

THE TONY CHADWICK ESSAY PRIZE 1993 - WINNING ESSAY

THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

by Ronald Cretchley

In 1858 George MacDonald's 'Phantastes' appeared. In it the author poses some philosophical questions as the following extract indicates: "Why are all reflections lovelier than what we call the reality? - not so grand or so strong, it may be, but always lovelier? Fair as is the gliding sloop on the shining sea, the wavering, trembling, unresting sail below is fairer still.... All mirrors are magic mirrors. The commonest room is a room in a poem when I turn to the glass.... In whatever way it may be accounted for, of one thing we may be sure, this feeling is no cheat; for there is no cheating in nature and the simple unsought feelings of the soul. There must be a truth involved in it, though we may but in part lay hold of the meaning."

Lewis Carroll was also fascinated by a world 'through the looking-glass'. A mirror offers a peep-hole through which we see another world. MacDonald uses the same metaphor when he writes about "beholding past delights and pains through clefts in grey clouds of sorrow". These events perceived through a cleft, "are lovely as Fairy Land".

In the case of looking into a mirror we are seemingly shifting a present place into another location in space. When looking into the 'mirror of mind' at past events we are making a leap from one location in time to another.

Both situations make one see the familiar with fresh eyes, and this, it has been stated by Owen Barfield (1) is what art is all about. The principle function of poetry, he suggests, is to achieve a passage from one plane of consciousness to another. The poetic mood lives during that moment of transition.

There appears to be an affinity between Barfield's 'poetic mood in the moment of transition', and MacDonald's observation that 'the commonest room is a room in a poem when I turn to the glass'. It was in the nature of an exercise in verification that I approached a wall-mirror.

The first impression is one of mild shock - the room has been rearranged; and there through the window is the garden in which I have never walked. This rearrangement of the familiar introduces a feeling of strangeness which gives pleasure.

Everything in the 'other world', including myself, is inverted. There is a sense in which my 'other self' is better known than my 'real self', for it is always the former which is observed; never the latter. Of the real self only parts are visible at a time and, of the face, nothing but the nose seen squint-eyed.

I can never see my other self looking at the other world. The clock on the mantelpiece backs onto the wall upon which the mirror hangs. My other self can only tell the time when I, the real self, do so. If I try to catch the other self telling the time I merely find myself staring at his eyes instead. If I look at the other world I have to assume my other self is looking out at the 'real world', but again, I can never catch him doing so except in the one act of **looking me in the eyes**

If I turn round and examine my real world I know that my other self has turned to the other world and is occupied in examining that. I can see him doing so out of the corner of my eye in part of my real world, the mirror. The other world is entirely dependent upon the real world inasmuch as the other self is made possible by a special part of the real world. The whole of the other world is contained in that part of the real world which is my mirror.

What the other world needs to complete it is a mirror for the other self to look into. He has everything I have except a mirror. I hold a hand-mirror to the wall-mirror, glass-to-glass, my eyes peering above it into the wallmirror. Instantly I gaze down a tunnel that has no end; row upon row of pairs of eyes recede into the distance. The tunnel leads into the other world, not into the real.

Playing the looking-glass game has its serious as well as comic aspects. Observing the 'tunnel' calls to mind the principle enunciated by Royce (2) which, paraphrased, becomes: When that which symbolizes is contained in that which is being symbolized (the whole), it is logically necessary for the symbol to symbolize itself. But in the process of symbolizing itself, something is added to the whole which must be included in the representation. This demand is regressive.

The looking-glass game is an example of this principle. The wall-mirror in symbolizing my real world is itself contained in it. My other self lacked a mirror, logically necessary to complete his world. The hand-mirror symbolized the symbol, i.e. it created another world within the other world, and in doing so attempted to satisfy the regressive demand. There is, I believe, an analogy to be drawn between the looking-glass game and the cognitive game we play throughout life. The process of growing up and becoming familiar with our world has been suggested by Russell Brain (3) as a mapping in our central nervous system of what we term the objective world:

"The receptive function of the brain is to provide us with a symbolical representation of the physical world outside it... My perceptual 'world', therefore, is a kind of map. It is not identical with the physical 'world' any more than a map is identical with the country which it represents".

The mirror or other world is analogous to our mapped world. Whatever the coding or patterning adopted by our brains, we acquire a world which is symbolic of the real world. In the other world the regress exists for the other self but the real self knows it to be an illusion. Similarly, because our brains are part of the real world the regressive demand must exist. The looking-glass world suggests that my other self is better known than my real self. Yet the other world depends upon, and is contained in the real world. Similarly it is my symbolic self which is known, not the real self, just as it is my symbolic world which is known and not the real world. Again, just as the 'tunnel' leads into the other world and is not contained in the real world, so the infinite regress bores its way into our symbolic world which is beset with paradox. The prime example is the infinite regress of selves which self-awareness seems to suggest. Yet the analogy tells us that the regress does not exist in the real world, and because it does not exist it cannot be anything but an illusory demand of the other world.

In the looking-glass game there is a unique situation. With one exception neither self can look at the other self **looking**; it is always something other which is being looked at. The only act of **looking** which can be **looked at** is self looking at self. Then the eyes meet.

Only when self stares self in the eyes are we truly conscious of a self looking, but then we are no longer existentially aware of the world. It becomes only vaguely present and as a hazy backdrop; not concrete. The moment we begin to explore the world again we have taken leave of self. Only **one** mode of awareness is possible at a time. There seems to be only one way out of the dilemma of ‘existential wonder without self’, or ‘self without existential wonder’, and that is by introducing and identifying with a third-observer capable of both states simultaneously. This condition is that of Emily in Thornton Wilder’s play ‘Our Town’. After she dies she realizes that “one can go back and live all those days over again. But now we not only live it, but watch ourselves living it”.

Summary

The looking-glass game, it has been suggested, is analogous to the following aspects of our identity:

- (1) There is an existentially aware real self in the real world, not conscious of self. To be existentially aware is to be certain of the felt reality of the selfless, timeless, and unbounded experience, and of the illusory nature of the symbolic world.
- (2) There is an other self in the other world which the real self knows to be illusory. The mirrored world is analogous to the conceptually mapped world of discursive thought in which reason, and the frustration of logic (paradox) both play their parts. The infinite regress exists in the mapped world for the other self, but the real self knows it to be an illusion.
- (3) There is a **felt** (as opposed to a conceptualized) sense of self (of ‘I am’) which is analogous to the unique looking-glass event of **when the eyes meet**. This is a state which excludes all other awareness.
- (4) There is the real self watching out of the corner of the eye the other self, and reflecting upon him. This is analogous to the thinking state of self-consciousness.
- (5) By looking into the mirror at the other world **avoiding the other self** the ‘strangeness’ of disorientation ‘shocks’ the real self out of its thinking state into a fresh existential awareness of the real world. The shock results from the fact that we have no cerebral map of the inverted world we see. Sight of the mirrored world restores the ‘first vision’ state which was the early infant’s norm, when self-identity as an abstract idea was absent. In ‘shock’, the ego (other self) is lost in an ego-less sense of wonder. Using a map involves **active** participation of the ego towards a specific end. When there is no map, as in early childhood or in the case of a ‘shocked’ adult, there is no goal-seeking activity but rather a receptive enjoyment.
- (6) When once the reflected other self is seen, existential awareness loses its sharpness and fades, to be replaced by self-conscious thought focused upon the other self.

Conclusion

To have the best of both worlds, i.e. to enjoy both modes of awareness together, seems to demand a third observer who combines both the awareness of the existentially aware self (the real self) in the real world with the abstracting self (other self) in the other or mapped world. But it is a contradiction to postulate an observer who **at the same time** combines both aspects

of selfhood when one, the existential, is in a timeless state. Time is an abstraction which pertains solely to the other self.

A more fruitful way to approach the question of the selves which are parts of our identity is to consider the hierarchy within their relationship. Instead of introducing a third observer who combines both roles it seems possible to concentrate upon a single observer who adopts different aspects within a single identity.

The conclusion drawn from playing the looking-glass game is that there is but one real self which is not bound by space-time nor by any abstraction, including that of self itself. The essentially unselfconscious 'selfhood' can, for the pragmatic advantages that accrue, adopt a selfconscious identity in an abstract world of space-time. But if this 'world' only is acknowledged then it becomes illusory together with the self that inhabits it, for it has no substance in isolation from the real world of which it is a derivative aspect.

There is a knower that both experiences and is conceptually conscious of that experience. The knower is the endstop; the knower cannot be known. All mirrors are magic mirrors because they invite us into our first-world of existential wonder as seen through the innocent eye. We leave this Eden when we eat the fruit of the tree of conceptual knowledge. In mirrors, through clefts in clouds, by any shock that shatters the apparent substantiality of our 'thought world', we may re-enter Eden.

Notes

- (1) Barfield O. 'Poetic Diction' Page 52.
- (2) Royce. Supplementary Essay in 'The World and the Individual'.
- (3) Russell Brain W. 'Mind, Perception and Science' Page 59

Bibliography

- (1) MacDonald G. 'Phantastes' J.M.Dent, London.
- (2) Wilder T. 'Our Town' Coward McCann, New York.