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Mirrors of Entrapment and Emancipation

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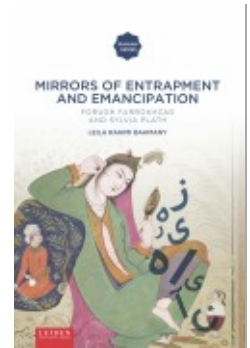
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Mirroring in Mythology and Psychology

“I am That!”: Doubling in the Myth of Narcissus and Echo

Ovid’s myth of Narcissus falling in love with his own image and pining away, depicted in Book 3 of his *Metamorphoses*, is one of the first great mirror tales ever recorded. The myth manifests this classical poet’s deep understanding of the psychodynamics of mirroring, echoing, the limits of *self-knowledge*, and the probable—even fatal—consequences of *self-realization*.

Narcissus is conceived out of divine violence when the river God Cephisus ravishes the fair water nymph Liriope. Shortly after a boy, Narcissus, is born, Liriope takes counsel of the blind, unerring sage, Tiresias, to find out whether or not her son will reach old age. Tiresias answers that he will have a long life if he never knows himself: “If he shall himself not know.”¹ Paradoxically, self-knowledge in this case will be fatally destructive for Narcissus. It is paradoxical in the sense that the very popular imperative wisdom of the Delphic god of light, healing and prophecy, Apollo, was “Know thyself.”² Tiresias’s parody of Apollo’s imperative becomes an intertextual mystery calling for an exegesis which will only be provided later in the story. Narcissus grows up into a wonderfully beautiful vain young man, whose callous pride makes him inaccessible to all his female and male suitors.

Apparently Ovid was the first to bring the two stories of Echo, a *vocalis nymphe* (voiced nymph),³ and Narcissus together, shrewdly recognizing their common theme of doubling, and the direct relationship between one’s self-image and one’s voice; echo is indeed an aural reflection, while reflection is a visual echo. The goddess Juno punishes the wood nymph Echo for using her voice in conspiracy against her. Echo is robbed of her speaking power as a *transformation punishment*—where the mode of punishment inflicted is metamorphosis. Echo can no longer be the originator of her voice. She can only speak,

If any other speak and cannot speak
 Unless another speak, resounding Echo.
 Echo was still a body, not a voice,
 But talkative as now, and with the same
 Power of speaking, only to repeat,
 As best she could, the last of many words.
 ... when speaking ends,
 All she can do is double each last word,
 And echo back again the voice she's heard.⁴

Echo is not the agent of her speaking act. She has no originality in her voice. All she can do is to repeat the last words her ear catches. One day Echo sees Narcissus wandering alone in a dense secluded forest and falls in love with him right away. She grows warm with love and follows him secretly. Echo longs to reveal to Narcissus her love,

... but nature now opposed;
 She might not speak the first but—what she might—
 Waited for words her voice could say again.⁵

Eventually, taking up and doubling the final words of Narcissus, who was searching for his party, Echo can declare her love for him. As with the rest of his lovers, Narcissus cruelly spurns her. “Shamed and rejected,” Echo hides in the woods and pines away in her unreciprocated love. Echo, who initially had a visible body and a voice of her own, now finds her body turned into stone and all that is left is her mimetic voice: *vox manet*. “Only her voice and bones are left; at last/Only her voice, her bones are turned to stone.”⁶

On the other hand, Narcissus, who is doomed by the same misery of unrequited love, sees himself in a placid pool and falls head over heels in love with his own reflected image. The reflected image in the pool precipitates Narcissus to develop a desire, a hope—“A hope unreal and thought the shape was real.”⁷ Narcissus gazes into his own eyes in the pool and burns for union with his image, “That false face fools and fuels his delight.”⁸ Narcissus is so in love with his own image that he cannot leave it for a second. He becomes fixated to that place, peering into the water all the time. At some point, Narcissus abruptly realizes that the image is none other than his own, uttering: *Iste ego sum*: “I am that.”⁹ Despite this epiphanic self-realization, Narcissus still remains enthralled, unable to leave his reflection in the water:

Oh, I am he! Oh, now I know for sure
 The image is my own; it's for my self
 I burn with love; I fan the flames I feel.¹⁰

Surprisingly this knowledge does not release Narcissus from his perpetual fixed gaze. He does not leave his image in the pool for a moment, not even to rest or eat, and gradually melts away in grief. Meanwhile, Echo observes his misfortune and pities him, but all she can do is to repeat his despairing lament “Alas” and “alas! The boy I loved in vain!”, as well as his final word of defeat: “farewell.”¹¹ At the end of Ovid’s story, there remains nothing of Narcissus’s body but a flower, “White petals clustered round a cup of gold!” and the nymphs called this blooming flower by his name, Narcissus.¹²

The figure of Echo as a marginalized feminine character with an unauthentic or “non-originary” voice, as Spivak calls it, has been understandably appealing for feminist critics in their uncovering of the historically marginalized position of women and their voicelessness, a position de Beauvoir calls women’s “immanence.”¹³ Echo is deprived of a voice of her own and is ultimately petrified. This presumably has to do with the fact that the mirror reflects the external appearance, hence the public visibility, of a person, whereas in antiquity women were often kept in the home and were not allowed to appear in public.¹⁴ In later *re-readings* of Ovid’s myth and the subsequent elaborations of the theory of narcissism, the female Echo has simply disappeared while Narcissus has gained an even more prominent position.

Echo has, in this as in other instances, been relegated to the margins, if not totally repressed. This occurs despite the fact that Echo is actually the mirror image of Narcissus in the sense that they are both linked by an attachment, Narcissus to his self and Echo to the other, i.e., to Narcissus. The latter is fatally consumed by his loving attachment to himself, and Echo by her loving attachment to the object. Narcissus has a grandiose view of himself and is unable to hear the voices of others. Echo, on the other hand, has a fragile sense of self-esteem and is deprived of a voice of her own, and is able only to mimic those of others. Depriving one of one’s own voice is a violent act of petrification—an act of robbing her of her own agency and thereby immobilizing her. The bodies of Narcissus and Echo are ultimately consumed by their passionate attachment and transformed into a flower and stone, respectively.

Narcissus’s recognition of his specular self in the pool, *Iste ego sum!* “I am that!” is based on the recognition of the discreteness of the reflected

image and what he experiences as self; that is the reflected self versus the experienced self. Grosz asserts,

On a global level, the coincidence of the image with the experience of a self (extroception and introception, respectively) is not guaranteed: there is no cenesthesia (images directly projected from bodily zones, organs, and sensations and thus capable of representing them directly for consciousness).¹⁵

It is this split and discrepancy between the image and the self that initially made Narcissus suffer, leading to his death; therefore, paradoxically, Narcissus was suffering from a lack of self-knowledge, initiated by his image reflected in the water. What makes Narcissus pine to death is the knowledge that the subject and object, active and passive, or “that which introspects” and “that which is introspected,” as Nuttall describes it, are never identical and can never be united.¹⁶ It is only after Narcissus gains the knowledge of this discrepancy, inflicted by a reflecting surface, and the impossibility of its unification, that he utters in agony, “But now we two—one soul—one death will die.”¹⁷ In this story, the mirror paradoxically serves as an instrument for depriving one of self-knowledge. It obstructs one’s path to acquiring self-knowledge by giving back a “fooling” metaphoric/metonymic image; an image Ovid calls a *simulacra fugacia*, “a fleeting image.”¹⁸ Narcissus was in love with his own mirror-image, double, shadow, a “nonobject,” “a mirage,” as Kristeva calls it: “on the one hand there is rapture at the sight of a nonobject, simple product of the eyes’ mistake; on the other, there is the power of the image.”¹⁹ Narcissus’s attachment to this nonobject image, Kristeva continues, was “the vertigo of a love with no object other than a mirage.”²⁰ Neither does Kristeva forget to emphasize the overriding power of that delusory image.

On the other hand, Echo has no original reflection of her own; neither specular or vocal, nor mental; therefore she has no agency or self-determination whatsoever. Narcissus remains her desired object and her ideal self. Echo has no identity of her own. This separateness of her real self from her ideal self proves to be fatal for her. Echo represents feminine subjective annihilation. Meyers further expounds on the nature of Echo’s love for Narcissus:

Echo can speak only fragments of Narcissus’s prior utterance, is desolate as she witnesses her beloved’s lovelorn suffering, but she is powerless

to prevent his suffering from culminating in death. To be loved by a woman who has no voice of her own is to be loved by an individual whose capacity to deliberate and act is gravely impaired. Narcissus's dying while Echo helplessly looks on dramatizes the insight that a love constituted by one partner's dumb mirroring of the other is a love at risk.²¹

While Spivak reads Echo as "an instantiation of an ethical dilemma: choice in no choice," Mitchell defines Narcissus's position as "confined in intra-subjectivity."²² Spivak describes the Narcissus story as "a tale of the construction of the self as object of knowledge" and elsewhere as "a tale of *aporia* between self-knowledge and knowledge of others."²³ For Spivak, this sort of self-knowledge is *mortiferous* because it is a limited knowledge that excludes the (true) knowledge of others: "Narcissus marks an arrest where there should be a passageway to others or the Other."²⁴ And in *Narcissisme de vie, narcissisme de mort*, Green writes, "Narcissism is the effacement of the trace of the Other in the Desire of the One."²⁵ Mitchell also affirms that Narcissus's desire for himself could be fulfilled only in death: "all Narcissus wanted was himself and, as all he wanted was himself, he could only have himself in death—the other half of himself, his own shadow."²⁶ Narcissus has to die because he loves a non-object, a mirror-image of himself, and as Kristeva discusses, Narcissus's "object of love is a metaphor for the subject."²⁷ She further explains:

*The object of Narcissus is psychic space; it is representation itself, fantasy. But he does not know it, and he dies. If he knew it he would be an intellectual, a creator of speculative fictions, an artist, writer, psychologist, psychoanalyst. He would be Plotinus or Freud.*²⁸

Kristeva and Andreas-Salomé have both tried to uncover the creative impetus of narcissism; however, they diverge in locating the source of this creativity hidden in the phenomenon. Andreas-Salomé sees narcissism as a function of plenitude, whereas Kristeva sees it as functioning from a void. Andreas-Salomé holds that the ecstatic overflow of the self onto the object of love enables creativity. For her, artists symbolize the "ineffable" plenitude whence the self emerges, and with which narcissism periodically reconnects:

the Narcissus of legend gazed, not at a man-made mirror, but at the mirror of Nature. Perhaps it was not just himself that he beheld in the

mirror, but himself as if he were still All: would he not otherwise have fled from the image, instead of lingering before it? And does not melancholy dwell next to enchantment upon his face? Only the poet can make a whole picture of this unity of joy and sorrow, departure from self and absorption in self, devotion and self-assertion.²⁹

Therefore, the creativity of Narcissus remains a function of void, a negotiation of “the gap between body and image, sign and signification,” as well as between the self and the “encompassing, undifferentiated All” from which the self emerges.³⁰ Shultz argues that Kristeva believes:

He [Narcissus] lives in all the poets and lovers who speak in metaphors, who figure a “fake” self in linguistic images or “conveyances of meaning” that muddle the borders between having and being, self and other, subject and object.³¹

Ovid’s Narcissus narrative has had an immense and wide-ranging cultural and philosophical influence on the history of Western thought. Though the mythological figure of Narcissus was originally a man, depicting vanity and the fatal lack of knowledge within a male figure, nevertheless the concept of narcissism in Western gender constructions underwent such a radical shift that it was more often ascribed to women as their particular negative tendency. Vanity, lack of self-knowledge and obsession with one’s mirror image have become attributes of female figures. This deviation in the trend happened within a more general transformation. Originally the concept of love, the beloved and the definition of beauty in the ancient Greek and Hellenistic world were defined by male homosexuality as the cultural ideal. It was only in later discourse that heterosexist norms became solidified and, along with them, narcissism was reassigned to women.³²

It is worth mentioning here that the ancient Greek word *nárkissos* was traditionally connected, by virtue of the plant’s narcotic or sedative effects, with *nárké*, which signifies being astounded, stupefied, benumbed or suffering from torpor. It is worth noting that to both flower and mirror are attributed a common power of astonishing, stupefying and numbing. In classical Persian literature, the term *narges*, referring to the same flower, is invariably a metaphor for the eye, particularly the wide-open or intoxicated and intoxicating eye of the beloved. Due to its whiteness, it may also refer to blindness and the blind eye. Moreover, it has sometimes been associated with jewellery.³³ Like the eyes, it is often deployed in pairs: in the dual form

of *nargesān* (narcissi) or *do narges* (two narcissi). At times it can also convey a negative connotation of bewitching, fooling and deceit.

The Petrifying Look: The Myth of Medusa

The acquisition of true knowledge of the self has traditionally been considered an undeniable source of empowerment and salvation. In ancient times, this was made explicit by the aphorism attributed to Apollo, god of light and healing: “Know thyself!” In Islamic cultures, it has circulated in the form of the Prophet’s saying: “He who knows himself, knows his Lord.”³⁴ Paradoxically, this very self-knowledge—virtuous, empowering and redemptional imperative for men—is regarded as extremely noxious if acquired by a woman, especially if she is not guarded or guided by a man. If she acquires self-knowledge by herself, she will be punished by being doomed to having a Medusa-like look:

Without Perseus to hold the Gorgon’s head, without the mirror’s reflection of woman’s submerged evil nature, woman’s glance would become the glance of knowledge, of the most dangerous kind of knowledge: knowledge of forbidden things, self-knowledge.³⁵

In Greek mythology, Medusa was the only mortal of the three hideous Gorgon sisters. Ancient stories recount that she was originally a woman of striking beauty; a beauty so striking that everybody was arrested by it—hence turned immovable. Medusa was even attracted to herself. When she was impregnated by Poseidon in Athena’s temple, the virgin goddess became enraged.³⁶ Out of jealousy, Athena transformed Medusa into a hideous creature. Her hair was converted into hissing serpents and the sight of her would turn an onlooker into stone. In the end she was decapitated by Perseus with the help of a mirror—the polished brass shield given to him by Athena. To hide Medusa’s head from view and render it invisible and harmless, Perseus buried it in a *kibisis*, a pouch, a deep hunter’s shoulder bag, symbolizing women’s repression and their forced invisibility. Later on, Medusa’s head was to become apotropaic, being used to ward off evils; evils that the head itself embodied.

In his essay “Medusa’s Head,” Freud equates the decapitation with castration and explicitly links the fear of castration-as-decapitation to the fear of seeing the adult female genitals, represented in the Medusa myth in the

form of phallic snakes. He also equates the petrification, caused by the sight of Medusa's head, with male erection. Freud does not fail to locate it within its context of antiquity:

Since the Greeks were in the main strongly homosexual, it was inevitable that we should find among them a representation of woman as a being who frightens and repels because she is castrated.³⁷

The story of Medusa has had a great fascination for many feminists, who consider her a sign of primordial, powerful (phallic) womanhood, as well as a sign of emancipation. Society's fear of womanhood and the powers of women, as well as the means it constructed for deflecting that power, are reflected in the Medusa story. Hertz believes that the Medusa figure is "a recurrent turn of mind: the representation of what would seem to be a political threat as if it were a sexual threat."³⁸ Therefore, to safeguard the hegemonic male knowledge (of the self), essential for the maintenance of the patriarchal order, this feminine threat has to be subdued and punished.

Cixous provides us with a crucial reading of the Medusa myth in her article "The Laugh of the Medusa." This article presents a simultaneous exposition and hence condemnation of women's historical repression through inscribed phallogocentrism. Moreover, by emphasizing the powers of *écriture féminine*, the writing specific to women advocated by French feminists, the article is a call to women to write. Cixous finds the decapitated head of Medusa not only *not* terrifying and deadly, but also beautiful and laughing: "You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she is laughing."³⁹ There are also some arguments over the association of Medusa with artful eloquence, another female threat to the patriarchal order which requires silencing and punishment.⁴⁰ For Cixous, Medusa represents a subversive figure, capable of disrupting "phallogocentrism," embodied in her laughter. Relying on the two premises of Freud's interpretation, i.e., that fully exposed male genitals signify power, and that Medusa's decapitated head represents female genitals, Cixous argues that men have always tried to conceal and to prohibit a woman's access to her sexual self-knowledge, and therefore, to power. Papparunas elaborates further by invoking the historically metaphorical function of women as mirrors to the male ego:

The woman's look into the glass is not only threatening because she might achieve sexual self-knowledge, thus power, but also, because of

her function as a reflector of man the glance into the mirror literally visualizes the possibility of losing phallic potency. The look into the glass can hence be read as an apotropaic gesture, at once fascinating and empowering but also intimidating. This double articulation lies at the very heart of the mirror as a visible object and as a figure of thought.⁴¹

If the female subject is to function as a mirror held up to man, to reflect back his image, then she is and should be on the side of the seen, the gazed-upon, the introspected, not the gazer or the see-er.⁴² In this sense, the woman's function remains pivotal for the male ego to take its shape. Therefore, she has to become effaced and selfless to be able to give him back the face he desires. Once the woman herself is turned into a blank mirror, her looking into the mirror can become dangerous, even deadly, to the male ego.

In the following part, another metamorphosis will be discussed: a metamorphosis of a different nature. I will explain how the myth of Narcissus is metamorphosed into the language of psychoanalysis, developed and propagated by Sigmund Freud in his essay "On Narcissism: An Introduction." Meyers ingeniously calls Freud's and the following psychoanalytic elaborations on narcissism as "the modern mythology of psychoanalytic theory" for the reasons that will be set out below.⁴³

From Narcissus to Narcissism: Freud's Psychological Exegesis of the Myth

It was not until the end of the nineteenth century that a psychological neologism based on the figure of Narcissus was coined and Ovid's mythological story began to be subjected to psychological exegesis. In 1898 the British sexologist Havelock Ellis used the term "narcissus-like" in his article "Autoeroticism: A Psychological Study" to describe a psychological attitude: "a tendency for the sexual emotions to be lost and almost entirely absorbed in self admiration."⁴⁴ Later, in his 1899 review of Ellis's article, Paul Näcke introduced the term *Narzissmus* for the first time as a clinical term describing a sexual perversion. Translating Ovid's myth of Narcissus into the language of psychoanalysis, Näcke described the term *Narzissmus* as "in love with oneself" (*Selbstverliebtheit*) and as "the most serious form of autoeroticism."⁴⁵ Freud took up this term to present the first coherent theory of narcissism as a psychological phenomenon in many of his essays, mainly in his 1914

so-called metapsychological essay “On Narcissism: An Introduction.” Freud’s theory of narcissism has created an immense fascination with the subject and markedly influenced later studies.⁴⁶

Freud’s Primary and Secondary Narcissism

Not only does Freud totally reject the notion of narcissism as a perversion, but he also believes it to be “the libidinal complement to the egoism of the instinct of self-preservation.”⁴⁷ Accordingly, narcissism is actually necessary as an intermediate stage, in certain aspects and measures, for the regular sexual maturation of the self and for the sense of self-preservation in the psychological structure of *all* human beings. This stage must be traversed on the way to full socialization. Human beings develop an image of themselves and they like this self-image, which they try to present to others and defend against any criticism in their act of self-preservation.

Freud believes that infants, prior to the constitution of the ego, are born into an undifferentiated state of perfect and blissful self-love, unable to distinguish between themselves and their environment, other people and other physical objects. They live in an undifferentiated union with their mothers. When an infant feels good (e.g., when he is fed by his mother’s breast), he feels that the mother’s breast belongs to him; when he feels bad (e.g., when he is hungry), he feels that his own body does not belong to him. This inability to distinguish anything other than one’s own feelings and needs leads to primary narcissism, in which the ego is the exclusive object of the infant’s love. This primary narcissism makes its early appearance in the infant’s sexual and ego instincts—attached to and dependent upon each other in the early stage—by the auto-erotic sexual satisfactions experienced for the purpose of self-preservation.

Freud asserts that the residue of the individual’s primary narcissism never fully disappears. It remains one of the three sources of one’s *self-concept*, a cognitive aspect of the self, related to one’s self-image which embraces one’s confidence, pride and sense of attractiveness. Self-concept is the sum total of a being’s mental and conceptual understanding of his existence and is constructed by his conscious reflections about self-image. Although by the term self one generally means an object, an entity separate from other(s) or from its environment, the perception of the self unfailingly influences one’s perception of the world and things in it. In other words, it is impossible to perceive or interpret the world and the things in it independently of one’s self-concept. The two other sources of the self-concept are,

according to Freud, the imaginary perfection of the individual's *ideal ego* and the satisfaction one gets when one's love is reciprocated.

Later, as the child matures, his libido which was directed inwards towards his ego changes its direction and tends to bind to other objects. This is because, as the child grows older, he begins to learn the distinction between himself and others. That is when the mirror stage—i.e., secondary narcissism—begins: now the child identifies with his mirror-image, i.e., with his external appearance, as it looks to others, and he becomes invested in its mirror-image in the sense that he wants to be what others want it to be. However, there always remains a libidinal economy with a permanent and proportionate relationship between the ego-libido directed inwards and object-libido directed outwards. The increase in one diminishes the other as it is best manifested respectively in autoerotism as well as in the state of being deeply in love, someone whose libido is so cathected in the object that his personality is attenuated.⁴⁸

In defining his notion of “secondary narcissism,” Freud states that if the transition from the subject-directed libido to that of the object-directed libido is disturbed in the developmental progress of one's ego, it leads to a regression into the previous phase of introversive narcissism. With the continual persistence of this pattern of regression, the pathological state called “secondary narcissism” or “narcissistic neurosis” reveals itself. Freud defines this “secondary narcissism” in the following manner: “The libido that has been withdrawn from the external world has been directed to the ego and thus gives rise to an attitude which may be called narcissism.”⁴⁹ In such cases the self habitually becomes the source of pleasure and gratification; the narcissist prefers this mode of deriving gratification to that of relying on the other objects and thus he remains introverted and self-centred.

Freud further writes that as the child grows he also begins to fight for the mother's or father's attention, regarding others as rivals. This is a major step into culture, and explains why human beings are so concerned with their outward appearance—to draw attention to oneself, to be loved, to be desired. This also reveals why they absorb the norms of behaviour transmitted by authority figures, starting with parents at home and then continuing in schools, religious institutions and so on: children are docile, sweet, and they wish to learn in order to be accepted and loved, and that continues in life—this is the IMAGINARY. It is governed by fantasies, modes of identifications and introjections: identifications with cultural ideas of what the self is and what others are (namely like me or not like me). By consistent exposure to the external intrusion of cultural prescriptions and expectations

and by the internalization of all these factors, the subject creates an imaginary idealized projected image of himself within himself called by Freud the *Idealich* or ideal ego. The creation of the ideal ego disrupts the early primary narcissism of childhood. The child who used to love his *actual self* now evolves to love this *ideal ego* against which he measures his actual self and aspires towards it. Attempting to fulfill the *ideal ego's* expectations, the self becomes the source of libidinal gratification.

In the next step the Oedipus complex emerges, when children develop infantile sexual desire: males and females take the parents as sexual objects, but that is of course forbidden by culture, and the parents are usually not interested. This is the moment when children conflict with the Symbolic order of the sexes, and finally submit to this order. Since mothers are physically closer to children, boys concentrate on the mother, experience rivalry with their father whose male body-image they share (the mirror is crucial here), and are afraid of the father's revenge (the phantasy that he might cut off the male sexual organ—castration complex). That is why they give up sexual desire for the time being, identify with the father as the stronger male and develop the cultural identity of a male. When they become adults, they look for a woman as a substitute for the first sexual object, the mother (a relation which Freud calls anaclitic). Male secondary narcissism is thus responsible for the boy's identification with the father, and it remains a strong force throughout life: men are ambitious; they pump iron in order to be attractive to women and so on.

On the other hand, according to Freudian psychoanalysis, when girls reach the oedipal stage, they also take their mothers and fathers as their sexual objects. However, the girl realizes that she lacks the boys' sexual organ—she of course has one, but it is inside the body and compared to a boy she lacks something. This is the condition of the Imaginary which is built on body-images. In addition, there is also the cultural privileging of masculinity, which exacerbates the situation. The girl feels rage at belonging to the less important and apparently physically deprived sex—penis-envy. She gives up the idea of sexually possessing the mother, not out of anxiety about the father's revenge, but out of contempt (the mother is also physically deprived after all). She concentrates her desire on the father.

Moreover, according to the logic of the Imaginary, the daughter must identify with the mother whose body-image she shares (again mirror becomes crucial here). The girl develops a female identity according to the Symbolic Order. Just like the boy, she stops sexually desiring anyone until adulthood, when she will look for a male partner who reminds her of the

father. However, because she feels physically deprived, as far as her body-image is concerned, she will, to a certain extent, always remain fixated on her body-image, compensating for the imagined lack by loving herself, by dressing up, and making it attractive for the male gaze. Female life and sexuality, in Freud's view, always have a stronger narcissistic component than male life and sexuality.

In other words, as the child grows up, according to Freud, primary narcissism takes two different divergent routes, depending on the sex of the child. Men generally develop a complete object-love of an anaclitic or attachment type that leads to an overvaluation of their love object, the impoverishment of their ego and attenuation of their original narcissism. Men often choose their love objects on the basis of resemblance to their original love objects, their mothers. There also exists another type of man which chooses its sexual objects not according to the model of its mother, but according to that of its own self—both types are still considered normal. On the other hand, as women and their sexual organs mature, their original narcissism is intensified, disfavours the development of their object-choice. In Freud's own words,

Women, especially if they grow up with good looks, develop a certain self-contentment which compensates them for the social restrictions that are imposed upon them in their choice of object. Strictly speaking, it is only themselves that such women love with an intensity comparable to that of the man's love for them. Nor does their need lie in the direction of loving, but of being loved; and the man who fulfills this condition is the one who finds favour with them.⁵⁰

In other words, what Freud says is that it is themselves that women love and they desire to be loved by men; therefore, their sense of love for the other is left undeveloped. In this sense, no man is ever actually loved by a woman. It should also be noted that men find narcissistic women, despite their apparent coldness, care-freeness and cruelty, more attractive, because these women seem invulnerable and self-contained. This is one of the manifestations of the Freudian idea of complete asymmetry between the sexes. According to Freud's gender-differentiating object choice, men are inclined to the active position of loving while women tend to the passive position of being loved. Still, passivity is not assigned by Freud to the same level of importance as self-absorption (as in the case of Narcissus). Here Freud does not ignore the role of beauty of a woman and the socially restrictive

demands of passivity in the formation of her narcissism. Apparently, Freud does not—at least explicitly—consider beauty as a culturally defined entity. Furthermore, Freud is evidently not criticizing or even questioning those social restrictions. In fact, he believes that this exaggerated female narcissism compensates for those restrictions as a sort of defence mechanism.

Freud finds an outlet for women's narcissism where their libido can be directed to the other. Women can experience love of the other only when they bear children; this love still remains the continuation of their own unquenchable narcissism. Women's parental love for their children, being in some sense a part of themselves, is, for Freud, "nothing but the parents' narcissism born again, which, transformed into object-love, unmistakably reveals its former nature."⁵¹ One could conclude that in the case of narcissistic woman, according to Freud, there are three options: (a) she longs to be loved by a man, (b) she can bear a child and love that child as a biological part, a specular extension of herself, or (c) she can long for a male love object as a stand-in ideal self.

These three options have been depicted by ample examples in literature. In the first option, there are many literary examples where women recurrently refer to their mirrors in order to check how they appear to the male gaze out of their desire to be loved and to be the object of their gaze. In their mirrors, they are continually involved in the act of creating, recreating and assimilating their outward appearance, mainly through make-up and cosmetic surgery, to attract the gaze of male observers and to conform to their culture's strict definitions of feminine beauty.

The second case is also recurrently portrayed in many literary texts. For instance, women see their offspring, especially their daughters, who carry the greatest physical resemblance to them (as well as sharing a common fate in patriarchal cultures), as the mirror images of themselves. There are also ample examples in literature in which the daughters see their mothers as their mirror images. This *Doppelgänger* motif between mother and daughter, depicted through the mirror metaphor, is amply represented in our cultural repertoire.

Finally, the third option open to the narcissistic woman is when she identifies and incorporates her lover as her alter ego or ego-ideal, and aspires to catch up with him. This is best demonstrated in the presentation of a woman as a mirror to her male beloved or husband. It is also demonstrated by women's historical echoing of men's voices, and considering everything pertaining to their female bodies and female experiences as taboo or inferior, thus perpetuating their inferior *status quo*.

Freud also categorizes four different directions for the love of a narcissist. A narcissistic type may love (a) what he himself is in his present state, (b) what he was before, (c) what he wants himself to be (in accordance with his ideal-ego, including another person who is like the one he wants to be), or (d) finally, someone who was once part of himself, like his children. At first sight, we may consider Ovid's Narcissus to be suffering from the first type of Freud's secondary narcissism, since he loves what he is at present, how he is reflected by the water.

Feminist criticism—Freud's treatment of gender relations and sexuality has evoked harsh criticism from different sides, especially from feminists, gender and queer theorists. Feminists have taken issue with the picture Freud has provided and his assumedly pseudo-scientific language which has been persistently used to push women further into their marginalized subordinate position by dictating what is most natural and normal for them. Feminists argue against Freud's views discussed above mainly for three reasons: first, because Freud seems to accept and propagate the view of femininity as physically deprived. Of course, later Lacan has somehow corrected this: both male and female children experience a lack (they are both unable yet to have sex). There is the mirror-image according to which the girl sees herself as lacking what males have, plus the social privileges accorded to males, which explain why women are envious of males and more narcissistic.

Second, they criticize femininity's representation as a masquerade: women learn to behave as men expect them to be. In this view, female narcissism is primarily a self-protective device, ensuring social acceptance and love. In Freudian definition, as Mitchell observes, a woman's secondary narcissism is in fact "a narcissism of becoming a sexual object—a woman who makes herself beautiful for men."⁵² This explains why the narcissistic woman who identifies with her lover as her ego-ideal becomes melancholic when the other, the lover, is absent. Grosz explains that, while the narcissistic woman desperately needs this male "subject to affirm her," she would feel "worthless, a mere fragment of a person," once the male subject becomes absent.⁵³

Finally, in reaction to the picture Freud provides, feminists have also argued that women should attack and change cultural values: they should not merely copy male behaviour, male ways of thought, male reason and male voice. Women should proudly honour female ways of talking and thinking as more poetic, less hierarchized, more fluid and more physical. The female look into the mirror can become an invaluable starting-point

for inquiring both into what one sees and what one does not see, as well as for developing a female mode of writing.

The Subject as an Alienated Construct: Lacan's Theory of the Mirror Stage

Je est un autre

I is an other⁵⁴

Rimbaud

Jacques Lacan's theory of "The Mirror Stage," argued in his paper "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," has gradually gained such significance that it is now considered by many, including Tallis, as "the cornerstone of Lacan's oeuvre."⁵⁵ This theory is a conflation of Henri Wallon's mirror theory, which maintains that the mirror ordeal forms a crucial stage in the development of the individual's sense of self, and certain ostensibly unrelated ideas of Freud, such as the narcissistic structure of the ego, *ideal-ego* and Oedipus complex, all founded on his gendered "binary opposition" of anatomical completeness/defect, presence/absence (lack) and the fear of castration/penis envy.⁵⁶ Lacan considered himself Freudian and called his own works an authentic "return to Freud."⁵⁷

In his theory of the mirror stage, Lacan emphasizes the essential role of the mirror image in the development of the human psyche. He argues about the cardinal significance the mirror image has in the individual's entrance into linguistic and social identity. Initiated by Freud's conceptualization of the ego as something one is not born with, but that is developed, Lacan holds that the mirror stage is a developmental stage in the formation of the *I*, or the sense of self. It begins at about the age of six months when the child abruptly recognizes the image in the mirror as his own for the first time.⁵⁸ This recognition is accompanied by a great sense of delight, and it ends at about the age of eighteen months when the acquisition of language starts.

This latter stage marks a crucial turning point in Lacan's tripartite psychic structure: the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic. In the earliest stage, prior to the association or (*mis*)recognition of the self-image as that of self in the mirror stage, the infant lives in an imaginary identity with the mother or the primary caregiver. He has no concept of self or the boundaries separating it from the (*m*)other. At this stage the infant is unable to distinguish

between inside and outside, or between the self and the (m)other. The Real continues to remain, after the mirror stage and even after the acquisition of the language, as the irreducible perceptual surplus of “outside world” that resists being turned into language; it does not enter into the realm of the Symbolic.

The recognition and the reactions to the mirror image in the mirror stage reveal the “ontological structure of the human world.”⁵⁹ Lacan asserts that this recognition is “*an identification*” in which a transformation comes over the *infans* marked by:

The jubilant assumption [assumption] of his specular image by the kind of being—still trapped in his motor impotence and nursling dependence—the little man is at the *infans* stage thus seems to me to manifest in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the I is precipitated in a primordial form, prior to being objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject.

This form would, moreover, have to be called the “ideal I.”⁶⁰

Identification, a complex psychological process over which the subject has no full control, signifies the separation between the “I” and the mirror image or “virtual complex,” as Lacan calls it.⁶¹ In other words, the image and the self are separate entities. It is interesting to note that the Latin term *infans* literally means “without speech.” With the birth of the ego in the mirror stage, the child assumes stability, unity and stature. It also assumes a split between the inside and outside, subject and object, between the self and the (mirror-image) self as other, as well as “between an illusionary stability and unity and a recognition of the power of the other in defining the self,” as Grosz articulates.⁶²

The lack of perfect correspondence between the child’s mirror image or the specular self and his experienced self—with all its impotence and dependency—occurring initially in the mirror stage, reveals “in an exemplary manner the properly imaginary nature of the ego’s function in the subject, along with the constitution of the ego’s ideal *Urbild*.”⁶³ The initial dynamic dialectic of identification of the self with his image, along with the internalization of this image and the libidinal investment in it, persists as a perpetual psychic force in the subject. The same process of identification of the self-image inaugurates the subsequent dialectical identifications with, and the libidinal investments in, other things and other persons.

This marks the beginning of a lifelong process of identifying the self in terms of the other. Ragland-Sullivan maintains that “In fact, Lacan’s mirror-stage concept is a metaphor for a mimetic process which occurs in intersocial relations with or without a mirror.”⁶⁴ But this identification, stresses Ragland-Sullivan, is “based on a lie—on a disjunction or asymmetry—whose later effects range from the production of a double as in the *Doppelgänger* phenomenon, or a bodily disintegration.”⁶⁵ Therefore, the self remains, in Grosz’s words, “a paranoid and alienated construct.”⁶⁶ The initial identification occurring in the mirror stage will remain a model for the later relationship between the actual *I* and its image of itself, between the actual *I* and the *ideal-I*, and between the *I* and the other. As understood from Lacan’s discussions, the narcissistic identification of the self with the mirror image and the formation of ego function around two opposite poles, *affairement jubilatoire*, an affirmative and joyful self-recognition anticipating the unity of the image, on the one hand, and *connaissance paranoïaque*, a paranoid and frustrating knowledge of the split, alien self, on the other.

The mirror image, as well as the mental image we have of ourselves—what Freud calls *Idealich*—will never fully correspond to our actual, physical and emotional being. This ever-present discrepancy between the projected specular image of oneself and what one experiences as self, or one’s ideal self and the actual self, reveals the primordial nature of the human subject as psychologically split. It will perpetually disrupt one’s experience of one’s own existence in many different ways, spurring disappointments, frustrations, anger, or even leading to serious mental disorders.

For Lacan, the recognition of the self in the mirror stage, though essential for the formation of ego, is actually a *méconnaissance*, a *misrecognition*. Therefore, as Evans clarifies, “the mirror stage shows that the ego is the product of misunderstanding (*méconnaissance*) and the site where the subject becomes alienated from himself.”⁶⁷ It is this process of *misrecognition* in the mirror stage which inaugurates the Imaginary. Hence the Imaginary constitutes Lacan’s version of the ego, which is the structured conception of identity. The Real and the Imaginary are the non-linguistic aspects of the psyche before the acquisition of language and entrance into the realm of the Symbolic, where the individual can refer to himself using the first person pronoun *I* and express his desires. By entering into the sphere of language, the individual is formed as a historical entity, that is, the child’s “specular *I* turns into the social *I*.”⁶⁸ Moi declares that “In the Imaginary there is no difference and no absence, only identity and presence,” implying that dif-

ferences and absences all appear when the subject steps into language, into the Symbolic.⁶⁹ Mitchell interprets the “moment of the symbolic” in gender-differentiating terms:

the point of organization, the point where sexuality is constructed as meaning, where what was heterogeneous, what was not symbolized, becomes organized, becomes created round these two poles, masculine and not-masculine: feminine.⁷⁰

It is the law of the Father which regulates this Symbolic order or the social field through its key signifier—the *phallus*. The difference between the imaginary phallus and the symbolic phallus should be introduced here parenthetically. The imaginary phallus is the erroneous interpretation by the child of the sight of women’s genitalia—namely that a woman does not have a penis and is therefore castrated, something the boy child is afraid may happen to him if he does not obey his father’s orders. Of course, other ways of conceiving of anatomical difference between the sexes, such as speculum, are possible. The symbolic phallus, on the other hand, is the signifier of sexual difference in the sense that neither man nor woman has a phallus (as a symbol of imaginary completion); *both* sexes are characterized by lack (what psychoanalysis calls “castration”). The Symbolic order makes them seek completion by steering sexual desire to a union with the opposite sex (heteronormativity of the symbolic). For Lacan, “phallus” is not an organ or even the symbol of it. It is a *signifier*—as Grosz clarifies, “the threshold signifier to the symbolic order, and the crucial signifier in representing the distinction between the sexes.”⁷¹

The process of identification with one’s mirror image, based on a *mis*-recognition, which is of course *imaginary*, relies on a reference to the Other, divided from the self and “other.”⁷² Although the identification with the mirror image—*exterior* to the child, *frozen* and *reversed*—is necessary for the formation of our sense of self, it leaves the subject with a kind of ever-present sense of alienation or *la manqué*, a sense of absence or want, because the image is only a sign or a symbol, different from the signifier by which one refers to and experiences oneself.⁷³ This sense of lack will continually mark the subject’s mode of being. In Mitchell’s words, the Lacanian human “subject is split and the object is lost.”⁷⁴ In another place, Mitchell describes this subject as “a being that can only conceptualize itself when it is mirrored back to itself from the position of another’s desire.”⁷⁵ In other words, the identification with the specular image makes the subject a double of his own double

and, in order to fill in this unfillable, the subject has to perpetually struggle to establish identificatory relations with others.

The mirror image is metonymic/synecdochic and metaphoric simultaneously. It is metonymic/synecdochic (a subgenre of metonymy) because the mirror image gives an external image of the body, not of the self as a whole. It is metaphoric because it stands in for the self, which is why it marks an alienation. The internal reality of the self and its feeling experience is not revealed in the mirror, although the felt reality can be incompletely approximated by that image. For men and women both, the mirror image is the first in a series of cultural images with which they identify to make sense of their identity (e.g., the different role models for boys and girls).

The act of specular recognition is an *intellectual act*, implying that the subject has adopted a perspective of exteriority on himself and that it is the mirror that provides for this externalization. For Lacan, the moment of the child's sudden insight in the identification experience of his own image in a mirror is analogous to what Köhler calls *Aha-Erlebnis*: "to express situational apperception, an essential moment in the act of intelligence."⁷⁶ In the field of developmental psychology, "situational apperception" refers to the individual's ability to position the image of his physical self within the physical world and in relation to the images of other physical objects.

Before the identification of the self in the mirror stage, the child conceives of himself as *corps morcelé*, an *aggregate*; he has a "fragmented image of the body";⁷⁷ what Gallop describes as "a violently nontotalized body image, an image psychoanalysis finds accompanied by anxiety."⁷⁸ With the identification with, and internalization of, the mirror image, the child can for the first time conceive of an image of his body in its *Gestalt*, a totality as a whole body, a complete singular entity, which Lacan calls "orthopaedic," because this provisional, fictional "I," formed in the mirror stage, functions like a brace, a crutch, a corrective instrument, supporting the subject in achieving the status of wholeness, a stable position which is imaginary and not real.⁷⁹ The infant's encounter with a whole, stable and autonomous self-image presents him with an image of his *ideal-I*. It is partly because of this imagined coherence and the perception of the image's apparent unity, which the child was hitherto unable to perceive, that the recognition of the mirror image becomes a jubilant experience. The encounter with the non-correspondent *ideal-I* is a departure point for a lifelong quest for a perfect correspondence with this *ideal-I*. But a fear of regression into this earlier

stage of fragmentary body, or a body-in-bits-and-pieces, may linger on in the form of an inevitable anxiety. This fear may reveal itself in dreams or fantasies of the disturbed subjects in the form of corporeal disintegration, decomposition or dismemberment.

In the very first paragraph of the article, Lacan claims that his psychoanalytical experience of the *I* function in the mirror stage refutes the Cartesian philosophy of Cogito, and the philosophical traditions born out of it, all based on the idea of “wholism.” Descartes’ Cogito philosophy is based on his famous “*Cogito, ergo sum*,” or “I think, therefore I am.” He used it as a deductive proof of existence; as a method to ensure that existence is indubitable and certain (and can thus escape global scepticism). Descartes’ philosophy takes for granted the unified wholeness of the human subject, as a centred autonomous “I” governed by reason. Lacan, following Freud’s model of the psyche, which posits psyche as comprised of at least three divided, conflicting parts, rejects the existence of the human mind as a unified whole governed by reason, as implicit in Descartes’ argument.

In the Freudian concept of ego, there is no fully self-aware ego in perfect control of itself. Self is not something knowable, and self-knowledge—and thus the perception of one’s world—is to some extent an illusion. This illusory self-knowledge is shaped by the desires, fears and aggressions issued from the id on the one hand, and from the injunctions imposed by the superego, on the other. According to Lacan, the ego is not in a position to judge reality because it is developed out of the initial lack or *misrecognition* of the mirror stage as well as the following *misrecognitions*. The Lacanian *I* comes into being through identification with the mirror image—a “*captation spatiale*,” or a “spatial capture”—as well as through an encounter with an exterior entity;⁸⁰ therefore, it cannot correspond to Descartes’ inborn and self-contained unit of *I* in his Cogito. Lacan says, “What we have here [in the mirror stage] is a first capture [*captation*] by the image in which the first moment of the dialectic of identifications is sketched out.”⁸¹

Finally, Lacan argues that through “subject to subject recourse,” psychoanalysis can help the patient by accompanying him to the ecstatic moment where “*Tu es cela*” (“Thou art that”) is revealed to him. Psychoanalysis tries to make the subject become aware of the history of the imaginary images he has of his self, as well as to help him understand the way these images are supported or undermined by the Symbolic order. This is founded on the otherness of the self experience, manifested in Rimbaud’s formula, “*Je est un autre*” (“I is an other”). It means accepting the otherness of the uncon-

scious, where all of one's experiences that do not fit the imaginary logic of self-identification have been relegated. Psychoanalysis attempts to recover this repressed unconsciousness, which is still participating in a person's conscious discourse. This is exactly what the mirroring can often facilitate. Lacan agrees, but also adds that "it is not in our sole power as practitioners to bring him to the point where the true journey begins."⁸²

Women and the Symbolic Order

The Symbolic order in most societies (with the exception of some archaic ones) transforms women into less able human beings. They are said to lack rationality, to be weaker in all kinds of ways, which then legitimizes their secondary status and their exclusion from the public sphere. The Symbolic order gives precedence to a "male" idea of language (in the sense of privileging control, sternness and clarity of meaning) over "female" language (chattiness, verbosity and emotional talk). All subjects have to come to terms with these gendered types of language; for both men and women, it involves the loss of a "full" command of language. Nonetheless, men's language is held in much higher esteem, and when women use "male" language (e.g., by becoming professors, doctors, professionals, politicians, etc. etc.), they are looked upon as exceptions to the rule, or regarded as having a masculinity complex.

On acquiring this male-dominated language, women experience a linguistic oppression, because they have no share in the development of the language of the Symbolic order. Women experience a constant conflict between the Symbolic order, instated by phallogentricity, and the repressed space of absence and silence which Kristeva calls "the Semiotic"—the language of the female-dominated Imaginary order.⁸³ Jacobus paraphrases a definition of semiotic as "the pre-Oedipal phase of rhythmic, onomatopoeic babble which precedes the symbolic but remains inscribed in those pleasurable and rupturing aspects of language identified particularly with *avant-garde* literary practice."⁸⁴ Kristeva tries to change the values of the gendered language, although she leaves the link of these different types of language to gender intact. She claims that certain writers such as Joyce were using the female language. According to Sellers, Kristeva also credits language with being potentially revolutionary in that "Only by listening to what is unspoken, . . . by attending to what is repressed, new, eccentric, incomprehensible and therefore threatening to the paternal code, can women hope to disrupt its order and acquire our own voice."⁸⁵ Mitchell, too, attempts to

uncover the political implications of the phallus as a signifier. She asserts that the rule of the phallus can only be challenged by a new symbolism,

from within an alternative symbolic universe. You cannot choose the imaginary, the semiotic, the carnival as an alternative to the symbolic, as an alternative to the law. It is set up by the law precisely as its own ludic space, its own area of imaginary alternative, but not as a symbolic alternative. So that politically speaking, it is only the symbolic, a new symbolism, a new law, that can challenge the dominant law.⁸⁶

Lacan defines the function of the mirror stage as, “a particular case of the function of the imagos, which is to establish a relationship between the organism and its reality—or, as they say, between the *Innenwelt* and the *Umwelt*.”⁸⁷ *Innenwelt* is the imaginary interior space that the “I” occupies and is to a great extent structured by the unconscious, while *Umwelt* is the external physical world, in which the living human subject is situated, which also could be translated as “environment.” Therefore, the alienated, frozen and reversed image in the mirror serves to relate these two dialectical worlds, to bridge the subject to the world and to lay the groundwork for the formation of identity and social acculturation.

In terms of women’s experience, their *Umwelt* is constituted by the “figurations of womanhood,” by cultural images of women, systematically enforcing them into the strict definitions of womanhood.⁸⁸ Women are under constant tension, struggling to effect a compromise between these two often conflicting worlds. Since the mirror image functions as a bridge, linking the *Innenwelt* with *Umwelt*, the constant clash between these two worlds, with its cultural figurations of womanhood on the one hand and the opposing reality of women’s experienced self and their inner desires on the other, manifests itself best within the mirrors of these women.

For women, the contradictions between the imaginary images they have of their selves and the images the phallogentric symbolic order systematically forces them into adopting or shedding appear conspicuously exacerbated. The incompatibility of women’s experienced self and their ideal self on the one hand, and the culturally provided “feminine” self-images with its offers/demands, for instance to adopt motherhood, to acquire an education, a job and a public role on the other hand, led to a marked psychological sensitivity and a need to come up with solutions. This incompatibility of the individual self-image and the cultural presentations of femininity may lead

to perceptual distortions, where one's experienced self does not conform to her perceived self.⁸⁹

It should be noted that the “orthopaedic” body image—that *totalized* image of the self—is provided by the eye and the sense of sight. It is the supposed simultaneity and synchronicity of the sense of sight that can provide this *totalized* view. Other senses, auditory, olfactory, tactile, and gustatory, according to Lacan, can only lead to an aggregate or the body-in-bits-and-pieces view of one's self. Therefore, a direct dialectical relationship between the eye and the subject, or the eye and I, is posited. Lacan's theory of the mirror stage, in complicity with his other works and also the works of Freud, is considered *ocularcentric* for its vision-centredness.

Feminist psychoanalytical theorists criticize these narratives as scopocentric, for constituting subjectivity through the act of seeing, as well as—politically significant—for exercising power through the act of gazing. They attempt to reconceptualize other narratives for the formational process of identity. Cixous and Irigaray are concerned with accounting for it by undermining the idea of woman as castrated (discussed above). Cixous describes Freud's and Lacan's theory as “voyeur's theory” for its emphasis on the exteriority and on the *specular*.⁹⁰ On the other hand, Irigaray in her doctoral thesis, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, proposes a speculum against that of a flat mirror.⁹¹ A speculum—a concave mirror usually used by dentists and gynecologists to examine body cavities—not only helps us to see, but also touches on what is being watched; hence, it is turned into women's “intimate mirror.”⁹²

Ettinger joins with Irigaray in exposing the hitherto ignored significance of touch and kinaesthetic sensation in the human psyche, particularly in the process of ego formation.⁹³ Here it is noteworthy that from all the perceptive senses, it is only vision that marks a sense of “spatialization” and, therefore, a schism between the subject and the object, the I and the other: “Vision performs a distancing function, leaving the looker unimplicated in or uncontaminated by its subject.”⁹⁴ Vision can provide access by the subject to the object without necessitating any contact.⁹⁵

Lacan's theory is also criticized for basing a subject's sense of self, as well as his sense of reality/environment, upon a *méconnaissance*, an erroneous cognitive act which denies the multiple dependencies of the self on others and on the environment. It obscures the emotional complexity of human psychological development by reducing the complex emotions into a relatively simple cognitive act, performed in relation to a visual image. As Gallop marks, the “mirror image becomes a totalizing idea that organizes

and orients the self.”⁹⁶ This theory also makes alienation and the detachment of the self an unavoidable norm. That is why Irigaray calls Lacan “a master of specular profit and alienation.”⁹⁷ Gallop explains further:

The social self (self tainted by the world) is grounded in the specular self (assumption of the fictionally solid, cohesive body—total shape, well defined and firm). Alienation/violation cannot be avoided without calling into question the specular self, the fictional unity of the body.⁹⁸

Hitherto the spatial dimension of mirror and the mirroring phenomenon has been sufficiently accentuated. As demonstrated above, the Lacanian *I* is brought into being by identification with the mirror image through its “*captation spatiale*,” or “spatial capture.”⁹⁹ Moreover, while criticizing the theories of Freud and Lacan for their inherent ocularcentricism, it was mentioned that “spatialization” remains the significant sense provided by vision. The temporal dimension of the mirror, though entailed in all the above discussions of the mirror, needs some more explicit emphasis.

A Spatiotemporal Site of Psychological Interiority: Memory as a Mirror

The mirror phenomenon contains both dimensions of space and time simultaneously. Psychological interiority also constitutes the dominant characteristic of this spatiotemporal site.¹⁰⁰ The mirror is an ambivalent space of reality and virtuality, duality and contradiction. It is where the dyadic relationship between the real and virtual is negotiated. Relying on the spatial extension of the mirror, Foucault analyses the double function of it as the utopia and heterotopia in the following terms:

In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of a shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror. But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position I occupy. From the stand point of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from

this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to constitute myself there where I am. The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there.¹⁰¹

Foucault also refers to utopia, and likewise the mirror, in terms of a “place-less place,” “no real place” and “fundamentally unreal space,” as they both share “a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space.”¹⁰² He argues that utopia provides society—containing the individual—with a representation “in a perfected form” or “turned upside down,” exactly in the same manner as the mirror provides the individual with his own image.¹⁰³ On the other hand, Foucault calls the mirror a heterotopia, a “counter-site” and “a kind of effectively enacted utopia.”¹⁰⁴ This hetero-utopian nature of the mirror can probably account for the abundant instances in literature where someone steps into the mirror (or desires to do so) and joins with the ideal/virtual self or world over there.

In comparison with the spatial dimension, the temporal dimension of the mirror has been less studied. Though it may seem that there is simultaneity to our present stance in front of the mirror and the perceived reflected image in it, there is a time factor involved. When a subject poses in front of a mirror, first his glance is directed out of his bodily self towards the mirror in an “outbeat gesture of (usually circumscribed) *ecstasis*,” as Casey formulates it, then the mirror reflects the image back to the viewer, allowing the subject to perceive his image in the mirror.¹⁰⁵ The outbeat-inbeat gesture of the mirror is what Casey calls the “two-beat temporality” of the mirror.¹⁰⁶ This move towards the mirror and back takes its own time. Therefore, what the subject perceives is not exactly what his present self is; it is his very near past. Hence any glance into the mirror accommodates a tri-temporal reality: past, present and future. Casey further elaborates:

The glance, despite its ephemerality, implicates all three phases; it arises in the present, but only as a reflection of the immediate past of interest or desire and as foreshadowing the future of current intention. Being tritemporal, the glance constitutes a genuine *moment* of time, as dis-

tinct from an *instant* of time. The instant occurs only in the present; it is the privileged form of the present, privileged because conceived as entirely actual, and actual because occurring as a *point*, in particular a now-point.¹⁰⁷

It means that when we glance at our mirror image, our present time is simultaneously and constantly accompanied by our past and our looked-for future. A glance at the mirror brings forth a wholistic temporal summary of past, present and future. Therefore, a look into the specular self grafts onto the present self both the anticipation of the future and the retroaction of the past.

It should also be noted here that there exists no pure self in the present. As a large number of philosophical and psychological studies have demonstrated, what the subject is in her ongoing present is built upon the perpetual accumulation of her past and also on her anticipation of the future. The individual remains a “subject in process” (“*sujet en procès*”), as Kristeva calls it in her theory of subject formation, emphasizing both meanings of the term “process”:

all identities are unstable: the identity of linguistic signs, the identity of meaning and, as a result, the identity of the speaker. And in order to take account of this de-stabilization of meaning and of the subject I thought the term “subject in process” would be appropriate. “Process” in the sense of process but also in the sense of legal proceeding where the subject is committed to trial, because our identities in life are constantly called into question, brought to trial over-ruled.¹⁰⁸

The subject is continuous and plural. It can only be defined momentarily and relationally in a process of what Deleuze calls “pure ceaseless becoming.”¹⁰⁹

There are ample cases in literature and philosophy in which the mirror serves as a metaphor for the memory. This is because there is a virtuality to the mirror image which is analogous to the reality of the bodily self, exactly in the same manner as there is a virtuality to the memory analogous to the reality of the subject’s passing present. As instances of “*dédou-blement*,” both mirror and memory provide us with virtuality while our physical presence and our present state and actions remain the realities of our selves.¹¹⁰ It is in this sense that the French philosopher, Henri Bergson, associates memory with the mirror, locating them both within the same order:

Our actual existence then, whilst it is unrolled in time, duplicates itself all along with a virtual existence, a mirror-image. Every moment of our life presents two aspects, it is actual and virtual, perception on the one side and memory on the other. Each moment is split up as and when it is posited. Or rather, it consists in this very splitting, for the present moment, always going forward, fleeting limit between the immediate past which is now no more and the immediate future which is not yet, would be a mere abstraction were it not the moving mirror which continually reflects perception as a memory.¹¹¹

Somewhere else, Bergson explains further:

we feel vaguely that our past remains present to us. What are we, in fact, what is our *character*, if not the condensation of the history that we have lived from our birth—nay, even before our birth, since we bring with us prenatal dispositions? Doubtless we think with only a small part of our past, but it is with our entire past, including the original bent of our soul, that we desire, will and act. Our past, then, as a whole, is made manifest to us in its impulse; it is felt in the form of tendency, although a small part of it only is known in the form of idea.¹¹²

In this regard, the mirror image is *not* a reality; it is a summary of our conceptual image which associates itself with the corresponding representation perceived in the mirror, enhanced with our feelings. The present feeling is built up of the feelings of the past and feelings towards one's future; one's hopes, anxieties and fears in anticipation of the future. Mutability and change is the requisite concomitant phenomenon of temporality, that is to say, any alteration takes its own time and time leads to alterations. We turn to the mirror because we are looking for changes, the insurmountable constant changes we are experiencing at every moment. The look into the mirror helps us to foresee the future changes in our bodily self and our life ahead. Within the mirror the concept of *tempus edax rerum* (time, that devours all things), visualizes itself vividly.¹¹³ In an epiphanic moment, the mirror onlooker may realize that he is nothing but time, transience embodied. It should be noted here that the haunting anxiety accompanying the mirror experience is related to both the temporal and spatial dimensions of the mirror. Furthermore, the mirror and mind, both being spaces for visual perceptions, have been turned into a metaphor for each other. Shengold discusses that the mirror, in fact, "can represent a working model of the mind."¹¹⁴

For the adult spectator, the look into the mirror does not function in the same manner as the primordial identification of the child in the Lacanian mirror-stage of his ego-formation, but it brings forth a *reidentification*, to see if he still looks like the person he last looked at and to trace the visible alterations. Moreover, the person who perceives his image in the mirror is not the same person before the act of perception. Now the self is refashioned by that perception, by his interpretation of that specular image which remains to some extent always distorted.

Though it may seem paradoxical, the mirror reflection, like memory, is psychologically internal to the subject.¹¹⁵ Therefore, like the mirror, memory has the potential power to facilitate the emancipation of the self: “Memory is not exactly the site of freedom, but the layering of identity and memory is the only basis for moving forward through time.”¹¹⁶ This is mainly because for the individual’s freedom it requires all tritemporality, i.e., the present and the anticipated future which are built upon the personal past history. Many poets, including Farrokhzad and Plath, had a thorough-going familiarity with the mirror’s temporal dimension and its ability to sum up past, present and future simultaneously. Farrokhzad and Plath have portrayed the temporality of the mirror figuratively in their works.

Mother-Daughter: The Mutual Mirroring

The temporality of the mirror, its capacity to depict the passage of time, is central to the theme of reflection of the mother in the mirror of the daughter in her continual process of becomings. Many female writers have expressed their astonishment, as well as their resentment, at becoming an image of their mothers. Instead of seeing their own image in their mirrors, they have encountered their mothers’ reflection in it. This image dislocation implies the inevitability of taking on the mother’s identity and her fate by the daughter, where the cultural forces push women into a homogeneous image of womanhood considered as the norm. Gallop writes about the female subject’s “obligation to reproduce,” both in terms of giving birth and in terms of reproducing the mother’s story.¹¹⁷ This inevitability also implies the powerful hold of the mother agent on her daughter. The daughter usually views this hold with despair and resentment and struggles to free herself from it.

The daughter’s ambivalent desire for the pre-oedipal relationship with her mother, as Irigaray calls the “archaic desire between the woman and the

mother,” has two dimensions: the mother who is now the rival and at the same time the object of her desire.¹¹⁸ De Beauvoir observes:

The daughter is for the mother at once her double and another person, the mother is at once overweeningly affectionate and hostile toward her daughter; she saddles her child with her own destiny: a way of proudly laying claim to her own femininity and also a way of revenging herself for it. ... she [The daughter] imitates her mother and identifies herself with her; frequently she even reverses their respective roles. ... the real child is also an *alter ego* for the mother.¹¹⁹

On the one hand, this desire promises an empowering union with the mother, in which they can provide each other with comfort and support. This kind of comforting support cannot be provided by anybody else, because of the mother’s and daughter’s exclusive access to a common knowledge and common experience. Rich claims that the mother and her daughter share “a knowledge that is subliminal, subversive, pre-verbal: the knowledge flowing between two bodies, one of which has spent nine months inside the other.”¹²⁰

On the other hand, unity with the mother may lead to an effacement of the daughter, the elimination of her individuation and her total dissolution in the identity of the mother. Therefore, through unity with her mother, the daughter may risk her identity as a separate and independent entity; since, as Rubenstein observes, the “ego boundaries between daughter and mother are often merged.”¹²¹ This mainly happens in women because, as Chodorow puts it, a female subject’s “experience of self contains more flexible and permeable ego boundaries.”¹²² Chodorow continues by defining the female’s sense of self against that of males in the following words: “The basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world, the basic masculine sense of self is separate.”¹²³ Consequently, the daughter often becomes the very extension of the mother, her replica with only a lapse of time in between. La Belle remarks, “The daughter is in part a genetic replication of the mother, a biological *mirroring* that can be signified by the image in the glass.”¹²⁴ And this “very continuity of identity with the mother” is, according to Flax, “a central problematic in female development.”¹²⁵ It has become problematic because “the development of women’s core identity is threatened and impeded by an inability to differentiate from the mother.”¹²⁶ It turns problematic also because this pre-Oedipal dependency on the mother functions as an encumbering dependency, preventing the daughter “from discovering

her own body as other, different,” as Kristeva argues.¹²⁷ Furthermore, the situation remains ironic as long as the development of one’s discrete identity from that of mother’s is initiated by the reflection of the self in the mother’s eyes, regarded as the infant’s first mirror. Shengold argues, “Individuation develops from the situation of mirroring that starts with the first reflections of the infant in the mirror of its mother’s eyes.”¹²⁸

The obliteration of the ego boundary and the effacement of identity will ultimately turn the daughter into “a completely petrified being,” as Irigaray notes in her essay with a highly suggestive title, “And the One Doesn’t Stir without the Other.”¹²⁹ There, the speaker addresses her mother, pleading for a release from her paralytic engulfment. Irigaray astutely depicts the broad overlap of the daughter’s selfhood with that of her mother; as well as the intertwined interaction of her narcissistic self-image and her authentic voice. The speaker not only reflects an image of her mother, but also echoes her voice—aural mirroring:

You look at yourself in the mirror. And already you see your own mother there. And soon your daughter, a mother. Between the two, what are you? What space is yours alone? In what frame must you contain yourself? And how to let your face show through, beyond all the masks? ... There’s just a pause: the time for the one to become the other.¹³⁰

The speaker claims that she and her mother are like “living mirrors,” involved in a continuous and endless exchange of selves.¹³¹ The daughter continues by revealing her strong resentment at the mother’s grip on her and at the bereavement of her image and voice: “You [the mother] put yourself in my mouth, and I suffocate.”¹³² The losses of one’s self-image and one’s authentic voice remain inseparable. This is also reminiscent of what Jung, in his essay “The Psychological Aspects of the Kore” observes:

Every mother contains her daughter within herself, and every daughter her mother, and that every woman extends backwards into her mother and forwards into her daughter. This participation and intermingling give rise to that peculiar uncertainty as regards *time*: a woman lives earlier as mother, later as a daughter. The conscious experience of these ties produces the feeling that her life is spread out over generations.¹³³

The temporality of the mirror is instrumental in the realization and expression of any alteration coming over a subject. When a female subject encoun-

ters her mother's image in the mirror, this image dislocation can indicate the alteration that has already taken place in the past, or which is taking place in the present in her process of becoming, or it can even be a foreshadow of a metamorphosis which will be happening to her in the future. In this sense, the mirror is endowed with prophetic powers. It turns into a cognizant catoptronic mirror in the hands of a female subject; a surreal omniscient surface by means of which she can traverse the limits of time and space.¹³⁴

The female subject's prophetic mirror carries with it the forebodings of the coming of age, loss of youth and beauty, degeneration and death. The daughter's fear of a total loss of selfhood in that of her mother often leads to a broader fear, which Sukenick terms "matrophobia."¹³⁵ Matrophobic women often feel a strong aversion to "the claims of emotion," and to whatever is regarded as feminine in their selves.¹³⁶ They believe that these so-called feminine qualities force them into an utter effacement and self-nullification in their repetition of their mothers' and grandmothers' images. Rich provides a definition of matrophobia as follows:

Matrophobia can be seen as a womanly splitting of the self, in the desire to become purged once and for all of our mothers' bondage, to become individuated and free. The mother stands for the victim in ourselves, the unfree woman, the martyr. Our personalities seem dangerously to blur and overlap with our mothers'; and, in desperate attempt to know where mother ends and daughter begins, we perform radical surgery.¹³⁷

Irigaray is, indeed, perceptive in her play with the mirror in its different facets. She reveals the mother's lack of selfhood by claiming, "Furtively, you [the mother] verify your own continued existence in the mirror," as if without the mirror she would have no other proof of her existence and no identity beyond that reflected image.¹³⁸ This is exactly what is expected from her in society; to be a flat image which can be presented to the world in its totality. Therefore, the daughter inevitably becomes "the uninhabited region of your [her mother's] reflections."¹³⁹ The mother desires a reflectiveness; a reflection of her own which she has been systematically denied in the patriarchal culture. The only outlet she can find for this reflectiveness of herself remains within her daughter, a double, a repetition of herself. In reflecting the mother's immobility, the daughter herself becomes immobile, a "statue." Irigaray unmasks the despair and at the same time the anger of the daughter at her mother's total lack of personhood and, consequently,

her own, as an extension of her mother. At the end of her article, Irigaray expresses her wish that her mother had kept her very own subjectivity even after giving birth to her: “And what I wanted from you, Mother, was this: that in giving me life, you still remain alive.”¹⁴⁰

Mirroring in Text

Texts have traditionally been considered as mirrors for their reflecting and representing capabilities. The metaphorical image of the text as a mirror has been employed to convey paradoxical meanings. In Europe, the conceptualization of texts as mirrors of their authors was developed by Romanticism (in the second half of the 18th century), which invited the reader to identify with the author and to discover the author’s superiority as a genius. Before that, literary texts were regarded as skilful variations of older texts. These texts usually carried a didactic message, with the reader recognizing that the text had implications regarding his moral life. With the advent of Realism in the 19th century, texts were regarded as mirrors of their society. The reader was asked to understand the text as a representation of the social world he lived in, and to identify with the main (positive) characters.¹⁴¹

In the author-centred view of the text as a mirror of the author, the text reflects the author’s experiences, feelings and thoughts, leaving the reader almost out of the picture. However, in another contradictory meaning, texts have been considered as mirrors held up, not to the author, but to the reader. The author loses his prominent place in this sense and the reader becomes all significant. The early twelfth-century Persian Sufi thinker ‘Ayn-ol-Qożāt Hamadānī (d. 1131) succinctly explains the meaning of the text-as-a-mirror metaphor, particularly in poetry, in the following words:

O gentleman! Consider these poems as mirrors, for you know the mirror has no face of its own, but everyone looking at it sees his own face. Likewise, there is no intrinsic meaning in a poem, but rather every reader sees his own present state of mind in it and brings into it his utmost knowledge in its interpretation; and if you say that the poem has a meaning which its poet had intended for it, and that other readers are imposing other meanings from themselves, it is as if someone says the face in the mirror is the face of its initial polisher which appeared on it for the first time. Explicating this concept is so difficult and complex that if I start it, I will digress from my main point.¹⁴²

Insisting that the only real face in the text/mirror is the face of its initial author/polisher is indeed what is called “intentional fallacy”. The metaphorical meaning of the text as a mirror held up to the reader corresponds to what Reception theory and Reader Response theory publicize and still remains one of the most controversial tenets of post-structuralism. This idea was promoted by Barthes in his 1968 essay “The Death of the Author.” Barthes contends that it is not the author who is speaking in the text, but the language itself. Once the text (mirror) is in circulation, the umbilical cord connecting the text (mirror) to the author (initial polisher) is severed and the text (mirror) gains its independence, able to reflect the multiple readers (beholders). Writing, according to Barthes, is “that neutral composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing.”¹⁴³

This is exactly what happens in the mirror and to the Lacanian subject. In this meaning text, like the mirror, can reveal and simultaneously deceive. Furthermore, the different temporality discussed by Barthes has not escaped the perspicacious observance of the Persian Sufi thinker, Hamadānī (discussed succinctly above) in his analogy. Barthes argues:

The temporality is different. The Author, when believed in, is always conceived of as the past of his own book: book and author stand automatically on a single line divided into a *before* and an *after*. The author is thought to *nourish* the book, which is to say that he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it, is in the same relation of antecedence to his work as a father to his child. In complete contrast, the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing, is not the subject with the book as predicate; there is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written *here and now*.¹⁴⁴

In this study, I am not concerned with this second metaphorical meaning of the text and will concentrate on the first meaning, i.e., the metaphor of text as a mirror held up to its author.

A subject’s need for the objectification of his self in order to know, create and express that subjectivity through the medium of the mirror, as well as the psychologically complex interaction of one’s narcissistic self and the mirror has been discussed above. There remains another medium through which this self-objectification can be enacted—a text. A subject can enter into the same dialogical reciprocity with her text as with her

mirror. Therefore, glass and paper (or nowadays computer screen) can be interchangeably used with the same psychological function. Paper (or the screen) can provide the subject with the same medium as glass for the outpouring of the narcissistic self. This becomes particularly manifest when that writing is in the form of autobiography. Text and mirror can function as alternative means for proving and sustaining the female subject's existence. This is because, for any production such as writing, there should be a subjectivity involved and an agent active in the process of creation. Through a sustained act of creation and re-creation, the subject can reassure herself of her continual existence.

On the other hand, a look into the mirror (as discussed earlier) can facilitate a subject's crossing time-lines. Just as can happen in a text, this time-line crossing allows for dreams and fantasies. Moreover, the portrayal of mirror image in one's mirror-text can provide the author with a starting-point for considering, discussing and presenting his identity self-reflexively. Therefore, it is very true that for a woman "poetry is not a luxury"; it can become a desideratum, "a vital necessity".¹⁴⁵

It should be noted here that not many women write or read poetry. However, if women do think about their own identity, they must inevitably consider the social construction of femininity, for which the mirror is a central metaphor; and if they do not keep their reflections private, but make them public and wish to address women in general, then the writing of autobiographical texts may indeed become a necessary element of female discourse.

Texts and mirrors function as the two semiotic modes—the linguistic and the catoptric—for the consciousness and objectification of the self. They are both "subjective semiotic system[s]" available to be read.¹⁴⁶ Text is indeed a mirror made up of language; it is not visual, but symbolic. Language consists of signifiers which refer to objects that are absent. Therefore, this means that the lack of completion is always already recognized. To reflect on oneself by writing about oneself means to implicitly recognize the lack of one's being and hence the necessity to give it a meaning; to (re)construct and scrutinize one's self from an external position, often retrospectively. However, it is still the self that is reflecting upon himself, making it an imaginary activity.

With the act of mirroring and writing the female subject is actually struggling "to incorporate the signifier [the mirror image/written subject] and the signified [the human observer present in front of the mirror/writing subject] within a totalizing phenomenology of self-consciousness."¹⁴⁷ By objectifying herself either on the glass or on a piece of paper, the female

subject can gain knowledge of her self. She relies heavily on this *reflection*—specular/perceptive or mental/thought—for her sense of continual existence. This means that the subject can reflect herself both on the glass and on the paper.¹⁴⁸ La Belle emphasizes, “Texts and mirrors can perform similar psychological functions for women, particularly during periods in their lives when objectification and consciousness of self becomes necessary.”¹⁴⁹

Through the act of writing, particularly in the form of autobiography, as Olney explains, the author is “bringing to consciousness of the nature of one’s own existence, transforming the mere fact of existence into a realized quality and a possible meaning.”¹⁵⁰ To acquire self-knowledge and to present that self to the world outside, the introspected, on the mirror or in text, is introjected into the introspector. By the objectification in their texts, just as in their mirrors, female writers are in fact constructing themselves. Andreas-Salomé observes, “Objectivity is mankind’s glorious goal, summoning narcissism, Eros masked, from the dreams of childhood to the service of research, progress, art and culture.”¹⁵¹ She further claims that “the compulsion toward objectification in narcissistic identification is the foundation of all creativity.”¹⁵²

This very act of writing, for the female subject, has often become a repudiation of patriarchal law and its rigid definition of sexual difference, which excludes women from involvement in the writing and intellectual spheres; a repudiation which sometimes leads to the stigmatization of them as mad women.¹⁵³ Particularly in the twentieth century, women’s autobiographies became a major medium for criticizing patriarchy, because those authors were not content with their enforced self-images or their role in society. They felt the contractions of twentieth century womanhood. Their self often became insecure, vulnerable or they may even have experienced anxiety, paranoia and so forth.

Therefore, writing an autobiographical text for a woman may turn into an inscription of the gendered history of the subject’s anxiety in the process of continual becoming and the incessant adoption of identities. Butler argues that the identity, like the ego, is something to be produced and developed. Identity is a dynamic “effect,” constructed during social processes and it is not universalized, “foundational” and “fixed.”¹⁵⁴ The identity is gendered because every experience and every personal history is gendered. Mitchell argues:

I do not think that we can live as human subjects without in some sense taking on a history; for us, it is mainly the history of being men or women

under bourgeois capitalism. In deconstructing that history, we can only construct other histories. What are we in the process of becoming?¹⁵⁵

The female writer may go through the anxiety of reconciling the powerful and recurrent self images with which her society incessantly bombards her, and her very own authentic images. These social images position her on the side either of an angel or a monster—a binary opposition. However, a construction of one's very own genuine self, untouched by society's images and by the "cultural noise pollution," in Meyers's words, would be impossible.¹⁵⁶ The chaste authenticity of one's self-image and the autonomy of one's writing or voice can only happen in a virtual "placeless place"—a utopia. Gilbert and Gubar discuss this in their influential work *The Madwoman in the Attic*:

Before the woman writer can journey through the looking glass toward literary autonomy, however, she must come to terms with the images on the surface of the glass, with, that is, those mythic masks male artists have fastened over her human face both to lessen their dread of her "inconstancy" and—by identifying her with the "eternal types" they have themselves invented—to possess her more thoroughly. ... a woman writer must examine, assimilate, and transcend the extreme images of "angel" and "monster" which male authors have generated for her. Before we women can write, declared Virginia Woolf, we must "kill" the "angel in the house." In other words, women must kill the aesthetic ideal through which they themselves have been "killed" into art. And similarly, all women writers must kill the angel's necessary opposite and double, the "monster" in the house, whose Medusa-face also kills female creativity.¹⁵⁷

Talking about journeying *through* the looking-glass (in an allusion to Carroll's book *Alice in Wonderland*), Gilbert and Gubar imply that women must shatter their fixation on the male gaze and social constructions of femininity—not to discover an authentic self, but rather to rearrange the shards of the broken mirror to come up with a different idea of self. In fact, writing can provide women with a heterotopic space, in some sense utopian, where they can enact their marginalized position, their desires, their experiences and their bodies, which they have been forbidden to do in their real socio-cultural space. Therefore, women's existential need for writing themselves into their texts and giving voice to their own experiences is as much political as psychological.¹⁵⁸

For Farrokhzad and Plath, as well as for many other women, self-realization remains in a close relationship with their self-narration. For them, productivity in the form of writing becomes a matter of survival; and non-productivity equates with non-existence. This is also because, as Cixous explains in her famous manifesto on feminine writing, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” women write from, and gain strength through, the unconscious. Cixous maintains:

To write. An act which will not only “realize” the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal; it will tear her away from the superegoized structure in which she has always occupied the place reserved for the guilty (guilty of everything, guilty at every turn: for having desires, for not having any, for being rigid, for being “too hot”; for not being both at once; for being too motherly and not enough; for having children and for not having any; for nursing and for not nursing ...)—tear her away by means of this research, this job of analysis and illumination, this emancipation of the marvelous text of her self that she must urgently learn to speak.¹⁵⁹

Cixous’s remark grounds women’s writing in culturally repressed spaces or, at the very least, minoritized as second best, or deficient compared to accepted, male-dominated modes of self-expression.

Among the different literary genres, poetry appears to be the most privileged form for the creation, recreation and also presentation of the “subject-in-becoming” or the Kistevan “subject-in-process.” Melchior-Bonnet observes:

Poetry, like the mirror, restores symbolic activity, and far from turning its horn against itself, like the unicorn before the mirror or the subject of the poem, it is nourished by “the possibility of being.”¹⁶⁰

Furthermore, poetry is a fragmented piece, with separate and ostensibly irrelevant units, which makes it an ideal form for the presentation of an essentially fragmented self. Poetic language, observes Sellers, also “incorporates the unconscious and body-rhythms in a way other forms of language do not.”¹⁶¹ Thereby, poetry can, more than any other genre, participate in the Imaginary. Robbins explains, “Poetry, with its creative disruptions of gram-

matal rules, syntax and vocabulary partakes of the Imaginary, even as it also functions within the Symbolic.”¹⁶² In poetry, particularly in the lyrical variety, the subject can gain a powerful centrality, dominating the whole poem. Therefore, like the mirror, the poem becomes a convenient space for dealing with the subject and its complex problematic. This central “I,” in lyrical poetry, can modify every other thing around it, including one’s own mirror-image, as Wehinger explains in the following words:

The peculiarity of lyrical diction gives priority to the subject and allows him—as measured by the language of everyday life—the freedom to modify the second person and to speak to all people and objects as well as natural phenomena, or phantoms, not least their own mirror image.¹⁶³

Schenck, stressing poetry’s potential as a space, adds, “Poetry as autobiography constitutes a potential space in which a subject may be repeatedly and *repeatably* present to herself during the act of utterance.”¹⁶⁴ This heterotopic space of poetry provides the female subject with an alternative means (to that of mirror) by which she can (re)construct voice, body and images of her own creation, which are often totally discordant with the images of womanhood her culture has ordained for her. It is only within this space that she is given the opportunity to reconstruct and to (re)present her own incoherent and split—at times warring—images of selfhood in the process of her becoming. Olney claims: “... by its very nature, the self is (like the autobiography that records and creates it) open-ended and incomplete: it is always in process or, more precisely, is itself a process.”¹⁶⁵ Folkenflik maintains that autobiography is itself a metaphor of the mirror stage; “one can think of autobiography itself as a mirror stage in life, an extended moment that enables one to reflect on oneself by presenting an image of the self for contemplation.”¹⁶⁶

Farrokhzad and Plath have both managed to establish a close narcissistic reciprocal relationship between their subjects and their texts. In their texts, they set down on paper a portrayal of their past experiences, their present feelings and desires, and even their anticipation of the future, often fearful but at other times peaceful. For them, text, like a mirror, is a site not only for the realization and expression of the self, but also for the creation of the self. Poetry as mirror, for both Farrokhzad and Plath, provides a space for directly engaging with their selves by adopting the three different modes of self-inquiry, self-reflection and self-expression. Hence, the mirror metaphor turns out to be the most appropriate figure—not simply the

figure of speech, but also the figure of thought. These female authors' need for self-affirmation and social acceptance from within their marginalized position and their struggle to move beyond that position are well reflected in their texts. They inscribe their "subject-in-process" into their texts, and establish an intimate connection between their selves and their texts. It is pertinent to note that Farrokhzad and Plath have also both tried their hand at drawing their own self-portraits, the study of which would be beyond the scope of this book.