

Mirror, Glass, Ice

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for Isobel Armstrong

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‘Down at the far end of the hallway, the mirror hovered, shadowing us. We discovered (very late at night such a discovery is inevitable) that there is something monstrous about mirrors. That was when Bioy remembered a saying by one of the heresiarchs of Uqbar: *Mirrors and copulation are abominable, for they multiply the number of mankind.*’

In Borges’ story, ‘Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius’, this memorable epigram turns out to be from the article on Uqbar strangely missing from his borrowed copy of the *Anglo-American Cyclopaedia*. Invisible third world. Next day his friend calls from Buenos Aires and reads from his copy, not quite as he had remembered it: ‘*For one of those gnostics, the visible universe was an illusion or, more precisely, a sophism. Mirrors and fatherhood are hateful because they multiply and proclaim it.*’

An imaginary land that became real, like psychoanalysis itself, a theatre of dreams where mirrors and fatherhood are hateful: De Quincey’s mirrors turned into negative hallucination, the horror of reproduction, the labyrinth: Nilotic mud, sinking into catoph-tro-phobia, fear of mirrors, and spectrophobia, fear of looking in the mirror, to fear of finding yourself not there, Dracula, and soon to Scruton’s abject photographobia. Fear of the everyday, the real, the ordinary, people, the human, anthropo-phobia. In the face of proliferation, generation, *reproduction*, the work of art. Mechanical. The aura. The aesthetic.

‘Dazzling’, ‘sparkled’, ‘glittered’, ‘blazoned’, ‘glowed’: before he, sparky Lance-a-lot flashes into the crystal mirror, cracks it from side to side. Crack.

Smack. Junk. Freedom's curse, to break the aesthetic bubble wrap. 'A gleaming shape she floated by, death pale... Till her blood was frozen slowly / And her eyes were darkened wholly Her glassy countenance'. Lustrous.

You fascinate: caught cowering in cold caves of ice. Frozen fierce, hard, unyielding, brittle, silent until the ice creaks, cracks, asphyxiating huge frozen-in ships. Iced in, icing, break the ice. The Ice House. 'A sea of glass like unto crystal', rippled, wrinkled. Crystal set. Fast freeze.

Frog-like one way, invisible when face on. Transparent green: why is glass green sideways, and ice not? Too much oxygen, too many bubbles! Puff, pare them away: two metres down deep into the glacier's crevice, and all the red photons are dead. At last: blue ice.

Free, float. Float glass. Plate glass, smashed. Sharp shards. An unlucky break. Snookered. Ground down. Fragile yet hard to touch, invisible yet green, sharp yet smooth, you, glass, are nothing but oxymorons. A material that is invisible like the spirit: 'and the city was pure gold, like unto clear glass'. The unseen boundary between inside and outside, yet always letting the alterity of the other side, the exotic, in, the inside out. Escape! Bank tellers, the post office, prison visiting rooms, windows he stared through, numbed with hunger, at the cold featureless Bavarian winter, brightly-lit shop windows, windows in trains but not planes where you could not take the pressure, you hold us apart. The safety glass of apartheid. Sometimes she sees through you, to the fields of barley beyond. Sometimes she sees only herself in the bevelled blue mirror and what lies unseen behind, beneath. You show what is there, one way or the other, reversed or straight on. And keep it on ice.

Your elusive strength is the stronger for its invisibility. You became the companion of iron at the very moment when skin became neutral toned, or the dark other. The fantastic fairyland, wonder land, the Crystal Palace, for the Ice Queen. Spectacle. Make an exhibition of yourself. All those English windows with no shutters, no bars, testimony to law and order, to the absence of flying bricks. The glass house. Throw a stone. It's dark—have a glass. Take glass.

Glass: English transparency. Whiteness as invisibility, and the invisible rules of rich white men, their universal frame for the other: 'In life, [he] was

afflicted with unreality, as so many Englishmen are; in death, he was not even the ghost he was in life'. Not even then could he break the ice. Ghostly solitude,

His tears became frozen diamonds, pearls, blood rubies, as that notable nose knocked the frozen Kashmiri earth. Namaz. Not quite white. He cut no ice. The sea of glass, ground green, glazing, mirroring the sky. 'Translucent lakes, shining like mirrors'.

Glaucous. Glass is, as Roland Barthes might have glossed it, nothing more or less than language itself. Sometimes hardly there at all, pure reference, the realist novel a window onto the world. Why did Barthes turn it into a window, splitting the sign just to get to the signified? 'For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face'...

With Lenin, Lukács: art becomes reflection, mimicry. It is all about representing, translating the real into its illusory quicksilvered labyrinthine, totalising depths. 'The fleeting images that fill / The mirror of the mind' of a Cowper. Or for Smacherey, a broken mirror, absent centre, transparent ideology.

So what if the glass that we are looking through is really a TV or computer screen, so that what we are really seeing is a back projection onto it? What if we are not seeing through the glass at all but seeing a reproduction? And the mirror image only a surface reflection, with only virtual depth: seduction. This shifts the relation of literal to metaphorical, takes us with Alice through the looking glass—where everything becomes reversed, deserver. Perverse palindrome. Everyone lives their lives backwards in the mirror stage, as mirror writing. 'The dark symbolic mirror reflecting to the daylight what else must be hidden for ever'.

At other times, like language, glass becomes the very thing itself, the object of aesthetic contemplation and desire, blown into its shot silk glancing rainbow colours, stretching and contorting into its ambiguous furnaced forms, playing for its own sake, the crystal cabinet of aestheticism.

Glass. What do we make of the fact that with glass the invisible is also visible, that language is both reference and materiality? Which is also, as it happens, the fundamental question of physics since Newton's *Optics*. Why when particles hit a sheet of glass, do some of them go through it (so that

you see what is behind) and some of them bounce back (reflecting your own image)? Still no one knows, no one has got much further than Sir Isaac. Though it is now the unresolved dichotomy of classical and quantum physics, the two incompatible systems through which our world functions.

Why should language be any different? It is not, as de Man thought, that language does not function like the material world: the problem is rather that it does. Which makes quite a difference, Paul, to say the least. That means, though, that the aesthetic works like that too. It is both of, and not of, the world, linguistic teleportation existing in a state of crepuscular quantum entanglement. It can hardly escape Einstein's 'spooky action at a distance'. It's spooked. Isomorphic.

Revered, admired, dear Isobel, 'clear... in the translucent fane / Of your still spirit': enmooned. 'The intuitive decision of a bright / And thorough-edged intellect': you knew how Alfred perpetually challenged that always a bit too friendly Hallam and his differences between poetry of sensation and of reflection, a performative staging of their own relationship. You sensed Alfred's radical disquiet with Hallam's sexist discrimination between aesthetics and the real, just as Mariana could not play content wallowing in self-interest in the moated grange.

You saw, you showed us, how the Lady of Shallott created the original counter-aesthetic on her island: its sparkling glass, mirrors, resisting the divide between the inner world of aesthetics and the outer world of the real and substance. The mirror of reflection cracks. She crosses the lapsed boundary between them, doubtless in glass slippers, *pantoufles en vair*, and dies as she floats off on the mirroring water. Fur, green, glass. Creative mistranslation. Transgression. Thin ice.

Hallam's drowning became the marker of the Lady's crossing the bar, turning herself from object to agent as she slips from signified to signifier, across the gender bar that Tennyson had prefigured in his poem: guilt, guilty as the Kraken's corpse-like surface roar. Sickly light, but enough for you to catch St Simeon Stylites at it red-handed, in the originary moment of the academic aesthetic, enabling us to live our lives at the top of our towers in the convenient comfort of a self-affirming aesthetic distance: 'I was fixed for centuries at the summit, or in secret rooms; I was the idol; I was the priest'. Dialectic at a standstill. Narcissism, self-reflection, academia. Labyrinth of mirrors.

You saw, Isobel, that the aesthetic is not the separation of boundaries, but the crossing of them, the tracking of the political into the material, language into other living forms.

Not Narcissus then, but Echo. Ecco. Va bene cosi. Isabella, amore, grazie tanto. Ciao.

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