



FATHOM

a French e-journal of Thomas Hardy studies

6 | 2019

Objects in Hardy and Conrad

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/fathom/1204>

DOI: 10.4000/fathom.1204

ISSN: 2270-6798

Publisher

Association française sur les études sur Thomas Hardy

Electronic reference

Isabelle Gadoin, « 'Looking into Glass': Moments of Unvision in the Poetry of Thomas Hardy », *FATHOM* [Online], 6 | 2019, Online since 01 October 2019, connection on 14 October 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/fathom/1204> ; DOI : 10.4000/fathom.1204

This text was automatically generated on 14 October 2019.

'Looking into Glass': Moments of Unvision in the Poetry of Thomas Hardy

« Dans le miroir » : le vu et l'invu dans la poésie de Thomas Hardy

Isabelle Gadoin

- 1 In her landmark study *Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination (1830-1880)*, Isobel Armstrong uncovers the perceptual, epistemological and even ontological transformations brought about by the extensive use of industrially-produced glass in the nineteenth century. This was, she notes, "the century of public glass" (Armstrong 1), and the apt symbol for the omnipresence and centrality of this new medium was the glass fountain at the centre of the Crystal Palace housing the Great Exhibition in 1851 – an event which could also be understood as the triumph of an ideal of universal visibility, putting virtually the whole world in the form of objects before the eyes of bedazzled spectators. But Armstrong also underlines the fundamental ambiguity of glass, an "ethereal substance" whose very materiality is denied by its defining quality, transparency: "Transparency is something that eliminates itself in the process of vision" (5, 11). Interposed between the spectator and the object, glass both allows sight and forbids physical contact: "glass is an antithetical material. It holds within itself contrary states as barrier and medium" (11).
- 2 Thomas Hardy shared his century's fascination with glass, and his novels often dramatise personal relationships as conflicts of gazes through optical devices like lenses, telescopes, microscopes distorting images, or even windows treacherously deflecting them. In his poems, on the other hand, the drama of the gaze is often linked to the experience of looking at oneself in a mirror. Yet the *looking* glass offers even more of a paradox than transparent plate glass, as Isobel Armstrong also pointed: it seems to send back a perfect reflection of the subject looking into it, but this is only a deceptive likeness of the person, a projection that reverses the left-right sides¹ and appears to falsely "materialize" the most intangible and indefinable features that make a human being a "person". Mirrors, Armstrong beautifully writes, "produce deceptive

palimpsest images: in glass, forward-moving figures come from the opposite direction of their originals; the helix reverses in the mirror, a phenomenon Lewis Carroll made axiomatic to *Through the Looking Glass*. Glass looks. Surfaces become alive with images and traces of images, losing their trustworthy solidity. The observer is accompanied continuously by a secondary world of figment" (Armstrong 8). The popular proverb holds that "the mirror cannot lie", but Hardy knew better...

- 3 Even if the rural world, and the fictional county of Wessex, were still relatively preserved from the invasion of glass in the form of shop-windows or glass monuments, Gabriel Oak's condemnation of Bathsheba's mirror as an instrument of vanity at the beginning of *Far from the Madding Crowd* betrays a rather diffident, if not downright hostile attitude to glass, reflections, and superficial lustre. The speakers in Hardy's poems do not entirely dismiss the experience of the encounter in a mirror, contrary to Oak; but the experience reverberates, reflects upon themselves, and serves to question the solidity, tangibility and objectivity of the *self*, in an almost metaphysical way. Indeed, in these poems, mirrors never quite offer the perfect picture of truth one would expect them to. They often seem to show either too much or not enough, so that the experience of "looking into the glass" becomes a strangely counter-intuitive and troubling one. Instead of providing a moment of ontological discovery, with the confirmation of personal identity, the confrontation of the beholder with his/her own image is nearly always a failed encounter, a moment of radical non-recognition which replaces the expected moment of self-understanding with the sudden awareness of the "self-unseeing", to take up the title of a poem from the collection *Poems of the Past and the Present*² (Hardy 166).
- 4 For Lacan, the "mirror stage" is a fundamental step in the child's development: the moment when he starts recognising his own body image in the mirror, and forming a mental notion of his unified self. But Lacan himself progressively completed this initial schema, adding that this fundamental moment of self-identification also operates thanks to the Other –the adult who stands by his side and points to the image in the glass, calling the child by his name. In truth, it is first of all this *other* that the child recognises; which means that otherness – or intersubjectivity – unexpectedly becomes one of the founding sources of self-definition. Moreover, what this later and fuller analysis adds to Lacan's initial understanding of the mirror-stage is the mediation of language, with the parent calling the child by his name. Now, as a poet, Hardy shows an amazing prescience of this "primordial discordance" (Lacan 96): in his "mirror" poems, the speaker only experiences a form of alienation, when failing to reconcile himself with his own distorted, fleeting, evanescent image in the mirror. The mirror becomes the agent of revelation of this inner split, as well as of the distance between past, present and future selves. The moment of the gaze becomes a meditation on time, but also on what escapes one's capacities of perception, and on the puzzling intertwining of the visible and the invisible in human experience. This is all the more frightening as many other objects may also happen to work as mirrors, like windows, polished materials, or even natural surfaces reflecting the gaze, like bodies of still water. In the latter case, the contemplation of one's reflection on a watery mirror naturally recalls Narcissus's fascination and plight. But the Hardyan variant of the myth in fact stages a strongly anti-narcissistic experience, yielding not the sense of beauty and enthrallment, but that of illusion and spectrality. In Hardy's world, the mirror is finally less an object

in itself than a medium: an instrument of revelation, or rather a surface of refraction sending man back to the unsolvable mystery of his condition.

1. The looking glass: revealer or deceiver?

- 5 In the history of painting, mirrors have often been instruments for the apprehension of the self. Because painters used to look at themselves in mirrors when painting self-portraits, they often pictured them within their canvases as a way of hinting at this work of self-observation and self-analysis: the mirror then stood as the material instrument of visual discovery, the metaphor for self-portraiture, and the signifier of the meta-pictorial dimension of self-portraits at one and the same time. In Van Eyck's famous double portrait of the Arnolfini couple (1438, London, National Gallery), the convex mirror in the background includes a miniature image of the painter within the painted scene, an arrangement which Velázquez also made use of in his *Meninas* (1656, Madrid, Museo del Prado); only this time it is the royal couple looking at the canvas who is projected into the scene – a *mise en abyme* of the canvas's spectators again taken up by Manet, in his *Bar aux Folies Bergères* (1882, London, Courtauld Gallery), where the glass behind the waitress reflects subjects external to the painting. This favourite alliance of the mirror and the portrait, highlighted in Johannes Gump's triple self-portrait conjoining the figure of the artist, the canvas and the mirror (1646, Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi) remained a central topos of painting up to the many examples of Picasso's mischievous play on the painter and his model(s). Inside-outside, objective-subjective, the looking glass was altogether the condition, the instrument and the symbol of the art of painting – or of the art of *realism*, rather, for one should not forget that the pictorial celebration of this supposed instrument of truth came along with the discovery of the illusionistic trick of “artificial perspective” in oil painting at the time of the Renaissance, a trick that passes a two-dimensional canvas as the exact reproduction of a three-dimensional scene. The mirror indeed served to denote “truth”, but *within* a system of representation itself entirely founded on optical illusion.
- 6 Hardy's relationship with mimesis is known to have been a rather vexed one, and in his poetic “self-portraits”, the mirror does not serve to attest to the truth of the picture. On the very opposite, it seems to substitute an image for another, and to offer a simulacrum, a ghostly projection only given in the conditional modality:

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 as 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. (Hardy 81)

- 7 This poem only offers the tantalising shadow of a self-portrait. Nowhere is the poet's whole face mentioned. What catches his eye is a thin “skin” that veils just as much as it reveals – literally a “shagreen”, “*peau de chagrin*”, which acts as both a metaphor and a

metonymy for the process of disappearance, the erasure of the body. This body has so much dwindled at the end of the poem as to lose substance and be called a “frame” – as if it could identify with the *mirror* frame, the material border enclosing the empty space of a vanished reflection, a passing existence. And the fricative sounds linking the “*fragile frame*” and the heart’s “*throbbing*” make us hear and feel the speaker’s trembling apprehension at this foreseen and foretold disappearance.

- 8 Instead of presenting a stable physical image, the mirror suggests an ongoing “wasting” process, in the progressive form; one that reveals or displays the agency of time in the look of a face – a process to which Hardy dedicates another poem, “Faded Face”, which reads as a dirge, a lament on a face discovered too late, past the beauty of its prime:

How was this I did not see
Such a look as here was shown
Ere its womanhood had blown
Past its first felicity? –
That I did not know you young,
Faded Face,
Know you young! (Hardy 447).

- 9 Tellingly, the visual process of perception in “I Look Into My Glass” is entirely and exclusively contained within the very first line of the poem, while the second line immediately rewrites the verb “to look” as “to view” – a verb which can be heard as “to review”, “to analyse”, “to study in detail”: an action necessarily unfolding in time. Thus the poet does not see himself, but rather his aging process, his mortality, in a word his coming end; and the verbs that punctuate the poem (“to waste”, “to pass”, “to shrink”, “to grow cold”, “to steal”, “to grieve”) point all the steps of the implicit scenario ineluctably leading to death. So the moment is less anchored in the instant, as the reflexive process of self-contemplation should be, than turned towards the future, stretching the present moment of “noontide” towards the coming evening or “eve”.

2. Palimpsest images and prescient mirrors

- 10 Interestingly, the static moment of the gaze is doubled with the awareness of a constant oscillation in thought between past, present and future, what was and what will be, what has gone and what will remain – an oscillation clearly marked by the symmetrical construction “part steals” / “part abide” around the comma that severs the line, and the central pivot in the verb “lets”. Finally the poem ends on a strangely oxymoric “projected retrospection” – if we may call it thus – that is, an anticipation of the final moment when the poet *will* be looking *back* upon his entire life. What should have been an existential moment of encounter with the self turns into the uncanny experience of double vision, collapsing the present face and the future skull, as in Picasso’s weirdly prescient self-portrait of June 30th, 1972 – barely one year before his death (private collection; a chalk drawing of the same date is kept at the Picasso Museum, Paris). The frightening encounter with the aging self turns into a peaceful acceptance of death; but for this, the speaker also needs to sever the ties with *others* (in the second, pivotal stanza), letting go of humanity as a whole, in an attempt to preserve himself from feeling and therefore suffering. And this is a departure indeed, an adieu, since “I Look Into My Glass” is as a coda, the concluding piece to the whole volume of *Wessex Poems*, followed by the silence of a blank page and the closing of the book cover.

- 11 So the glass of Hardy's poem is not so much a *looking* glass as an *hour* glass, and the poem may be called a *Vanity*: a meditation upon time, a quiet and disabused contemplation of self-effacement presenting us – contrary to “Faded Face” – with a lesson of acceptance of body decay. Nor is this the only instance when the poet sees the glass as an instrument of *prediction*: in “Near Lanivet, 1872”, the poet's young lover leisurely spreads her arms against a gate and suddenly appears as a frightening figure of crucifixion “in the running of Time's far glass” (Hardy 436, l. 30). In another instance still (“By the Runic Stone”) the sand-glass turns into something of the fated crystal bowl containing all of men's destinies. What the mirror discloses here is the action of malevolent Time “tossing” together individual histories:

It might have strown
Their zest with qualms to see
As in a glass, Time toss their history
From zone to zone! (Hardy 471)

- 12 If mirrors thus reflect the past and adumbrate the future, it is because, in scientific terms, the process of reflection itself unfolds in time – albeit the time of an unperceivable split second, as Isobel Armstrong again superbly expresses: “There must always be something askance about the mirrorscape's image. A silver aloofness comes athwart the viewer *because reflections are simply light's memory traced in matter*. Mirror poems long for faces and visual coherence. There is always the possibility that the inhuman takes over as the human face is evacuated from the glass” (Armstrong 112, my emphasis). As a poet, Hardy seems to have felt instinctively what physicists rationally demonstrated about the agency of time in the shaping and perception of images. A late poem, “The Lament of the Looking Glass”, seems to transfer this agency onto the mirror itself, which bemoans the disappearance of the girl who used to look at herself in the glass:

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 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.' (Hardy 674)

- 13 In words quoted earlier, “glass looks. Surfaces become alive with images and traces of images, losing their trustworthy solidity” (Armstrong 8). From a mere object, the glass here has become an active, “reflective” subject speaking in direct discourse and entertaining complex relations of affection, need and longing for human beings. For the mirror is *nothing* without the human counterpart who animates it: “the denial of reflection empties out the universe” as Armstrong notes, commenting on the extremely

Hardyan perception of absence in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*: "Once a looking glass had held a face; had held a world hollowed out in which a figure turned, a hand flashed" (Woolf qtd by Armstrong 113). But before Woolf, Hardy had understood this ontological paradox: human subjects lend their existence and life to the glass; but the glass in turn abstracts these human subjects into shadows: "I flash back phantoms of the night"...

3. The visible and the invisible

- 14 "I Look Into My Glass" is particularly forceful in its rare concentration. Yet it is hardly an exceptional example of failed encounter with the self: the volume *Moments of Vision* offers many other moments of such non-coincidence. The whole collection is quite striking in its almost obsessive inquiry into the ambiguities of vision, with its coinage of the two dialectically paired verbs "to vision" (Hardy 533, l. 14) and to "unvision" (Hardy 530, l. 19) – a dialectics which is superbly illustrated in the poem which opens the volume and shares its title, "Moments of vision":

That mirror
Which makes of men a transparency,
Who holds that mirror
And bids us such a breast-bared spectacle to see
Of you and me?
That mirror
Whose magic penetrates like a dart,
Who lifts that mirror
And throws our mind back on us, and our heart,
Until we start?
That mirror
Works well in these night hours of ache;
Why in that mirror
Are tincts we never see ourselves once take
When the world is awake?
That mirror
Can test each mortal when unaware;
Yea, that strange mirror
May catch his last thoughts, whole life foul or fair,
Glassing it—where? (Hardy 427)

- 15 The poem seems to play at systematically reversing all the usual conditions in which one "look[s] into [a] glass": the mirror shows more at night than when men are awake and aware; above all, it does not stop at surface reflections, but penetrates to the heart and soul of men (their "breast", "mind" and "thoughts") pretty much in the manner of an X-ray picture. (And is it not this capacity of penetration which retrospectively accounts for the choice of the preposition "into" in the title "I Look *Into* My Glass", in preference to the more trivial, and also more superficial "I look at myself in the glass"?). Like the glass which turned the skin into a thin veil, that mirror abstracts the body into a "transparency", to reveal not the visible but the *invisible* – down to the depths of the soul, as suggested by the confessional implication of the image of bearing one's breast, in the condensed locution "breast-bared spectacle". Nevertheless, as in Hardy's other "mirror poems", the revelation is only a very partial one, for it intimates the feeling of a superior, but unknowable and forever invisible power holding up a mirror to men's gazes. It is the notion of distance indeed, as well as a form of

meditative suspension, which is conveyed by the demonstrative “that” in the insistent anaphora that beats the rhythm at the beginning of the first line and end of the third line in each stanza. Contrary to the mood of quiet, though highly disillusioned, acceptance of the former poem, here the whole text is structured by, and ends upon, unanswered questions: “who”, “why”, “where”: the poem reads as a riddle.

- 16 The mirror here becomes far more than a mere instrument reflecting physical features; it allows one to see further than mere surfaces and to question the forces of the *beyond*. The mirror this time holds an explicitly “magical” power (line 7) operating at night – an almost occult power also adumbrated through the allusion to Macbeth’s Weird Sisters predicting destinies “foul and fair”... It is able to transmute men’s appearance into new “tincts”, which might carry echoes of alchemical “tinctures”. And contrary to “I Look Into My Glass”, where the speaking subject remained in control throughout – at least grammatically –, here the mirror (as in “The Lament of the Looking Glass”) is the live agent throughout, associated with active verbs: it “makes”, penetrates”, “works”; it “can test” men, and “may catch” moments of vision, as the title of the collection goes. Undoubtedly, the most striking of these verbs of action is the final term “glassing”, a beautiful coinage which Hardy re-uses in “The Lament of the Looking Glass”, and also in his eulogy “To Shakespeare”. In that latter instance though, there is no mirror at all, only flickers of light reflected upon the watery surface of the river Avon: “the Avon just as always glassed the tower” (Hardy 440). Here, glass is understood metaphorically, as connoting the notion of reflection; and the verb “to glass” comes to fuse, magically indeed (or more precisely by synecdoche), the very *substance* of the instrument (the mirror-like surface) and the *effect* of its action (the reflections).
- 17 In “Moments of Vision” therefore, as in “I Look Into My Glass”, the mirror is able to show something *beyond* the face of the onlooker. Its power is no longer of mere reflection, but of *penetration*. And this time, the interrogation is not only ontological (the fact that we are “mortal” is simply posited as granted by the vocabulary) but metaphysical: the mirror is so important because it allows us to confront and question our status as subjects, in the literal sense of beings subjected to, submitted to, and overcome by, a world that much exceeds our capacities of comprehension, and is moved by some superior and forever unknowable power. In his analysis of “I Look Into My Glass”, Richard Beards notes that the form of the poem is that of the Anglican hymn (“four-line trimeter stanzas, with the third line of each stanza being four feet”, Beards 76), and that it was compared to George Herbert’s hymn “The Elixir” (77). But whereas Herbert’s Christian soul could catch a glimpse of Heaven in his glass, Hardy’s disabused speakers only discover there the enigma of the world beyond the self. The partial reflection in the glass stands for their partial understanding of a “strange”, puzzling world.
- 18 From that point of view, Hardy’s mirrors are powerful illustrations of the type of intertwining of the visible and the invisible highlighted by Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological readings of literature and art. For the French philosopher, the visible world cannot be perceived without its inherent background of invisibility, which is *not* its opposite, but on the contrary, its very condition of possibility: the visible emerges *from* the invisible, which “lines” it and gives it birth, and vice versa, in an endless “chiasm” or inextricable series of “inter-encroachments”, to borrow some of Merleau-Ponty’s expressions. In the same way, Hardy’s dark night makes the mirror an even more effective instrument of “vision”, once sight is obscured.

- 19 Although Merleau-Ponty acknowledges the presence of the sentient body within the process of vision, he also insists on the reversibility of that vision, in which the seeing subject is always also a seen object, placed under the eyes of others (like those beings looked at by their own mirrors in the poems quoted above), while he himself will never be able to see his own eyes, which work as a sort of “nullpoint” in his own visual field. The reason why mirrors are so revealing, Merleau-Ponty remarks, is that they clearly manifest this vital reversibility of the seeing person and the seen body, of the subject and the object, of the self and the other:

The reason for the fascination with mirrors is that I simultaneously see and am seen, that there is a reversibility of the sensory world, which mirrors both display and reproduce. In a mirror, my outward body finds itself completed by all that is most secret in me, passing through my face – that flat and closed surface which I first intuited through my reflection on water. [...] The ghost in the mirror extirpates my flesh, so that suddenly my body’s invisibility can invest all the other bodies I see. (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 33, translation mine)³

- 20 This quotation helps us understand the action of mirrors in Hardy’s poems: they turn the self into an “*object*” in the widest sense, that is, an image of the body, resembling yet separate from the looking *subject*, and on which the latter projects his own inner sensations. Thus what others see in the reflected image will never be exactly what the seer perceives of himself.⁴ The mirror betrays both the impossibility of perfect reflexivity and the multiplicity of points of view which intercross upon one and the same image.

[...] the mirror is the instrument of a universal magic which turns things into spectacles, spectacles into things; which turns the self into the other and the other into the self. Painters usually love mirrors because they see, below this “mechanical trick”, similar to the tricks of perspective, the metamorphosis of the seer and the visible which characterizes the flesh, as well as defines their vocation as painters. (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 34, translation mine)⁵

4. The metamorphoses of the mirror

- 21 It follows from this that the poet is hardly interested in the mirror as a material object or a tangible thing, but rather as optical device, or as a transparent or even invisible medium (an *interface*, in today’s jargon), which is never seen for itself: what catches the attention instead is its power of revelation. Consequently, we might compare it to other instruments or techniques presenting disturbingly or suspiciously “faithful” images like painting or photography. The narrative scenario of the poems mentioned above is indeed partly duplicated in the poem “The Rival”, which narrates another tragic drama of self-alienation. Like the speaker of “Moments of Vision”, the female narrator of the poem also makes “a clean breast”, confessing her jealousy towards the woman whose portrait her husband keeps carefully locked away in his desk – until the day when she dares open the drawer at last, and discovers that the picture he thus treasured was none other than... hers!

And there was the likeness – yes, my own!
Taken when I was the season’s fairest
And time-lines all unknown. (Hardy 433)

- 22 The shock of recognition comes with the silent acknowledgement of distance and self-estrangement, in the dash and the exclamation which separate the word “likeness” from the revelation of identity: “my own”. The incredibly tale-tell rhyme that couples

“my own” with “unknown” expresses the split between the present speaker and her past self, a split that leads her to “destroy” the picture – without however recovering a sense of the full self, since the active subject, “I”, remains wide apart from the passive “me”, at both ends of the line: “I destroyed that face of the former *me*” (emphasis added). The graphic shape of the poem, just as much as its content, then, materializes the traces of the cleft subject, torn apart by the subject/object divide – in a perfect illustration of what Jill Richards called “an aesthetic of disjunction”, expressing the effects of a “disjointed subjectivity” (Richards 125-127). Richards insists notably on Hardy’s use of the “asyndetic gap” – and we might venture to say that mirrors operate in a somewhat similar fashion, by making visible or perceptible the gap between “I” and “me”.⁶ Here too Hardy’s poems instinctively perceive the subjective division (“*la refente du sujet*”) which Lacan was to explore in such detail half a century later – including the schism between the enunciating and the enunciated subject (Lacan 517), finely expressed here in the distance between “I” and “me”...

- 23 In all these examples, the poet expresses his fascination for visual images thrown back to us, or placed under our eyes, which force introspection and question the notion of identity. And, as Hardy did when slipping from the noun “glass” to the verb “glassing”, we have to extend our reasoning from “mirrors” to the operation of “mirroring”. Indeed, the poems offer many examples of elements polished, frozen or glazed into mirror-like surfaces –surprising ones at times, like the coffin of Hardy’s friend William Barnes sending a “last signal” by catching the last rays of the setting sun: “It meant the west *mirrored* in the coffin of my friend there” (Hardy 473, l. 11, emphasis added).
- 24 But the closest equivalent to the mirror is of course the window, which often throws back unexpected images, particularly when watched against the night sky.⁷ “The Pedigree” narrates an almost magical or mystical moment of revelation, when the narrator discovers how little “himself” he is, and how much he owes to his ancestors and to the logic of heredity. In that dreamer’s trance, the moment of realization comes from a double transformation: in a process of reification of the metaphor, the lines of the family *tree* traced in an old book of chronicles become real *branches* pointing towards the window, which in turn morphs into a surface that does *not* reflect the face of the onlooker, but exhibits those of his forbears. What we expected to be an exact reflection of the speaker’s dreamy face instead discloses the element of *otherness* in his very self:

The branches seemed to twist into a seared and cynic face
Which winked and tokened towards the window like a Mage
Enchanting me to gaze again thereat.
It was a mirror now
And in it a long perspective I could trace
Of my begetters, dwindling backward each past each
All with the kindred look (Hardy 460)

- 25 The little plot of this revelation in the glass-turned-mirror is fairly similar to that of “Something Tapped”, a poem strongly reminiscent of the situation in Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Raven”: some insect seems to be tapping at the pane of the room, whose hybrid function is implied by the term “window-glass”; but what is shown upon the dark window is the narrator’s “Belovéd’s face”, an apparition which might be pulled directly out of the speaker’s unconscious, of his desires or longings (Hardy 464).
- 26 What may be discerned here is one of those “repetitive patterns” which Dennis Taylor identified in Hardy’s poetry, which we might call the drama of estrangement and/or

self-estrangement. And these dramas are played on many other surfaces, like pools of still water sometimes acting as mirrors; at other times, the waves or ripples of more dynamic streams or rivers work as kaleidoscopes disseminating broken images of slightly more worrying aspect. In the poem “On a Midsummer Eve” – the title of which makes us expect some Midsummer Eve’s... *dream* – the narrator bends upon a brook and all of a sudden sees, reflected there, *not* himself, but his old love, as in the former example:

I went, and knelt, and scooped my hand
As if to drink, into the brook,
And a faint figure seemed to stand
Above me, with the bygone look. (Hardy 443)

- 27 All the modalisers in that stanza (“as if”, “faint”, “seemed”) contribute to throw a doubt on the reliability of this perception; and yet we clearly identify here the repetitive Hardyan scenario of a revelation that shows literally “more than meets the eye”.
- 28 The narrative that appears in filigree in many of those visual dramas of missed encounters and split selves carries far-away echoes of Narcissus’s myth, as told in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (Book 3, lines 402 to 510). In Ovid’s text, Narcissus, having unwittingly caused the nymph Echo to pine away for love of him, discovers his face mirrored on “a clear, unmuddied pool of silvery, shimmering water” (Ovid 112, ll. 407-408). It is of course this “silvery” quality – that “silvery aloofness” evoked by Armstrong – that turns the transparent water into a mirror; and Ovid’s metaphor was confirmed by Dante’s periphrase, which defined water as “Narcissus’s mirror”, while Leon Battista Alberti, the architect and pioneering theoretician of painting during the Italian Renaissance, made the contemplation of reflected images a hypothetical source for the art of painting itself, and more especially a paradigm of portraiture – thus tightly linking the three poles of the subject, the mirror, and the portrait: “Consequently I used to tell my friends that the inventor of painting was Narcissus [...] What is painting but the act of embracing by means of art the surface of the pool?” (*Della Pittura*, book 2, 1435, qtd in Land 10a). Finally Freud himself was to pursue the analogy by linking Narcissism and the creative frame of mind of artists in general (Land 14, n1).
- 29 In Ovid’s version of the story, Narcissus becomes enflamed with his own reflection, which he does not understand at first to be a deceitful image. The text nonetheless carefully insists on the utter insubstantiality of the all-too-seductive reflection, in words strongly recalling Hardy’s treatment of mirror images: “a shadow mistaken for substance”, a “strange illusion”, “a fleeting phantom”, a “shape now haunting [his] sight”, “a reflection consisting in *nothing*” (Ovid 112-113, ll. 416-417, 431-434, my emphasis). The text itself could not say more clearly that Narcissus is not only in love with his own image, but also in love with a threatening *nothingness*... Still unaware of the nature of the image, Narcissus first addresses it as a “you” (“peerless boy”, l. 454, “Oh marvelous boy”, l. 500), before he finally understands its nature – but even then, he still insists on the tragic split between his own self and its reflection, in two separate clauses that fail to reunite the two sides of a single self: “I know you now and I know *myself*” (115, l. 472).
- 30 Narcissus’s story is usually understood as a tragedy of self-love and vanity – Ovid uses the notion of “self-adoration” and associates it with that of almost religious “worship”

(Ovid 113, l. 423). But reading Ovid’s text, one is struck by the constantly paradoxical nature of the boy’s feelings: although he is first fooled into believing that the image is a real person, he soon comes to realise that it is no more than a shadow. From that moment on, he explicitly states that he does *not* yearn for a reunion with that other part of himself (“O how I wish that I and my body now could be parted, I wish my love were not here! – a curious prayer for a lover”, 115, ll. 466-467) but on the contrary would want to *preserve* what he clearly perceives as irreducible distance, being aware that the union with the watery image would be his own death..., and that his death would ineluctably put to death the beautiful image he reveres. The moment of his death is encapsulated in this paradox, that he would wish his image to live on (“better indeed if the one I love could have lived longer”) but also, simultaneously, yearns for a final union of their two souls, which makes the former proposition impossible: “but now, two soulmates in one, we shall face our ending together” (ll. 471-473). Unable to tear himself away from the pool, Narcissus “rests his weary head in the fresh green grass”, dies, and is turned into the flower that bears his name.

- 31 There are very obvious differences between Narcissus’s myth and Hardy’s elaborations on mirror images. What Narcissus sees is a picture of absolute perfection and beauty, one that irresistibly seduces the senses. In Hardy’s mirrors on the contrary, it is distortion, indirection and excess, or deferral, that prevails: one does not see the fleshy envelope but rather the heart and mind of the subject; one does not see the present but rather the past and the future condensed in an instant; one does not see the self but rather the other – the estranged lover, for instance. Nonetheless, what both scenarios have in common is the clear awareness of a tragically unbridgeable distance between self-perception and outer-image. In all those cases, the mirror is the medium that signals the gap between fragments of the self: it becomes an operator of disjunction.
- 32 It seems that mirrors in Hardy’s poetry are hardly ever evoked as “objects”,⁸ in the sense of functional or decorative commodities. Mirrors always come to share something of the insubstantiality of glass. They deflect, refract, disseminate the gaze, creating a world of unstable doubles, of passing shadows, of aerial images. There is a “poetics of glass” (Armstrong 1) in Hardy’s poems and novels, which de-realises images instead of confirming them. It “glasses” men, in the sense that it not only reflects them but dissolves their very flesh, abstracts them into “transparencies” or flickering presences. And it complicates the simple subject-object confrontation by imposing obliquity, indirection, transitivity. Hence a constant questioning of the process of perception itself, and of the very definition of the self.
- 33 But behind this poetics of glass lies a metaphysics of the invisible. Because they draw attention to the instability of images, mirrors recall the necessity of seeing what lies *beyond* external surfaces. In Armstrong’s words, the mirror “exposes an image and alienates it at the same time” (Armstrong 99). Paradoxically, the contemplation of the mirrored – i.e. distanced – image is mostly an opportunity to question the inwardness of things and of human beings. Hardy again and again recalls that what matters is what the mirror does *not* show... And in this he again chimes in with Merleau-Ponty’s ideas: “the in-visible is the secret counterpart of the visible, and is only perceptible through the visible [...] it is the pregnant kernel of the visible, inscribed in it – in filigree” (Merleau-Ponty 1964b, 269); and the perceiving subject never fully coincides with that totality.

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NOTES

1. I am grateful to Barrie Bullen for pointing this out.
 2. All the page numbers given here refer to *Thomas Hardy, The Complete Poems*, ed. James Gibson, London: Macmillan, 1976. Hereafter Hardy 1976.
 3. "Le miroir apparaît parce que je suis voyant-visible, parce qu'il y a une réversibilité du sensible, il la traduit et la redouble. Par lui, mon dehors se complète, tout ce que j'ai de plus secret passe dans ce visage, cet être plat et fermé que déjà me faisait soupçonner mon reflet dans l'eau [...]. Le fantôme du miroir traîne dehors ma chair, et du même coup tout l'invisible de mon corps peut investir les autres corps que je vois."
 4. One might find many examples of characters sadly subjected to others' gazes in Hardy's novels. It is Tess's plight, for instance, to be constantly defined as a desired object rather than an autonomous subject. See Gadoin 2008.
 5. "Quant au miroir il est l'instrument d'une universelle magie qui change les choses en spectacle, les spectacles en choses, moi en autrui et autrui en moi. Les peintres ont souvent rêvé sur les miroirs parce que, sous ce 'truc mécanique' comme sous celui de la perspective, ils reconnaissent la métamorphose du voyant et du visible, qui est la définition de notre chair et celle de leur vocation."
 6. Reading the novels too, we would find very similar scenes when the viewer does not recognize him/herself in his/her own reflection; or conversely, when he/she finds an uncanny family air in the look of strangers, like Tess instinctively shuddering in front of the two old "hags" of the d'Urberville family whose picture she discovers on the landing of Wellbridge Manor... See Gadoin 2014.
 7. Here too one may recall that in *Tess*, the heroine looks at herself in a window lined by some black fabric, as a makeshift mirror.
 8. But in another sense, these mirrors *are* an object, the "object-gaze", with which Annie Ramel's article deals more amply in this volume.
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ABSTRACTS

The article studies the ambivalent, if not antithetical, qualities of glass – both a substance and a transparent medium – in Thomas Hardy's poems. In these, the looking glass does not send back the exact image of the human subject looking at it, but series of fleeting, evanescent images through which the past is conjured up and the future intuited. Reflected images travel in space and time, with a strange capacity of penetration and subversion: subject and object, seer and seen, the real and the virtual, the visible and the invisible are tossed together, until all that is left is the fundamental ontological question: "who am I?" In Hardy's mirrors, the beholder undergoes a deeply troubling anti-narcissistic experience, which only inspires him with the feeling of self-estrangement (instead of self-love) and of alienation, in a world inhabited by mysterious transcendent presences.

Le verre du miroir est, chez Hardy, une étrange matière, à la fois transparence et obstacle, qui n'offre aucune image fixe à qui le contemple, mais met en branle tout un mouvement de superposition et de substitution d'images : dans le miroir, le sujet reconnaît en palimpseste celui qu'il a été, et devine celui qu'il sera ou pourrait être. Mais l'image du miroir ne traverse pas

seulement le temps, elle pénètre aussi les surfaces, renvoie le visible à l'invisible, et vice versa, pour poser silencieusement la question ontologique fondamentale : qui suis-je ? Ainsi les miroirs hardyens imposent-ils sans cesse l'épreuve déstabilisante d'un anti-narcissisme : le sujet ne s'y reconnaît plus, et n'y saisit que la distance de soi à soi, dans un monde régi par d'énigmatiques présences, tout aussi indéchiffrables que le destin humain.

INDEX

oeuvre I Look into My Glass, Near Lanivet – 1842, To Shakespeare, Rival (The), Pedigree (The), Something Tapped, Lament of the Looking Glass (The), Wessex Poems, Late Lyrics and Earlier

Keywords: object, glass, mirror, window, transparency, reflection, self-portrait, self, alienation, metamorphosis, Narcissus

Mots-clés: objet, miroir, verre, fenêtre, transparence, reflet, autoportrait, moi, métamorphose, Narcisse

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