



What the 'Decadents' see in the Mirror: the Catoptric System in British fin-de-siècle Poetry

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What the "Decadents" See in the Mirror: the Catoptric System in British fin-de-siècle Poetry

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Never since the Elizabethan age had the mirror, both as image and theme, been so consistently resorted to as in the late Victorian period, more often referred to as the "decadent" era. It is not surprising that such a motif should have been so widely used in an age when notions like artificiality, the double, the search for the self and the quest for identity permeate literature and art in England and on the continent, as Huysman's *A Rebours*, Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray*, some of Moreau's or Klimt's paintings, illustrate. The purpose of this paper is to analyse the aesthetic function of the mirror and its variations in some figures of British "decadent" poetry.

Considered from an epistemological point of view, the mirror implies the correlated notions of reflection and vision and is particularly appropriate to reveal the twofold process of consciousness: the self's consciousness of its own being, to which the theme of identity is related, and the self's consciousness of the surrounding reality, congruent with the theme of knowledge.(1) The mirror helps to apprehend the intrinsic nature of the self and of the world which cannot be perceived directly by the operation of the senses, thus providing a link between the two planes of the sensible and the intelligible. Underlying this lies the idea of a dichotomy between appearance and reality, truth and illusion, the outside and the inside at the core of "decadent" thinking, as exposed by Symons in "The Decadent Movement in Literature", an essay published in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in November 1893:

Taking the word Decadence, then, as most precisely expressing the general sense of the newest movement in literature, we find that the terms Impressionism and Symbolism define correctly enough the two main branches of that movement... What both seek is not general truth merely, but la vérité vraie, the very essence of truth - the truth of appearances to the senses, of the visible world to the eyes that see it; and the truth of spiritual things to the spiritual vision. (2)

It follows that the mirror is used in "decadent" poetry more as a metamorphic tool and a medium of revelation through the reflection it offers than as an instrument of faithful reproduction implying a mimetic correspondence between copy and model.

The equivocal nature of the image reflected in the mirror is one of the focal points of Symon's "White Heliotrope", published in *London Nights* in 1895:

The mirror that has sucked your face
Into its secret deep of deeps,
And there mysteriously keeps
Forgotten memories of grace;

And you, half dressed and half awake,
Your slant eyes strangely watching me,
And I, who watch you drowsily
With eyes that, having slept not, ache. (3)

In its power of absorption rendered in the metaphor "has sucked your face", the mirror's original function of reduplication is transgressed and the abyss lying under its plain surface holds a simulacrum, an altered, distorted image. "White Heliotrope" also

suggests, with its repeated emphasis on depth, a parallel between the mysteriousness of the mirror and that of the self, thus underlining the typically "decadent" concern for the self's incapacity at grasping its own reality, forever escaping into the mystery of the mirror. Symons uses the mirror to reveal an alter ego. "The Opium-Smoker", the opening sonnet of *Days and Nights* published in 1889, provides an echo to this motif, although no mirror is explicitly mentioned:

I am engulfed, and drown deliciously.
 Soft music like a perfume, and sweet light
 Golden with audible odours exquisite,
 Swathe me with cerements for eternity.
 Time is no more. I pause and yet I flee.
 A million ages wrap me round with night.
 I drain a million ages of delight.
 I hold the future in my memory.
 Also I have this garret which I rent,
 This bed of straw, and this that was a chair,
 This worn-out body like a tattered tent,
 This crust, of which the rats have eaten part,
 The pipe of opium; rage, remorse, despair;
 This soul at pawn and this delirious heart.

The subject-matter is the report of an episode of drug-taking where the poem's real theme is the descent into the mazing depths of the self, as expressed in the images of the first lines, accompanied by the subject's divided consciousness and detached look at his own body.

A more complex catoptric device consists in introducing a second mirror the function of which is to create reflexive images. Ernest Dowson's "Flos Lunae", published in *Verses* (1896), offers one of the commonest variations on the image of the double mirror in that of lovers looking into each other's eyes:

I would not alter thy cold eyes;
 I would not change thee if I might,
 To whom my prayers for incense rise,
 Daughter of dreams! my moon of night!
 I would not alter thy cold eyes.

I would not alter thy cold eyes,
 With trouble of the human heart:
 Within their glance my spirit lies,
 A frozen thing, alone, apart;
 I would not alter thy cold eyes. (4)

Emblematic of Dowson's preoccupation with the theme of the double, the last two stanzas of the poem illustrate the complexity of the relation between the subject and his mistress. The metaphor "Daughter of dreams!" reveals that the latter is but a projection of the imagination of the former, like Symon's Celeste, mirroring back an unknown image of the self: "Within their glance my spirit lies." Gérard Genette's words on the image of Narcissus in French baroque poetry might define the revelation experienced by the subject of "Flos Lunae". "Le Moi se confirme, mais sous les espèces de l'Autre." (5) The revelatory function of the act of looking into the mirror-eyes of the beloved is then put to the fore, as is the wish to preserve the integrity of the image, manifest in the recurrence of "I would not alter thy cold eyes." The mirror effect between model and image is so fragile that the disappearance of the former would imply the destruction of the latter. The image of the eyes conceived as reflexive mirrors operates as a variation on Socrates' mirror of

identity and the narcissistic theme of self-knowledge revealed in the mirror permeates the literature of the "decadent" period. John Davidson's "Thirty Bob a Week," from *Ballads and Songs* (1984), a long narrative poem stripped of all hackneyed conceits of poetic diction and much admired by T.S. Eliot, "relates" the experience of a metaphorical trip in to the heart conceived as a tell-tale mirror:

And the god-almighty devil and the fool
That meet me in the High Street on the strike,
When I walk about my heart a-gathering wool,
Are my good and evil angels if you like.
And both of them together in every king of weather
Ride me like a double-seated bike.(6)

By looking into his heart, the subject is able to apprehend his own divided self. Similarly, Lionel Johnson's famous "The Dark Angel" (1893), is centred on a manichaeian feud between the two sides of the self, the darker one, opposed to the Paraclete and strangely fascinated by evil, and the more divine, attracted to purity. Johnson's poem heralds the "decadent" awareness of a fracture at the core of the ego.

One of the Ms. versions of Dowson's "Flos Lunae," dated 20 July 1891, is entitled "Claire: La Lune!" as a possible debt to Paul Verlaine with whose work Dowson was well acquainted. Symon's "Claire de Lune", published in *London Nights*, resorts to a pattern of imagery similar to that of Dowson's poem:

Eyes that are not mine to keep
In the mirror of my eyes,
Where I tremble lest from sleep
Other ghosts should re-arise;
Why enthrall me with your magic,
Haunting lips, triumphant eyes?

Besides the platonic conceit of the mirror-eye and the confronting of reflexive looks reminiscent of some of Donne's sonnets like "The Extasie," lies the more profound notion that the reflection (the eyes of the beloved mirrored in the eyes of the lover) has no fixity. The emphasis being on the transience of the image, what the mirror reveals is primarily uncertainty, instability and mutability's destructive power reflecting anxiety at the impermanence of things and the destructiveness of time. The notion of evanescence present in Symon's text is reinforced by the metaphorical association of silence and water in the fourth stanza:

For the silence of the night
Swims around me like a stream,
And your eyes have caught the light
Of a moon-enchanted dream...

Incidentally, the recurrence of images of unsteady water coupled with the mythological reference to Charon and his barge is noteworthy in Dowson's poetry. The mirror's function is then to offer an image of human instability and a picture of reality fading into a dream.

This leads to the analysis of the symmetrical mirrors of life and death exemplified in Yeats's short poem "The Two Trees," published in *The Rose* (1893). (7) The subject first urges his beloved to look into her mirror-heart which holds the eschatological revelation of the truth of life, as the biblical and cabbalistic symbol of the tree bears witness:

Beloved, gaze in thine own heart,

The holy tree is growing there;
 From joy the holy branches start,
 And all the trembling flowers they bear.

The heart acts as a Paulinian mirror. Conversely, the maleficent glass held by the demons reflects an image of death under the form of a return to original chaos:

Gaze no more in the bitter glass
 The demons, with their subtle guile,
 Lift up before us when they pass,
 Or only gaze a little while;
 For there a fatal image grows
 That the stormy night receives,
 Roots half hidden under snows,
 Broken boughs and blackened leaves.
 For all things turn to barrenness
 In the dim glass the demons hold,
 The glass of outer weariness,
 Made when God slept in times of old.

In this latter section of the poem, it seems that Yeats is indebted to medieval imagery which considered the mirror as one of the devil's instruments, as is the case in Hieronimus Bosch's famous painting *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. (8) The structure of "The Two Trees" lies on a dichotomy between the perfective and the progressive. The former stanza (the mirror of life) suggests the idea of a state of things:

The changing colours of its fruit
 Have dowered the stars with merry light;
 The surety of its hidden root
 Has planted quiet in the night;
 The shaking of its leafy head
 Has given the waves their melody...

whereas the notion of process is rendered in the latter stanza (the mirror of death) by verbs the semantic value of which implies the idea of change. The mirror held by the demons reflects the tragedy of life appearing as a continuum whose final point is death.

The apprehension of the vacuity of existence in the mirror, combined with a variation on the theme of the double, is at the core of Symon's "La Mélinite: Moulin Rouge," the fourth poem of "Décor de Théâtre" published in *London Nights*:

Alone, apart, one dancer watches
 Her mirrored, morbid grace;
 Before the mirror, face to face,
 Alone she watches
 Alone morbid, vague, ambiguous grace.

Before the mirror's dance of shadows
 She dances in a dream,
 And she and they together seem
 A dance of shadows,
 Alike the shadows of a dream.

The catoptric system is here more complex and also more revealing as the mirror reflects the morbid grace of La Mélinite and the frailty of a group of dancers situated outside her field of vision; in other words, the mirror acts as a "spy", to borrow Lucien Dällenbach's

word in *Le Récit Spéculaire*, (9) making visible what La Mélinite is unable to see directly. The technique used by Symons recalls that of Van Eyck in *The Marriage of Giovanni Arnolfini and Giovanna Cenami* although the couple, in the painting, are not looking at the mirror situated behind them. Like a painter, Symons superimposes reflections of La Mélinite and of an otherwise invisible reality the consistency of which has completely vanished. As a result, La Melinite is endowed with the same unsubstantiality as the image of the dancers reflected in the mirror, which then reveals that she exists primarily as a shadow and not as a being:

And, enigmatically smiling,
In the mysterious night,
She dances for her own delight,
A shadow smiling
Back to a shadow in the night.

From an aesthetic point of view, the mirror and the catoptric device impart a pictorial dimension to the poem which is representative of an *Ut Pictura Poesis* technique common to many "decadent" poets and particularly well illustrated in Dowson's "Saint Germain-en-Laye", first published in *The Savoy* for April 1896.

The structure of "Saint Germain-en-Laye" lies on a mirror effect between the demise of nature and the disembodiment of the lovers. The pictorial aspect is exemplified in the loose, disjointed syntax producing the impression that the poem is made up of a succession of touches:

O, the white,
Gaunt ghosts that flutter where thy feet have sped,
Across the terrace that is desolate,
And rang then with thy laughter: ghost of thee,
That holds its shroud up with most delicate
Dead fingers; and, behind, the ghost of me,
Tripping fantastic with a mouth that jeers
At roseal flowers of youth. (10)

The superimposition of the two corpses and the sardonic laugh of one of them reveal that each of the two protagonists' personality has disappeared. What is left is a mere bunch of bones. Dowson's "Saint Germain-en-Laye" emphasizes the gracility of the death dance and appears as a literary echo of the pictorial art of the *Vanitas*. The poet combines the theme of the double and that of the vanity of life in a composition borrowing much of its essence from miniatures and anamorphoses.

The propensity to associate poetry and painting, perhaps a legacy of Pre-Raphaelitism, is but one instance of a growing concern for aesthetic combinations and interest in the relationships between all forms of art clearly formulated by Symons in his "Preface" to *Plays, Acting and Music* (1903):

This book is intended to form part of a series, on which I have engaged for many years. I am gradually working my way towards the concrete expression of a theory, or system of aesthetics, of all the arts. (11)

This directly leads to the "decadent" approach of art conceived as a mirror. Symon's "In the Sanctuary at Saronno", published in *London Nights*, stages a couple of lovers admiring one of Bernardo Luini's four frescoes, probably *The Marriage of the Madonna*:

Has not Luini writ in fire
The secret of our own desire?

Your eyelids heavy with the sense
 Of some strange passionate suspense,
 And your mouth subtly hungering
 Who knows for what forbidden thing?
 Yea, and my longings that would pierce
 The obscure dividing universe,
 To die unto your heaven of love;
 Our passion, and the end thereof,
 Love even to the death of love.
 You were this martyr, I the saint
 For whom your aching eyelids faint
 In this pretence of chastity;
 The mystic spousal that shall be
 Betwixt your lord and you, divine
 And deathless, does but symbol mine;
 Bride of my ultimate desires,
 And equal flamelike with my fires!
 This did Luini once record,
 Unto the glory of the Lord,
 And for us chiefly, and for all,
 Upon the sanctuary wall.

Although no mirror is mentioned, we understand that it is the painting which acts as such, with the dubious modesty of the Virgin appropriately miming the situation of the spectators. What the subject sees is desire tainted with sin and pretence akin to corruption in the demure eyes of Mary who is then supposed to be acting, whereas in the fresco, the three main characters, Mary, God and Joseph are merely looking at the ring the Virgin is holding. We may then conclude that the subject re-interprets Luini's painting in the light of his own fantasies projected on to the work of art which then mirrors them back to him. Hence the sense of immediacy between the painting and the situation of the couple admiring it. Such egotistical approach of art is not limited to Symons; recent analyses of Pater's famous commentary on Leonardo's *La Gioconda* in *The Renaissance* have shown, besides the influences of Michelet and Gautier, the egotistical nature of Pater's text operating as a medium revealing its author's phantasms. (12) Wilde's paradoxical aesthetic pronouncement according to which "it is the spectator and not life, that art really mirrors" may be one of the keys to the understanding of "decadent" conceptions of art.

Another form of art, the stage, and the dance more particularly, is also a means for the "Decadents" to reverse the traditional mimetic relation between reality and make-believe. In "Ballet, Pantomime, and Poetic Drama", an essay which appeared in *The Dome* for October 1898, Symons eulogizes the dance as an art holding the mirror up to nature: "From the first it has mimed the instincts... It is more that a beautified reflection, it has in it life itself, as it shadows life... The dance, then, is art because it is doubly nature." (13) Therefore it is hardly surprising that the poet should use the mirror in the context of the world of the stage as in "At the Gavour", published in *Silhouettes* (1892):

Wine, the red coals, the flaring gas,
 Bring out a brighter tone in cheeks
 That learn at home before the glass
 The flush that eloquently speaks.

The mirror allows the two worlds of the natural, the girl looking at herself, and of the artificial, "the flush that eloquently speaks", to encroach upon each other. Such mingling between nature and make-believe is one of Symon's main concerns, as evidenced in "At the Foresters", from his "Décor de Théâtre". In this poem, the subject metaphorically

steps into the mirror and stands on the other side of the looking-glass, observing the mechanisms of the artificial world of the stage from behind the scenes:

The shadows of the gaslit wings
Come softly crawling down our way,
Before the curtain some one sings,
The music sounds from far away:
I stand beside you in the wings.

Seen from there, the real appears as a mirror of artifice and the reflection of an illusion:

Divinely rosy rouged, your face
Smiles, with its painted little mouth,
Half tearfully, a quaint grimace;
The charm and pathos of your youth
Mock the mock roses of your face.

The relationship between reality and artifice becomes reversible, each of the two being the other's symmetrical double. If the stage mirrors life by imitating it, life in return, by mirroring artifice, is nothing but a dream:

Life dreams itself: the world goes on,
Oblivious, in oblivion;
Life dreams itself, content to keep
Happy immortally, in sleep

writes Symons in "Alla Zattera", published in *London Nights*. The motif resurfaces in many a text of the "decadent" period, including Yeats's play *The Land of Heart's Desire* (1984):

For life moves out of a red flame of dreams
Into a comon light of common hours
Until old age bring the old flame again.

In "Awakening", a manuscript poem dated May 1888 (14), Dowson resorts to a similar pattern of imagery in his metaphorical account of existence conceived as illusion, deception of the eye, "trompe l'oeil":

We have dreamt but now they are long over,
Dreams of a life the other side of death;
Drop down the curtain on the play completed,
The farce of life is finished with the breath.

The metaphor of life as a stage permeates fin-de-siècle literature, and in his symbolic definition of life as a mask, "Life is a mask that changes/A fig for constancy!" ("To his mistress", published in *Decorations*, 1889), Dowson posits that the meaning of existence remains mysterious. The image of the stage as a mirror and the reversal of the mimetic relation between reality and illusion it allows are conducive to an apprehension of the enigmatic nature of life as exemplified in Symon's "Prologue" to *London Nights*:

My life is like a music-hall,
Where, in the impotence of rage,
Chained by enchantment to my stall,
I see myself upon the stage
Dance to amuse a music-hall.

'Tis I that smoke this cigarette,
Lounge here, and laugh for vacancy,
And watch the dancers turn; and yet
It is my very self I see
Across the cloudy cigarette.

My very self that turns and trips,
Painted, pathetically gay,
An empty song upon the lips
In make-believe of holiday:
I, I, this thing that turns and trips!

The stage is a tragic mirror questioning the essence and meaning of existence.

The extensive use of the mirror in poems where life is apprehended as a dream and the self as an insubstantial image, the importance of catoptric systems and the recurrence of specular imagery, all conducive to a reappraisal of the relationship between illusion and reality, artifice and nature, may be viewed as baroque reminiscences. Yet what the mirror and its multiple variations also strongly emphasize is the pre-eminence of the self in "decadent" poetry. Although they do not betray any common doctrine, these poems are all centred on the discovery of the self and illustrate the highly lyrical dimension of fin-de-siècle literature which Yeats was later to acknowledge: "The period from the death of Tennyson until the present moment has, it seems, more good lyric poets than any similar period since the seventeenth century". (15) Lyricism implies vision, but the "decadent" mirror reveals aesthetic images which fail to convey ontological certainties. Indeed, what Symon's or Dowson's poems suggest, behind the artificiality of subject-matter and form, is that the images revealed are both traumatic and evanescent: no sooner have they been captured than they disappear again in the depth of the mirror. Thus, the sense of failure which emerges from these texts is particularly intense. Nevertheless, the "Decadents" expressed life at its intense moments. Faithful to Pater's aesthetic teaching, they gave voice to the transient, visionary moments - be they tragic - which experience afforded them.

NOTES

- (1) This point is explained by Marie-Madeleine Martinet in *Le Miroir de l'Esprit dans le Théâtre Elisabéthain* (Paris: Didier Erudition, 1981), p.14.
- (2) Quoted in Eric Warner and Graham Hough eds., *Strangeness and Beauty: An Anthology of Aesthetic Criticism 1840-1900* (C.U.P., 1983), vol. 2, p. 237.
- (3) All quotations from Symon's poetry are taken from Arthur Symons, *Poems* (London: W. Heinemann, 1912), 4th impression of the 1901 edition.
- (4) This poem was first printed in the *Century Guild Hobby Horse*, vol.VI, 1891. All quotations from Dowson's poetry are taken from Desmond Flower ed., *The Poetical Works of Ernest Dowson* (London: Cassel and Co., 1934).
- (5) Gérard Genette, *Figures 1* (Paris: Seuil, 1965), p. 22.
- (6) Quoted in Derek Stanford, *Poets of the 'Nineties: A Biographical Anthology* (London: John Baker, 1965), p. 133.
- (7) The version quoted here is that appearing in *The Poems of W.B. Yeats* (London: Macmillan, 1949).
- (8) See Jurgis Baltrusaitis, *Le Miroir* (Paris: Elmayan, Seuil, 1978), p. 193.

- (9) Lucien Dällenbach, *Le Récit Spéculaire* (Paris: Seuil, 1977), p. 21.
- (10) The poem later appeared in *Decorations* (1899) with major alterations in punctuation leading to different interpretations.
- (11) Quoted in Eric Warner and Graham Hough eds., *Strangeness and Beauty*, vol. 2, p. 259.
- (12) See Jean-Pierre Guillermin, *Les Peintures Invisibles* (Lille: Presses Universitaires de Lille, 1977), pp. 674-771.
- (13) Quoted in Eric Warner and Graham Hough eds., *Strangeness and Beauty*, vol. 2, p. 260.
- (14) This poem was first published in Desmond Flower ed., *The Poetical Works of Ernest Dowson*.
- (15) W.B. Yeats, "Modern Poetry", *The Listener* (14 Oct. 1936).