The Echo and the Mirror *en abîme* in Victorian Poetry

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In recent French theory, the term *en abîme* describes any fragment of a text that reproduces in small the structure of the text as a whole. Introduced by André Gide in a passage of his *Journal* in 1893, the phrase, which he intended as a characterization of his own reduplicative techniques, had as its origin an ancient visual device – that of the miniature heraldic shield enclosed within another shield whose shape and inner divisions it repeats exactly. There had, to be sure, been earlier examples of internal mirror effects in painting and literature – Gide cites the literary instances of *Hamlet*, *Wilhelm Meister*, and “The Fall of the House of Usher.”¹ But in order to distinguish his own strategies from those of simple doubling, he felt the need to fashion a new critical term – “*en abîme*” – to indicate the idea of multiple replication. From Gide’s coinage in the *Notebooks* and exemplary practice in *Narcisse*, *La Tentative*, and *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, it is but a short step to the *mise en abîme* of post-Saussurean, post-structuralist theory, where we are invited to follow, in Jacques Derrida’s words, “a book in the book, an origin in the origin, a center in the center”² beyond the inmost bound of human thought. In short, the *mise en abîme* generated by Derrida’s elaboration of bottomless *differance* uncovers a frame within a frame in endless replication – what one thinks of in more homely terms as the Dutch-Cleanser, Quaker-Oats or Morton-Salt effects of commercial packaging.

It is no accident that the concept was given its initial literary definition in the nineteenth century. In his famous characterization of “the Piranesi effect,” for instance, Thomas De Quincey recalls the play within a play in *Hamlet* and compares this to a room on whose wall is a picture of that room, on whose wall is a picture of that room, on whose wall is a picture of that room . . ., and concludes that “we might imagine this descent into a life below a life going on *ad infinitum*” into “abysses that swallow . . . up abysses.” And Alfred Tennyson conveys to perfection what Gide meant by *en abîme* in the very context of Gide’s heraldic etymology: Lancelot’s shield in “The Lady of Shalott” with its image of a knight forever kneeling to his lady gives us in microcosm the larger structure of desire in the poem. That is, whatever its history in French theory and literature, the device, or something very much like it, also accentuated itself in English Victorian poetry in the auditory guise of the echo and the visual one of the mirror, sometimes in tandem. It demonstrated thereby the nineteenth-century English sources – Arnold’s tortured and unending “dialogue of the mind with itself” – of modernist reflexiveness.

The formal expression of man’s cognitive self-enclosure for the period is the dramatic monologue, with its limited aperture of the single personality’s straitened vista upon the world. The very narrowness of the “single window” in the monologue, however, makes for a compensatorily rich depth; the outer frame can compose a wildly proliferative inner cosmos, the receding strata of voices, for instance, within Robert Browning’s poems. As John Hollander suggests in his exhaustive study of the figure of echo in English literature, dramatic form is an implicit echo chamber whenever a speaker is made to echo a prior voice, the typical situation in Browning’s monologues. In the simplest and most accessible of the monologues, the speaker’s outer voice merely brackets a single interlocutory one – the Duke’s voice, say, in “My Last Duchess” containing the implied answers of the Count’s envoy. But more often that framing impulse leads Browning to the more dazzling rhetorical acrobatics which attract his sophistical protagonists, those “wheel within a wheel” replications their perverse, complex natures require, as his Bishop Blougram insists. At his most convoluted (and increasingly in the later monologues), Browning approaches the frame within-a-frame recessiveness that Erving Goffman has anatomized in *Frame Analysis*, his breakdown of social intercourse at its labyrinthine extreme where only the most patient of listeners can follow.

While others may have their own favorite Browning echo chamber, my candidate for his most recursive Chinese-box instance – or at any rate the one easiest to exfoliate in brief as a paradigm for auditory
regressiveness – is “Dis Aliter Visum; or Le Byron de Nos Jours.” In this maddening tour de force, Browning’s *Last Year at Marienbad*, a woman addresses a famous French poet who out of timidity and a passion for respectability had refused to seize the moment of love with her ten years earlier. Then, they had met by a cliff brow at the seaside; now, she reminisces to him at a windowseat in an enclosed room. As quotation marks envelop quotation marks, point of view becomes ever more recessively entangled until, at the echolalial center of the poem, the woman is imagining what her lover would have imagined himself saying in reply to the speech (sts. xv–xvii) which he had just imagined her making had they indeed decided, as they had not, to marry! And the challenge to the audience becomes even more forbidding in such late monologues as *Balaustion’s Adventure*, *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country*; or *Turf and Towers*, or *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau*, *Saviour of Society*. Perhaps we have not yet reached, even in the most impenetrable of such later mazes, the systematic vocal dislocations of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Nathalie Sarraute or the deepset games of R. D. Laing’s *Knots*. Arguably we are not quite at the seventh remove from the outer voice (“‘ ’ ’ ’ ’ ’” in print) where John Barth locates the innermost voice of his “menelaiaid,” one of the auditory experiments in *Lost in the Funhouse*. But Browning is surely moving in such directions, and the pleasurable strain we experience in disentangling the voices of his intricate echo chambers prepares us for the late games of modernist theory and practice, for an epistemological vertigo that stages itself rhetorically as auditory confusion.

The original sound that the Victorian poet’s voice projects into the world is not of course inevitably indecipherable, or so the situations in some of Tennyson’s poetry assure us. In a brief, early Shelleyan phase, unmediated sound fills the soul of the Tennysonian bard upon the height (as in, say, “Timbuctoo” or “Armageddon”), from which remove he is able to “shake the world” with prophecy. The sound of the Dying Swan, one of Tennyson’s recurring images of the poet’s prophetic voice, flows forth into the world with such a bracing force, flooding an otherwise desolate wasteland with “eddying song.” But very quickly Tennyson’s artist figures suffer an “Icarian fall” from a semidivine to a human condition. As a result, prophecy now floats down from the heights upon a melodic stream to be received by such fallen or “cursed” maidens as Claribel, Mariana, and the Lady of Shalott – artist figures immured within a garden of the mind who try in their turn to reach an audience or a single auditor with their voices. As song flows out of the aesthetic garden, the important question Tennyson considers is how or
even whether the bard’s inspired flow will be received by listeners in the cities of man. Tennyson conceives of a variety of answers to that question in the course of his career from the perspective both of the artist and of the audience, but for the sake of brevity, I will abstract first the positive and then the negative force of his notion of sound, especially of reverberative sound – i.e., the echo.

One of the critical truisms about Tennyson is that he is the poet of the remote in time and space, a poet of the “far, far away” – to echo one of his favorite echoing phrases. “It is the distance,” he maintained to his friend James Knowles late in life, “that charms me in the landscape, the picture and the past, and not the immediate to-day in which I move.”10 If that recessional quality characterizes his visual sense, it informs his sense of sound as well. Sound like sight is most evocative when it is experienced at a “far, far” remove from the original source, and the appeal of echo over simple sound is that the former gives the impression of having traveled great distances, of having bounced off various surfaces on the way to the auditor and of having been rendered numinous in the process. Music, as it moves from the bugle in the lyric “The splendour falls on castle walls” (from The Princess), grows “thinner” and “clearer” the further it travels, the greater the number of wild echoes it achieves. That is, the artist’s sound may dissipate at its source – it is ever “dying, dying, dying.” But the very repetition of the word, like the repetition of “far” in “Far Far-Away” or “break” in “Break, break, break”11 denies that death since it implies an endless life in an answering nature and in the ears of distant auditors:

O love, they [the echoes] die in yon rich sky,
    They faint on hill or field or river:
Our echoes roll from soul to soul,
And grow for ever and for ever.

(ll. 13–16 of “The splendour falls on castle walls”)

To the extent that the echo is nature’s correspondent instrument to the impulse of human speech and sound, theoretically unto infinity, it implies the emergence of sound’s life out of sound’s death – not merely life dying out but also life rolling from soul to soul forward to the starry track. Of the several other instances of a death-and-rebirth pattern one might educe to illustrate Tennyson’s treatment of the answering echo, perhaps the most haunting occurs at the conclusion of the Idylls of the
King. There, the dying wail of the three queens as they escort Arthur toward the distant great deep is answered by a sound from that deep:

Then from the dawn it seemed there came, but faint
As from beyond the limit of the world,
Like the last echo born of a great cry,
Sounds, as if some fair city were one voice
Around a king returning from his wars.

(“The Passing of Arthur,” ll. 457–461)

But the Tennysonian echo is not always so expressive of life rolling to and from the limit of the world, especially in works where the poet-figure does not have much of an impact upon or is misunderstood by his – or rather “her” – audience (since, as Lionel Stevenson demonstrated in a Jungian analysis of the matter, Tennyson in his early poetry habitually rendered himself as an “anima” figure in the guise of isolated maidens12). Perhaps the situation in “The Lady of Shalott” may illustrate the auditory gap as well as any of the early poems (“Anacaona,” “Claribel,” “The Kraken,” “Oenone” or “The Hesperides”) that one might have chosen. In the 1832 version of the poem, a reaper, arguably representing the audience of the Lady’s art, hears the song she sings in her tower:

Underneath the bearded barley,
The reaper, reaping late and early,
Hears her ever chanting cheerly,
Like an angel, singing clearly,
O’er the stream of Camelot.
(ll. 28–32)

By the time of Tennyson’s 1842 revision, the Lady’s “clear” song has been transformed into something more mysterious:

Only reapers, reaping early
In among the bearded barley,
Hear a song that echoes cheerly
From the river winding clearly,
Down to towered Camelot.
(ll. 28–32)

While the single reaper of the first version hears the song directly, the several reapers of the second encounter it as a reverberation off the river, to which the epithet “clear” has now been shifted. It is tempting
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to read something thematic into this change partly for reasons of interpretive originality: to my knowledge no one has argued for its significance. To be honest, however, the change from straight sound to deflected echo in a single stanza may not by itself be very important, but it becomes so if we hear it as a concomitant and reinforcement of a like change in visual emphasis between the 1832 and 1842 versions of “The Lady of Shalott.”

In the 1832 version of the poem, the Lady

lives with little joy or fear.
Over the water, running near,
The sheepbell tinkles in her ear.
Before her hangs a mirror clear,
Reflecting towered Camelot.
(ll. 46–50)

The mirror into which the Lady gazes is primarily that, a literal mirror which is figuratively unremarkable. Since tapestry is woven from the reverse side, a mirror would have been necessary for the Lady to see the design being woven, and that technical craft function is the primary emphasis or is at any rate more obvious in the 1832 than in the equivalent lines in the 1842 version of the poem:

And moving through a mirror clear
That hangs before her all the year,
Shadows of the world appear.
There she sees the highway near
Winding down to Camelot.
(ll. 46–50)

Now the “mirror clear” has moved to the first line of the stanza to become associated with “Shadows of the world” (l. 48) of which, after catching sight of Lancelot, the Lady becomes “‘half sick’” (l. 71). Because of that change, both the ontological and aesthetic oppositions of the poem receive sharpened definition, so that the poem is now usually read as a parable concerning the problematics of mimesis in Tennyson’s early art. Within that “parabolic drift” (Tennyson’s term for his figurative methods), the fact that Lancelot’s image flashes into the Lady’s glass “From the bank and from the river” (l. 105) seems crucial. In the semiotic exchange of the poem, the reapers have to decipher a song that echoes off the river, a second order deflection; but the Lady in her reaction to the sight of Lancelot has to contend not only with his mirror
image but also with a reflection of that same river’s reflection of him, not only with a second but also with a third order reflection, \(^{13}\) i.e. with the *mise en abîme*.

In the historical context of representation theory, it seems important to distinguish between the metaphorical implications of the “Shadows of the world” of which the Lady is “half sick” on the one hand and the mirror on the other as alternative figures of aesthetic imitation. Both the shadow and the mirror of the poem are traceable back to a Platonic ontological dualism. But while the shadow in the famous parable of the cave in *The Republic* assumes the possibility of only a single duplication – one cannot imagine a shadow of an opaque shadow – that is not true of Plato’s mirror. Because a mirror relies upon reflection, there can be a mirror image of a mirror image – indeed, there can theoretically be an infinite series of reflections of reflections of a single putative original. And that is precisely the inner cosmic play of frames implied by the optical situation of “The Lady of Shalott” (not to mention the infinity-of-mirrors conclusion to Orson Welles’ *Lady from Shanghai*), a perceptual abyss in which the “original” image of Lancelot bounces endlessly and without grounding between river and glass, teasing the Lady (or at any rate some recent commentators upon her plight) out of thought as doth eternity.

Consequently, “The Lady of Shalott” has of late achieved a paradigmatic force that extends well beyond the status of the poem as a part of Tennyson’s early work. I have myself argued that the Lady’s movement from mirror to window epitomizes the motion of other nineteenth-century epistemological rebels who seek, at whatever cost, a windowed release from Romantic self-absorption and solipsism, \(^{14}\) while Geoffrey Hartman has read her passion for direct, unmediated contact with the world, her unwillingness to rest content with ungrounded representation, as the best poetic symbol of a Western “desire for reality-mastery as aggressive and fatal as Freud’s death instinct”:

“I am half-sick of shadows,” says the Lady of Shalott, and turns from her mirror to the reality of advent. She did not know that by her avertedness, by staying within representation, she had postponed death. The most art can do, as a mirror of language, is to burn through, in its cold way, the desire for self-definition, fulness of grace, presence; simply to expose the desire to own one’s own name [Hartman’s context is Lacanian], to inhabit it numinously in the form of “proper” noun, words, or the signatory act each poem aspires to be. \(^{15}\)

Thus, when the knights and burghers of Camelot gather around the barge which has floated her body down to Camelot, all they can know
of her being is her name, “The Lady of Shalott,” inscribed upon the prow of her barge. The Lady thus becomes in death what she was, unbeknownst to herself, in life: a “floating signifier,” in Hartman’s inspired pun (p. 107). That is, “The Lady of Shalott” serves for Hartman precisely what “The Purloined Letter” did for Lacan in his now famous seminar on Poe’s story – as an allegory of the signifier floating through the abyss.

To be sure, such an abyss – like the *mise en abîme* itself – is hardly the invention of the present or even the Victorian age, whatever the current fashion of the concept. Possibly alluded to as early as Euripides, it served as a model for Neo-Platonic notions of Being from Plotinus to Macrobius. In the transition from the dualistic Platonic philosophy with its divisions of Being into Ideas and their Forms to a hierarchy with several gradations, the Neo-Platonists evidently preferred Plato’s mirror figure to his shadow figure because it is possible to have mirror images of a mirror but not even a single shadow of a shadow; and Richard Rorty, arguing for a “philosophy without mirrors,” has recently shown in his influential *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* the systematic centrality of the mirror metaphor in ontology from Plato to Kant. There is a running debate these days, chronicled in Herbert Grabes’ *The Mutable Glass*, concerning the extent to which the fashion for mirrors and mirror imagery from the late Middle Ages onward is attributable to the improvement and cheap mass production by the Venetians of glass mirrors and the extent to which that fashion demonstrates a new Hamletic consciousness, a post-Cartesian increase in reflexiveness of thought, and a deep shift in reciprocity of subject and object. Within the frame of that debate, if the 1832 version of “The Lady of Shalott” with its concentration upon the craft function of the mirror may be said to support the former technological explanation, the 1842 version with its profusion of mimetic reflectors supports the latter epistemological one. Indeed, as Christopher Ricks has shown, the parabolic use of the mirror in the poem is directly imitative of an earlier Neo-Platonic mirror scene, the one in Book III, Canto ii of *The Faerie Queene* where Britomart in her tower first spies and falls in love with Artegall in a “wondrous myrrhour.”

Nineteenth-century adaptations of the ontological and aesthetic mirror are, as I have said, generally traceable to a Platonic paradigm of the twofold remove of art from archetypal forms. Specifically, in the tenth book of *The Republic*, Socrates explains the mimetic nature of art by an analogy: while the maker of an actual table or bed imitates the
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Ideas of those things, the artist has another way. “What way?” asks Glaucon. “An easy enough way,” Socrates replies,

or rather, there are many ways in which the feat might be quickly and easily accomplished, none quicker than that of turning a mirror round and round – you would soon enough make the sun and the heavens, and the earth and yourself, and the other animals and plants, and all the other things of which we were just now speaking, in the mirror (italics added). ¹⁹

While Plato – or Socrates for him – evolves several negative consequences of this turning mirror as an instrument of cognitive deception, one can see its more positive potential for a later Aristotelian tradition of mimesis. Accepting the truth value of sense experience, that tradition would find Plato’s whirling mirror quite congenial to the view that the world of objects could be seen accurately and “easily” – could be seen with the visual acuteness Matthew Arnold attributed to a Sophocles who saw life “steadily” and “whole.” Consider the Arnoldian echo in order to allude momentarily to the third of the major Victorian poets, because in what he does with Plato’s whirling mirror Arnold illustrates even more pointedly than Tennyson the distance the West has traveled toward a cognitive nihilism. For in the despairing words of Arnold’s Empedocles,

The out-spread world to span
A cord the Gods first slung,
And then the soul of man
There, like a mirror, hung,
And bade the winds through space impel the gusty toy.

Hither and thither spins
The wind-borne, mirroring soul,
A thousand glimpses wins,
And never sees a whole;

Looks once, and drives elsewhere, and leaves its last employ.

The Gods laugh in their sleeve
To watch man doubt and fear,
Who knows not what to believe
Since he sees nothing clear,
And dares stamp nothing false where he finds nothing sure. ²⁰

Victorian poetry, then, presents us at key points with the opposition of sound and answering echo and of image and mirrored repetition, and Victorian paintings (say, those of William Holman Hunt) and
photographs (especially those of the fascinating, relatively unknown Lady Clementine Hawarden) contain comparable iconographic mirrors that raise epistemological questions. When they do, we are, to return to the outer frame of my argument, well on our way to Gide’s image en abîme – and beyond, to the infinite play of substitution and replication that, for a highly influential Derrida at any rate, constitutes the fundamental operation of any text. I am not of course asserting the identity of a Victorian and a post-structuralist view of representation: for recent theorists the mise en abîme describes the operation of the text as mirror or echo of a previous mirror or echo beyond recoverable origin, which is why the two conceptual metaphors are appropriate pendants for the idea of a textuality beyond which the readers (or reapers?) of the world cannot get. (The Greeks, to be sure, also combined the story of Echo and Narcissus into a single myth.) Consequently, the mise en abîme can have no existence outside of the mirror and the echo. Since it does not partake of the property of objects, it cannot be grounded in them. Representation always appears in the text as the representation of representation, as the mirror of a mirror or the echo of an echo.

In contrast, the Victorian poet as implied pre-Saussurean theorist would have us believe that the echo has a firm origin in the sound of the bugle, that the images of the world are grounded (if somewhat shakily) in its objects. In “Le Byron de Nos Jours” (unlike Last Year at Marienbad) a definable something did happen ten years ago, and the ever so patient reader can unravel what it was; and even for the perplexed Lady of Shalott, a palpable Lancelot does undoubtedly exist beside the river and the bank. In terms of the poet’s belief in linguistic referentiality, we are still well within what the post-structuralist mind would deconstruct as a naively confident Metaphysics of Presence. Still, while the structures of representation within Victorian poetry have not brought us to the infinite regress of contemporary theory and lost-in-the-funhouse fictional practice, they do predict, we retrospectively see, the modernist endgame of bottomless indeterminacy.

Notes


The specific source for the Derridean *mise en abîme* would seem to be Edmund Husserl’s Dresden gallery passage in *Ideas*. Husserl’s sentences, which become the epigraph that introduces Derrida’s *Speech and Phenomena*, trans. David Allison (Northwestern Univ. Press, 1973), p. 1, read as follows: “A name on being mentioned reminds us of the Dresden gallery and of our last visit there: we wander through the rooms, and stop in front of a painting by Tenier which represents a gallery of paintings. Let us further suppose that the paintings of the gallery would represent in their turn paintings, which, on their part, exhibited readable inscriptions and so forth…”


7 *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Harvard Univ. Press, 1974). I would like to thank Mary Ann Caws for letting me profit from the manuscript of *Reading Frames in Modern Fiction*, her phenomenological study of framing structures in the novel from Austen to Woolf (Princeton Univ. Press, 1985).


9 The phrase, as well as the generalized theory, is A. Dwight Culler’s in *The Poetry of Tennyson* (Yale Univ. Press, 1977), pp. 27–8.


11 On Tennysonian repetition, see “Tennyson, Tennyson, Tennyson,” Chapter 1 of Culler’s *Poetry of Tennyson*.

David Martin was the first to emphasize this twofold detachment in “Romantic Perspectivism in Tennyson’s ‘The Lady of Shalott,’” VP, 11 (1973), 255–66.


Ricks, p. 357. The Platonic context of Britomart’s mirror is spelled out succinctly in the notes to The Faerie Queene III. ii. 22, 5–6 in A. C. Hamilton’s recent edition (New York, 1977), p. 320: “In Plato, Phaedrus 255 d, the lover is said to be a mirror in which he beholds himself; cf. the fountain of Narcissus in the Romance of the Rose [II.] 1571–602. Britomart’s inward-looking gaze projects an image of beauty which arouses love for Artegall; hence the vision of him follows. It leads to self-division; hence she compares herself to Narcissus at 44.6–9.”


I have discussed the symbolic opposition of window and mirror in Hunt’s The Awakening Conscience as an example of the figural strategies that the Victorian painters employed (Joseph, op.cit., pp. 71–2), and Craig Owen considers the same opposition in the work of Lady Hawarden (in “Photography en abyme,” October, 5 [1978], 73–88).

For a most interesting treatment of the convergence of the two figures, see John Barth’s experimental story about life “on the autognostic verge” – “Echo” in Lost in the Funhouse (Garden City, 1968), pp. 98–103. At the end of the story, he writes, “Narcissus would appear to be opposite from Echo: he perishes by denying all except himself; she persists by effacing herself absolutely. Yet they come to the same: it was never himself Narcissus craved, but his reflection, the Echo of his fancy; his death must be partial as his self-knowledge, the voice persists, persists” (pp. 102–3).

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