest the existence and the attraction of another reality, a *natura altera* in which to immerse ourselves – what is behind, beyond, besides or outside every-day life. They attract, lure, entice onlookers and bystanders, readers and spectators alike, to go through, to be on the other side, to reach beyond limits and confines, to enter regions of exaltation and hidden pleasure; to be 'other' from what we are, and possibly see, meet and embrace there our mysterious doubles.

"Mirror mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?" asks Snow White's jealous stepmother of the Grimm brothers' tale, and ever since. There one can find an answer. Elsewhere it is not so: hence the increased yearning to break through portraits and mirrors. And it is perhaps on the strength of what follows that in Tarsem Singh's Snow White film *Mirror Mirror* (2012), the wicked mother (Julia Roberts) crushes through a mirror that shatters in glass shards without making noise.

The starting point of a long series of such situations in 19th- and 20th-century fiction is of course Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*,

and What Alice Found There (1871): Looking-glass House (the room seen through the mirror over the fireplace) “is just the same as our drawing-room, only the things go the other way ... the books are something like our books, only the words go the wrong way.” Perhaps everything is reversed, and for young Alice the wish to go through and see the *other* side becomes irresistible, and easily accomplished: “Let’s pretend the glass has got all soft like gauze,” she tells, and “Why, it’s turning into a soft mist now, I declare!” She is up on the chimney-piece, “And certainly the glass *was* beginning to melt away, just like a bright silvery mist. In another moment Alice was through the glass, and had jumped lightly down into the Looking-glass room.”

Glass is generally hard and bright, but here, rather startlingly, we have softness, no noise, and no shards: the two original illustrations by John Tenniel reinforce the impression of easiness – simply a transition – and that everything is the same, though reversed, on the other side. Further on in the novel, we shall have living and moving pictures, and all will indeed be reversed – a dream for one reading with youthful eyes, as well as for the psychoanalytic critic. (In his essay “On Mirrors”, Umberto Eco warns that the mirror image is properly an ‘inverted symmetry’: only in the retina it is actually *reversed*; still, entering the mirror is “living the virtual image as if it were real,” and “the catoptric universe [the realm of reflections] can actually give the impression of virtuality.”)

In Le Fanu’s *Carmilla* (published in a collection called *In a Glass Darkly*), the narrator confesses, as if to clinch my assumption, “I see it all, as divers see what is going on above them, through a medium, dense, rippling but transparent. There occurred that night what has confused the picture, and made its colours faint” (*transparent* will be a crucial word for Nabokov). Towards the end of Maupassant’s *Le Horla*, too, the diarist confesses (August 19): “If a glass without a tinfoil behind it were to bar my way, I should run into it,” just as a bird caught in a room flies against the window panes. He does not see himself in his room’s glass: “It was empty, clear, profound, full of light! But my figure was not reflected in it,” perhaps ‘absorbed’ (*dévoré*) by his double. But suddenly he sees himself re-surfacing: “I began to see myself through a mist in the depths of the looking-glass ... as if it were through a sheet of water ... It was like the end of an eclipse.” What hid

him seemed “a sort of opaque transparency.” The context and direction of the story point elsewhere, but the references to mirrors, pools of water, baffling reflections, and their deranging effects, relate to previous cases. (Earlier, in Fitz-James O’Brien’s *What Was It, A Mystery*, 1859, a popular tale on a similar topic, the narrator spoke of mirrors, sometimes so pure as to be invisible: one could “make a glass which will not reflect a single ray of light ... the rays of the sun pass through ... refracted but not reflected”).

Breaking through pictures and mirrors may be a response to a secret wish, almost independently of one’s will. Other characters woo and enact it willingly – grown-ups who, like Alice, enter the realm of the uncanny with an implicit or declared intention. To plunge into, go through or beyond the picture or mirror becomes an extreme risk or adventure, involving the profoundest depths of the self and otherness, where time and space are arbitrary, suspended, and reversed – exalting and exhilarating, and at the same time anguished and perturbing.

Portraits and Mirrors of the Past

One of the first cases is Henry James’s unfinished novel *The Sense of the Past* (posthumously published in 1917), where the full-length portrait of a European ancestor is the means by which the protagonist, the American Ralph Pendrel – “by the turn of his spirit oddly indifferent to the actual and the possible; his interest all in the spent and the displaced” – jumps into the past, back from 1910 to 1820, and finds himself entrapped in it. In the ancestral home in London, where he spends an ecstatic vigil, the portrait above the mantel seems to follow him with his eyes and move when he gets near, to challenge him, turn his back and beckon to follow him. It is then an animated portrait, seemingly alive in the room, that suddenly reveals Ralph’s own features: “the face – miracle of miracles, yes – confounded him as his own.” Ralph will take his ancestor’s place in the past, arguably by going through his picture: “He is from that minute, to his own eyes and all his own faculties, the young man in the portrait” – his ‘double’. Not, however, to follow in his steps – this is James’s twist – but to do *his own* part, *modifying* the past in a day-to-day ‘invention’ of the

steps to be taken, thereby involving his alter ego in a kind of troubling 'Future.' Both end by acting, and being trapped, in what might be termed an artificial (even virtual) reality. There are elements taken from the Gothic tradition – the living portrait, the plunge into the past, the *suspense* – and above all a sense of terror, not only for this, but for the drama of a double consciousness, "of being the other and yet himself also" (this seems to be echoed in the ghostly terza rima passage of T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, 'Little Gidding,' ll. 44-47: "So I assumed a double part / ... / Knowing myself yet being someone other"), of being in the present and in the past, and acting in the past as an agent of the future. Ralph painfully *creates* his own, and his double's, reality in the past, where he becomes lost and damned beyond all rescue, with the divination that he might not emerge from it at all. This unresolved strain, perhaps, accounts for the novel being left unfinished.

This motif will reappear in Vladimir Nabokov's Russian short novel *La Veneziana* (*Venetsianka*, 1924, translated into French in 1990, Italian in 1992, English in 1995, with the Italian title, and inspired by Sebastiano del Piombo's painting *Giovane romana* – *Roman*, not Venetian). Here the protagonist, fascinated by the portrait of the Venetian lady who seems to be alive and smiling, feels a strong urge to enter the picture: "I would ... concentrate all my will-power on one thought: to enter it," and "with a profound sigh, [he] moved toward her and effortlessly entered the painting. A marvelous freshness immediately made his head spin."

But he is understandably trapped, "mired like a fly in honey ... feeling his blood and flesh and clothing turning into paint, growing into the varnish, drying on the canvas ... next to the Veneziana," no longer breathing the "live, terrestrial air." At the request of the owner, this 'additional' figure is then indignantly scrapped and rubbed away from the picture: he 'revives' and is found in the dirty rags thrown out of the window after erasing him. As in most Gothic fiction, the mystery is then rationally explained away. And in Nabokov's other Russian novel *Glory* (*Podvig*, 1932, translated into English in 1971), an English fairy tale is mentioned about a little boy who "went from his bed into the picture" right above his bed; the illustration in the book resembles a watercolor hanging on the bed of the young protagonist, who later wonders "if one night he had not actually hopped from bed to picture": a yearning attributed to the writer himself in

his fanciful *Speak, Memory. An Autobiography Revisited* ('assembled' in 1951, revised 1966) as the symbol of an initiation into art.

A second case, deserving longer treatment, recalls in set-up and development James's *The Sense of the Past*: a *pastiche* at which Max Beerbohm worked from 1913 to 1914, also left unfinished and published only in 1982 by Lawrence Danson as *Max Beerbohm and The Mirror of the Past* for the Princeton University Library, where the motif of mirrors is combined with the aestheticism and some proto-science fiction interests of the Belle Époque. The text is much more entangled and incoherent than James's, a 'chaos of fragments,' that its editor has literally reconstructed: an exemplary text of what happens when dealing with or entering mirrors.

In a long, never sent, "private and confidential" letter of intents to the editor of *The Century*, Beerbohm gives "A very brief and arbitrary account of a book I am writing, entitled 'The Mirror of the Past': a mirror belonging to an invented character, Sylvester Herringham, "which, hanging in his drawing room, gradually ceased to reflect present images and began to reflect things long past." Beerbohm used this character as a kind of *alter ego* in his BBC talks during World War II (collected under the title *Mainly on the Air* in 1946): a mask or *persona* for reminiscences "founded on my rather full knowledge of the *actual* memoirs of the period, on my instinct for character, and on my rather dreadful talent for 'parody'." Sylvester is a fictional friend who, before dying, reveals to the narrator the existence of that particular mirror – which he created on a chemical system suggested by a French book 'on reflectents' [*sic*], and which allows to preserve or even *create* images. The fiction looks back to Wilde and forward to Borges and Nabokov, as Danson noted, based as it is on 'doubles', playing with 'limited perspectives' and interferences between art and life. Here the twist is that the past recedes backwards.

Per speculum in aenigmate. In the room where the two characters meet there is already "an oval mirror that reflected one of the windows and the river beyond" (a pre-figuration of Nabokov's multiple reflectors): another is uncannily 'discovered', "with a round black space in the middle," "apparently a convex mirror ... except that where the mirror itself would be there was blackness. ... Like a mirror – only with black felt stretched over the glass." It "*Feels* like glass;" it is transparent, but without light,

with “ordinary quicksilver” at the back. At first, “Darkness is what it reflects,” “bygone darkness.” Yet something gradually emerges: “a sudden faint suffusion of its surface,” dots of light, then a small human figure moving backwards and growing. According to the letter of intents, a young Herringham materializes in it, “in evening dress, mysteriously walking backwards around the room.” He does everything backwards, and everything in the mirror is reversed, “not merely, as in other mirrors, reversed in point of space, but in point of *time* also.” Its time is *regressive*; as in *Entr’Acte* (1924) by René Clair, in comic movies or in CDVs run in reverse. Characters from the past recede (in the literal sense of the term) from old age or maturity to their youth: Whistler, Sickert, Wilde, Lord Lytton, Browning, Meredith, Tennyson and so forth. (One may think of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button” in *Tales of the Jazz Age*, 1922, whose life recedes from old age to his birth: a mere *divertissement*, I believe, but now taken seriously after the movie it inspired.)

At Sylvester’s receptions, Pre-Raphaelites, Aesthetes, and ‘Professional Beauties’ of the Belle Époque parade, *in primis* Dante Gabriel Rossetti, of whom Sylvester gained possession through that ‘reversed’ process, in which, moreover, the image is not an illusion but it is *something*, has *substance*, however flimsy, while *it lasts*. The mirror “is just the receiver”; we “are giving out from every angle a constant, unbroken *series* of images. They are invisible – but they *become* visible for a fraction of an instant as they go on the polished surface.” Sylvester believes they are caught between the glass and the quicksilver of the mirror; being mobile by nature, they go on irradiating like ‘stacked films’ when the pressure is removed. With this particularity: at 7 o’clock we see what happened at 5, at midday what happened the previous midnight, and so on. Of Whistler, the letter of intents specifies, “in the mirror the first that you see of him is the last that the mirror reflected of him. His receding and disappearing back-view is now an appearing and *proceeding* rear-view.”

We are on the verge of the uncanny, and on the way to Adolfo Bioy Casares’ *La invención de Morel* (1940, of which more below), where ‘stacked films’ will play havoc and cause the death of the living people they reproduce. There is also a kind of *mise en abyme*: D. G. Rossetti loved that mirror, calling it “the only artist among mirrors- emphasizing and attenuating- always a composition- a *Rondure*- the aim of all art.” William

Morris, instead, hates mirrors because they *lie*, while the painter Sandys not only puts mirrors in his paintings, but wants to paint Sylvester in front of a mirror, to multiply reflections, including those in the eye, again in a decidedly pre-Nabokov manner: “he’ll insist on the round mirror’s reflection of the *oval* mirror’s reflection of your face- And then the pupil of each of your eyes reflecting the oval mirror’s reflection of the round mirror’s reflection of the back of your head.” One may recall in this context that the pupil of the eye is a perfect reflecting mirror: in *Alcibiades* Plato had already noted that our face is there reflected as in a mirror, and that “the part we call pupil – *kore* – is the image of the onlooker” (quoted in *La maschera, il doppio e il ritratto*); believing that the soul could reside there, one spoke of *anima pupillina* (which may have had something to do with the evil eye). In Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, Brutus would tell Cassius “the eye sees not itself / But by reflection.”

Other possible references multiply. Sylvester, who is always young in the mirror, contrasts with aging Beerbohm. A long, even more confused and confusing story of Sylvester’s marriage and his betrayal by his wife Mildred, involves his destroying her portrait painted by Rossetti (both aspects refer back to Wilde). While Sylvester is ill or travelling, the mirror darkens; and when it starts reflecting again we are plunged back into the 1860s and then the 1830s, in the Paris of the *ancien régime*, when the process may eventually stop. The past can then be captured and preserved in the mirror, and prove the opposite of what we expected: in this particular mirror we are caught in a whirling, backwards movement reaching a point of no return coinciding with death. It is a frustrating experience: everything is deceiving, ungraspable, mute (this is the period of silent movies), threatened by invisibility. No possible conclusions are envisaged, and this seems one further reason, as in James, for which the novel was left unfinished. The Master of the Artificial is betrayed by his own invention of the convex mirror (a meditation on this and the general question of reflection is in John Ashbery’s poem “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,” a modern *exphrasis* of Parmigianino’s painting of that title: “the portrait / Is the reflection once removed. / The glass chose to reflect only what he saw. / ... / The soul establishes itself. / But how far can it swim out through the eyes / And still return safely to its nest?”). Beerbohm is

only saved, as a writer, by his ironic and parodic representations (as in most of his other works, which do not belong here), by his ‘inventions’ often in contrast to what actually happened – as Ford Madox Ford, too, would do in his fanciful memoirs of the same historical and literary characters.

In spite of our assumption that they reveal identity or otherness, we can never be sure of what mirrors tell. The unreliability of what is reflected is always high. Mirrors often deceive and mock us, they lie to us, as intimated in *The Mirror of the Past*: we can see better by ourselves, neither Mildred nor her lover are as Sylvester had seen them; he himself seemed to Carlisle the opposite of what he appeared to Beerbohm. This is perhaps owing to the undefined character of his set-up and plot.

Unreliability

On this kind of unreliability one could scroll up and down a long string of examples. Shakespeare offers remarkable and disturbing confrontations with mirrors (notably in *Richard II*, *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, and other plays). Tennyson’s “The Lady of Shalott” (1832, rev. 1842) beholds the images of the world in a blue mirror: “in her web she still [=always] delights / to weave the mirror’s magic sights,” until “The mirror crack’d from side to side” when she must face reality to go to Camelot, and she will die. (Can it be prophetic of our contemporary website addictions and risks?) In their *Antología de la literatura fantástica* (1940, and subsequent enlarged editions), Jorge Luis Borges, Silvina Ocampo and Bioy Casares offer a fascinating passage from the Chinese novel *The Dream of the Red Chamber* (1752-62), in which one is invited to look at the back of a burnished mirror: a skull’s head appears, and the protagonist, Chia Jui, then looks at the other side, where an elegant lady beckons invitingly at him. He will go through the metal of the mirror many times to join her, till he suddenly dies. No comments are needed to stress a congruity with my topic. I will mention a few examples from the late 19th to the mid 20th century.

H. G. Wells, in spite of his ‘realistic’ and ‘scientific’ tendencies, in his novel *The Time Machine* (1895) deals with the forward as well as the backward movement of time, and in some of his *Thirty Strange Stories*

(collected in 1898) shows a marked predilection for *mobile* figures, images and views, believing in what he calls a 'second sight'. In "The Late Mr. Elvesham" (which was included in Borges-Casares' *Antología*), a young man is raised from poverty and benefited by a mysterious old man, but finds himself terribly aged when looking at himself in a mirror, with a face just like his benefactor's. The old man may have taken possession of his young body and of his strength; perhaps his young soul, too, has been possessed by, or transferred to, Elvesham, who may thus achieve immortality by endlessly repeating such exchanges. Are these hallucinations, due to drugs or drinking, as the ethics of the times or a rational explanation would require? We are left to wonder. A similar motif of the exchange of vitality, in fact, inspires Henry James's baffling novel *The Sacred Fount* (1901), and such 'transpositions' are typical of this period. Ten years later, in the popular short story "The Beckoning Fair One" (in the collection *Widdershins*, 1911) by George Oliver Onions, the glass over a portrait above the mantel works as a mirror in which the flame of a candle is reflected on a hair-comb that seems to move, and, as in the Chinese text just quoted, a fair one beckons invitingly from it.

In the Gothic tale "The Residence at Whitminster" by Montague R. James (in *A Thin Ghost, and Others*, 1919), a round, smooth tablet, apparently of transparent glass, seems to reflect objects and scenes which are not in the room and to show hallucinated images parading as in a phantasmagoria: mysterious tragedies, perhaps, that happened in the house. Similarly, tales by H. P. Lovecraft have characters going back and forth in time, and allow the past to be modified. In "The Outsider" (1926), for instance, after a nightmare experience, the narrator sees a ghoulish apparition: stretching out his hand to touch it, he is freed, riding "with the ghouls on the night-wind," playing among the catacombs, pacified in his alienation from his times. But in the conclusion of the tale, he recognizes that when he stretched his fingers to "the abomination within that great gilded frame," he had touched "*a cold and unyielding surface of polished glass*": a loathsome mirror of some mysterious kind. The mechanics seem reversed, but the fictional concept is that of previous examples.

The two most inspired, prominent, and true 'heirs' of such fictional motifs and situations are, in another linguistic area (Latin-American/

Argentine), Bioy Casares and Borges, both great admirers of these writers, and, in a mixed, Russian-Anglo-American, linguistic area, Nabokov. I am not suggesting ‘sources’, of course, but literary *analogues*.

Casares qualifies immediately in our group with his statement “I would like to go inside a three-way mirror, where the images would repeat themselves clearly,” and his early story “The Postcard Lovers,” where a young man inserts his image into the photograph of the girl he loves. In his masterpiece, *La invención de Morel*, artificial figures, human *replicas* and reproductions *created by man* are central to the story. Everything turns on duplication (*geminatio*, in Latin, duly quoted) and reflections. Harassed and bewildered by strange presences on a desert island, unseen and unnoticed by them, the narrator sees “the same room duplicated eight times in eight directions as if it were reflected in mirrors.” Then the mystery unfolds. With a Faustian urge, Morel (a nod to H. G. Wells’s mad scientist in *The Island of Dr. Moreau*) has invented a gigantic machine or camera that can ‘receive’ (capture), record – ‘take’ or ‘shoot’, *tomar*, but also *grabar*, may be better words – and three-dimensionally project images of objects and above all of persons, who are thereby eternized in the postures, attitudes, and behavior of their ‘take’, and who can be reproduced *ad infinitum* for the period of the ‘take’ or while the camera ‘projects’. *While it lasts*, as Beerbohm (greatly admired by Casares and Borges, who included his story “Enoch Soames” in their *Antología*), had envisaged for the images ‘irradiated’ by his convex mirror.

In *Morel* – whose plot and super-imposition of various other motifs are much more complex – the creation of such images or ‘reconstituted persons’, however, brings about the unforeseen, often gruesome death of the living persons, models or ‘transmitters’ (*emisores*, as Bioy Casares calls them). When ‘eternized’ as images, simulacra, or ‘doubles’, they must give up life; or rather, life is snatched away from them by the process involved in creating artificial images. Morel aims at a retention (*retención*) of figures taking form in mirrors: they are admittedly images extracted (*extraídas*) from mirrors, though in this case “no witness will recognize that they are images.” They are rather “reconstructed persons, who disappeared if I [Morel] cut off the projector” – ‘living’ or *moving pictures* resembling those of *The Mirror of the Past*, except that they are three-dimensional, have

olfactory, thermal, tactile, sound, and other sensations, a consciousness, and possibly even a soul. I notice, in passing, that Morel refers to the “influence of the future on the past,” to the “motion pictures” of his day (the term began to be used for films in 1899), and suggests prophetically that one might be tempted to take amorous or porno selfies. The narrator himself will inherit the wish to become one of those images, and in the end he moves into their realm, experiencing a gradual disappearance and extinction of his living body.

Borges was erratic, idiosyncratic, and fragmentary in his writing, but he was an aficionado, spectacularly infatuated with mirrors (as well as with labyrinths and shadows), obsessively attracted by duplications, doubles, *Doppelgänger* and *alter egos*, equally fascinated by the infinite regression(s) of time and its possible, contradictory configurations or dimensions. The two sides merged and coincided. In his exemplary story “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” (1940, included in the *Antología de la literatura fantástica*), based, as he wrote, on “the idea of reality transformed by a book, a book that transforms all the reality and transforms the past,” the play of mirrors is present at the start: “I owe the discovery of Uqbar to the conjunction of a mirror and an encyclopaedia. The mirror troubled the depths of a corridor in a country house. ... the encyclopaedia is fallaciously called *The Anglo-American Cyclopaedia*. ... From the remote depths of the corridor, the mirror spied upon us. We discovered ... that mirrors have something monstrous about them. ... mirrors and copulation are abominable, because they increase the number of men.” (This half-joke attributed to Bioy Casares was repeated elsewhere; later in the tale this idea seems to be found in the *Cyclopaedia*, or could be attributed to Uqbar himself). At the end of section II, “The methodical fabrication of *brönir* ... has performed prodigious services. ... It has made possible the interrogation and even the modification of the past, which is now no less plastic and docile than the future.” Obvious coincidences, again, with what we pointed out above, all the more so as these ‘secondary objects’, or *brönir*, are reproduced by deriving one from the other in a periodic process. Duplicated things, however, tend to be cancelled. In the *Postscript 1947* – a whirlwind of mystification – we have “the revision of an illusory world” where reality must give way or recede. As for the second thread of our topic, “a fictitious past occupies in

our memories the place of another, a past of which we know nothing with certainty – not even that it is false.”

A few more references: in *Historia universal de la infamia* we are told that by looking into the circular mirror built of divers metals by Soliman, one could see the faces of one’s fathers and sons; in *El Aleph*, that “the Lord’s image, in Caesarea, was supplanted by a mirror”; a fanciful dissertation on mirrors follows. In *Otras inquisiciones* Borges quotes the crystal eye that for H. G. Wells reflected what happened on Mars, and in the section called “The Mirror of Enigmas” he elaborates on the *per speculum in aenigmate* theme. In *El hacedor* (The Maker) we have a section on “Los espejos velados” (Veiled Mirrors). Elsewhere he clinches the idea that we see every thing reversed. In one of the poems of the collection *El otro, el mismo*, of his other cherished American writer, E. A. Poe, Borges claims that “Como del otro lado del espejo / Se entregó solitario a su complejo / Destino de inventor de pesadillas”; the other side of the mirror generates nightmares. In “Edipo y el enigma,” Oedipus deciphers/confronts in a mirror the reflection of his decadence and his destiny. In *El hacedor* we have another duality/identity, “Borges y yo”; in the poem “Al espejo” he wonders about its reflection: a mysterious brother, “another I,” is after him – a horror or a sorcery that dares multiply things, and will continue to do so after his death. In “El espejo” he confesses that as a child he thought “Que el silencioso tiempo del espejo / Se desviara del curso cotidiano / De las horas / ... / Yo temo ahora que el espejo encierne [hides] / El verdadero rostro de mi alma.”

On the question of time: one of Borges’ tales is called “New Confutation of Time.” “Quiero saber de quién es mi pasado” – whose past will mine be? – he asks in the poem with the Shakespearian title “All Our Yesterdays.” In “Nota para un cuento fantástico” he toys with the idea of discovering “the art of undoing the web [*destejer*] of time or, as Peter Damian says, modifying the past.” Borges is ever like this. He knows, of course, of James’s *The Sense of the Past*, as a variation of H. G. Wells’s *The Time Machine*, and of the related question of entering a picture. All his work ‘thematizes’ the two, consubstantial, motifs of reflecting mirrors and time – an endless hesitation on the threshold of the real.

In Nabokov, these themes are a mode of being, the world of mirrors and reflections substitutes for, and takes the place of, reality. His fiction

is a piling-up, a phantasmagoria, a triumph of mirrors of all kinds – in every form, function, and possible complications. They become a key element for a vision and a representation of the world and humankind in a reflected, slanted, oblique, curved, crooked, fragmentary, spiraling, distorted, and distorting way, such as is manifested and indeed determined by all reflecting surfaces. This is his true reality and narrative method. A *natura altera*, filtered by screens, constantly inviting to plunge in, to go the other side, a reflected, multiplied, and fleeting reality in every sense, an artificial, parallel realm of images, ultimately, that in importance, presence and attraction pushes aside and substitutes for our common, lived-in, reality. Reality lies between, inside, or behind the picture, glass, reflection, projection, the inverted, trumped, deceitful representation of worlds which finally or in essence are alternative worlds.

Here, too, quotations might be endless. Portraits, first. In the passage from the autobiography already quoted, for instance: “I imagined the motion of climbing into the picture above my bed and plunging into that enchanted beechwood – which I did visit in due time”; there he finds “the highest enjoyment of timelessness.” In an episode of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941, Nabokov’s first American novel), the portrait of the elusive writer is minutely described: “eyes and the face itself are painted in such a manner as to convey the impression that they are mirrored Narcissus-like in clear water”; “Thus Sebastian peers into a pool at himself”; “the likeness is excellent . . . But the face is only a chance reflection.” It provides another instance of the transition from uncanny portrait to mirror: the mirror *interferes* with the way in which the portrait itself is painted, and the suggestion is clearly made that only ‘chance reflections’ lead to facts and views of life.

In *Pale Fire* (1962, half a verse poem, half a highly unreliable “Commentary”), the beginning of the poem reads: “I was the shadow of the waxwing slain / By the false azure in the window pane,” and we are warned that true life is “*that* life, the life of the picture,” i.e. a photography of the author; also, that “it is the underside of the weave that entrances the beholder and only begetter” (another obvious reference to Shakespeare). As for the overwhelming presence of oblique, slanted, deviating or deforming mirrors, reflections, and visions: in *The Eye* (*Soglyadatay*, a *nouvelle* of 1930),

the Preface tells us that Smurov, the protagonist, exists only because he is reflected by other people's brains; the same is true of the author, whose investigation brings him "through a hell of mirrors and ends in the merging of twin images" – a perfect description of Nabokov's own fictions, just like the process of seeing "in a strip of mirror through a door ajar." The people, too, are not alive but only "chance mirrors for Smurov," and their movements can be accelerated or delayed. The insistence can be even fastidious.

"Their former, entire existence has been merely a shimmer on the screen": this is where true and fictional reality is enacted and evolves, where it must be sought and captured; there, or in mirages (a word connected with mirrors), which present occasional, inverted, upside-down sights and visions. Well aware of all this, Nabokov coins the word 'mirorage' in *Despair* (*Otchayanie*, 1934, in English 1965), the whole story of which is played round the idea of mirrors: the protagonist is surrounded by mirrors and by doubles reflected in mirrors. The 'double' he will end by killing, he confesses, does not really exist, he is "*a product of my imagination, which bankered after reflections, repetitions, masks*" (my italics). Another passage about "that curved mirror in which a self-complacent professor of physics recedes, getting ever smaller and smaller" reminds us of Beerbohm. All these mirrors *distort* and *create*, while reflecting, reality.

After its "prototype", or "first throb", *The Enchanter* (*Volshebnik*, a *nouvelle* of 1939, translated and published posthumously in 1986), reflections multiply abnormally and become the leading motif in *Lolita* (1955), starting from the first sight of the nymphet, whose reflection in the mirror "is more alluring" than the sleeping girl, to the crucial and ultimate *mise en abyme* of the theme in the room of the Enchanted Hunters hotel: "There was a double bed, a mirror, a double bed in the mirror, a closet door with a mirror, a bathroom door ditto, a blue-dark window, a reflected bed there, the same in the closet mirror"; one on top of the other, endlessly. In *Pale Fire* (1962) there is a chapter entitled "Mirrors," and of course, "As befits mirrors, everything is seen in reverse, or backwards, or as an anagram of something else." We end with the ephemeral *Transparent Things* (1972) of his last semi- or falsely autobiographical book, "through which the past shines."

Visions of and in mirrors, windows, panels, wardrobe and bathroom doors, recur, run one after another so insistently, that images merge and dissolve into one another: we achieve a *third view* or a multiplied vision (like someone in an elevator lined with mirrors who sees his image infinitely multiply and move away, with exhilaration and anguish. I had myself this disquieting experience). Even the cover of the paperback collection of Nabokov's *Stories* (2002) is a series of reflections as from a broken mirror, shimmering at us when we touch or open it. After the second sight in the past and the re-consideration of the future, these deceitful reflections are one with a totally assumed, ephemeral, inconsistent view of things. To end with one of Nabokov's irrepressible puns, we inherit "an exquisite simulacrum – the beauty of intangible property, unreal estate." Intangible, unreal, are the key words.

Postscript

I asked myself why, and I came up with this possible, tentative explanation. This way of looking at life and its social aspects not directly, but rather askance, indirectly, *reflected* in the realm of imagination, consciousness and subjectivity, depending not on recognizable views, but rather on imagined, constructed and autonomous 'looking glass' worlds, may be due to Nabokov's life-long émigré condition, his condition of exile, expatriation, and estrangement. The much more lenient case of Henry James (an expatriate of his own choosing) and those of other émigré writers of the period provide similarities and confirm such preferences and outcomes. (Beerbohm, too, was an expatriate in Rapallo between the two wars.)

These writers find themselves in strange milieus of which they do not master the *signs*; at a loss to recognize how alien societies function, they feel they may be working in a void (as James openly admitted in his unfinished Autobiography and in some letters, and Nabokov seems at times to imply). Hence a tendency to retreat into, or to rely heavily on, the inner realms of subjectivity, consciousness, and the mind, where outer behavior is *reflected* rather than confronted. (I make the connection advisedly: speculation and

reflection derive etymologically and semantically from *speculum* and its consequences. It seems that the procedures and workings of the mind are similar to those obtaining in the ‘catoptric universe’. James insisted in his Prefaces, and based most of his fiction, on his preference for the realm of the ‘second impression’; his business was “with the reverse of the picture,” as he wrote in “The Story in It.” He privileged the *indirect* approach, the subjective adventure, and chose to tell his stories from the limited point of view of onlookers and ‘intelligent observers’. Nabokov was drawn to rely and set most of his value on reflected and refracted views. For both, the artist was to be primarily a *maker*, a *creator* of autonomous, independent worlds.

Questions of identity also arise, escape or defense mechanisms are set in motion. Time shifts and dislocations in space are possibly pursued, consciously or unconsciously, to escape from, or express the deeper sense of a personal dislocation. As Nabokov wrote of Gogol, “The gaps and black holes in the texture of [his] style imply flaws in the texture of life itself.” Expatriate writers tend also to be cosmopolitan and experimental, and to be unsure of their achievements, even when publicly recognized. Hence, in James as in Nabokov, the urge to re-write and revise their earlier texts – witness the New York Edition of the former’s novels and tales, whose original flavor is often jeopardized by the revisions, and the latter’s constant changes, excisions and additions when translating his works from one language to another.

Uncanny portraits, distorted and distorting mirror images, *pace* Nabokov’s own disclaimers, may be construed as ways to express deeper truths of unease and unsettlement, to overcome a possible inadequacy to face surrounding and not fully recognizable worlds, and as a preference for parallel or alternative worlds. These could be adopted as mediating devices, or as guiding principles, in the creation of fictions which are meant to grow and develop independently of ‘real life’. In the case of Nabokov, his unease was geographical, social, emotional and political in relation to totalitarian Soviet Russia. For the first half of his career he wrote in Russian in countries where the language was not known and only for émigrés like himself – a weird situation. In *Speak, Memory* he writes almost dejectedly of “those years of exile ... [among] spectral Germans and Frenchmen in whose more

or less illusory cities we, émigrés, happened to dwell” – characters “as flat and transparent as figures cut out of cellophane ... no real communication ... existed between us and them.” Exiles would keep to themselves, and their books could not circulate in the Soviet Union.

For the other half of his career he had to give up his native language, and adopt a foreign one (though he had begun to read in English as a child). To some extent, both languages may then have worked or appeared as substitute, ‘abstract’, and artificial tongues (we are all aware of the idiosyncrasies of Nabokov’s English). In “On a Book entitled *Lolita*” (1956) he averred that “My private tragedy ... is that I had to abandon my natural idiom, my untrammelled, rich, and infinitely docile Russian tongue for a second-rate brand of English, devoid of any of those apparatuses – the baffling mirror, the black velvet backdrop, the implied associations and traditions – which the native illusionist, frac-tails flying, can magically use to transcend the heritage in his own way.” In England, as well as in America, James felt much the same (“To be so disconnected for the time, and in the most insidious manner, was above all what I had come out for,” he wrote in his Autobiography), though admittedly he had no such linguistic problem: he had moved to England rather than to France precisely to be where his native tongue was spoken. Yet there is consensus that he was writing half-way between English and American, with a peculiarly abstract ring to it.

Other expatriates such as Joseph Conrad preferred projecting their expatriation into grand adventure stories; and I always wondered how close Turgenev was – or wasn’t – to James’s situation. Without over-emphasizing the point, Nabokov’s obsession with portraits and mirror images finds a possible justification, explanation, and motivation in these brief critical conjectures and observations. Throughout his life and in his whole career he spoke for the need to subject reality and social aspects to the overriding dictates of a totally autonomous construction of artificial and subjective worlds and views, for which portraits and mirror images did provide (I shall use my own oxymoron) a vast, insistent, and deceitful ‘reflective correlative’.

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