Phantom reflections: Virginia Woolf's "The Mark on the Wall" and "The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection"

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1. Virginia Woolf's essay-manifesto "Modern Fiction" (1919/1925) expresses a desire to be "enlarged and set free", not only from established structures of fiction, but also from the strictures of the self[1]. Though she instructs modernist writers to "look within" in their quest for the "life" or "reality" writing ought to convey, this interiority is immediately opened up to the "showers of atoms", the "myriad impressions" of the exterior world in which this "life" is to be found[2]. Indeed, in this same essay, she writes that pursuing the "uncircumscribed spirit" of fiction involves not being "centred in a self", but rather following the movements of the self's "tremor of susceptibility" as it "embraces [and] creates what is outside of the self and beyond[3]". This surpassing of subjective boundaries is frequently portrayed in her writing, and is intimately linked to her representation of the self. For these "tremors of susceptibility" — *active* movements of *receptive* sensibility[4] — de-centre the self, and, in turn, retrace its contours. Or rather, they reveal the self to be but a spectral trace.

2. Two of Woolf's short stories, "The Mark on the Wall" (1917) and "The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection" (1929)[5], clearly stage such movements beyond subjective confines. The striking similarities in narrative structure alone invite a comparison between the two texts, written twelve years apart, each at critical points in Woolf's career.[6] In both stories, the narrator is alone in a room, and addresses the reader from the depths of an armchair. The narrator's musings on an exterior object — a mark on the opposite wall in the first story; Isabella Tyson, the room's mistress, in the second — structure the narrative and inform the themes, until they are interrupted by the arrival of another person, an event that closes the diegesis in both cases. A parallel reading of these

1 V. Woolf, *The Common Reader,* 150-158.
2 V. Woolf, *The Common Reader,* 154.
3 V. Woolf, *The Common Reader,* 154, 156.
4 "Susceptibility" is the quality of being easily affected or influenced, in both the sensorial and emotional registers. Described here as a "tremor" — that is, an *involuntary* quiver — this sensitivity is not to be placed under subjective mastery, and activity seems to be inherent in the receptivity implied, undoing clear oppositions between active and passive moments of perception.
5 References to both stories here are taken from V. Woolf, *"The Mark on the Wall" and Other Short Fiction*.
6 "The Mark on the Wall" is often considered indicative of Woolf's mature work to come. C. Reynier writes that this story "aims at defining fiction, the stuff modern fiction is made of." (*Virginia Woolf's Ethics of the Short Story*, 136). "The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection" was written after the publication of some of her most important works of fiction, notably *Jacob's Room* (1922), *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *Orlando* (1928). J. Briggs sees it as "a kind of tuning up for *The Waves*" (" 'Cut deep and scored thick with meaning' ", 176).

two texts throws light on several aspects of the representation of the self in Woolf's writing. Firstly, in both stories, the narrator's thoughts move beyond the self and seek direct contact with their object, weaving the narrator into the sensory fabric of the world. Secondly, as a de-centred self can no longer act as a centre of objective knowledge, both stories engage in an epistemological critique. Thirdly and concurrently, these texts challenge conceptions of the self as *reflexive*, a notion central to the dominant conception of subjectivity in modern Western philosophy, in which subjectivity is consciousness of the self. The looking-glasses and phantoms that appear in both stories play a critical role in this interrogation.

Reaching for an impossible contact

3. In both texts, in spite of the narrator's static position, the "thoughts" or the "imagination" exceed the narrating self, attempting to come into intense contact with their object. This is described in "The Mark on the Wall" in very material terms. Upon noticing the mark on the wall, the first person narrator remarks: "How readily our thoughts swarm upon a new object, lifting it a little way, as ants carry a blade of straw or feverishly, and then leave it…" (3). Demonstrating independence from the self they nonetheless inhabit, the "thoughts" here take on the form of a multiplicity in movement, moving beyond the self and coming into direct and intense contact with their object. They surround it in a movement of "embrace", and "create" it by lifting and displacing it. The rest of the narrative is given over to following the movements of these "thoughts" radiating to and from the mark, as they explore and accumulate different of versions of its nature. The narrator first entertains the idea that the mark is a hole; it then becomes a leaf; next, a nail; and finally it evokes a piece of wood. In other words, from being a hollow in the wall, the mark becomes flush with it and then protrudes from it, and seems therefore to become quite literally filled with the narrator's thoughts.

4. However, not only is the mark created by the "thoughts" swarming around it, but it also shapes these "thoughts" itself, directing them on to various tangents. The mark thus seems to actively participate in the perceptive process, as it gives content to the narrator's movements of consciousness, returning her materialised gaze in a moment the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty might have called *reversible*[7]. That is, the "thoughts" and the mark mutually constitute and transform each other through their relationship, and, at the point of contact, subject-object hierarchies are suspended.

5. The materiality of this relationship is again highlighted at the moment it is broken. This occurs

7 M. Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l'invisible,* ch. 3. The notion of *reversibility* develops and displaces the Husserlian concept of *flesh*, which Merleau-Ponty also took up and reworked. The notion of reversibility needs to be read in conjunction with the first chapter of *Le Visible et l'invisible*, which interrogates the principle of reflexivity.

in the final lines of the story: "Everything's moving, falling, slipping, vanishing… There is a vast upheaval of matter" (10). This is reminiscent of a scene recalled earlier in the narrative, when the narrator's attentive co-presence with the previous owners of the house was interrupted, and they are "torn asunder":

> […] and he was in the process of saying that in his opinion art should have ideas behind it when we were *torn asunder*, as one is *torn* from the old lady about to pour out tea and the young man about to hit the tennis ball in the back garden of the suburban villa as one rushes past in the train. (3, my italics)

A kind of ripping separation occurs between elements that had, through their physical, perceptive interaction, been in some kind of continuity.

6. This point of "reversible" contact is the moment the narrative explores, a moment preceding any reflexive return to the self which would allow the construction of a distinct subject and a knowable object. The narrator is centred not in her self, but held in a creative tension with the mark on the wall, and her de-subjectivation corresponds to the impossible objectivation of the mark. This impossibility is underscored by the fact that the "tremors of susceptibility" moving to and from the mark do not progress towards any objective, unequivocal form. Irregular sentence structure, abrupt jumps from one line of thought to another, unconnected one, and the punctuation of this text emphasise the incomplete, fragmentary, and above all inconclusive nature of these "thoughts" that eschew hierarchy[8]. Rather, the perceptive experience is one of constant, haphazard movement, anarchic groupings and contradictory accumulation[9].

7. Juxtaposing various incompatible versions of the mark undermines objective capture of the mark in another sense: it complexifies the moment of "reversible" contact by opening out the timeframe of the perceptual experience to include the contrast of these variations. Furthermore, the temporal complexity generated by contrast *between* different versions of the mark is enhanced by the mechanisms of representation *within* each individual one. For the mark is not described purely in terms of blocks of colour and formless sensation in the simple present moment of contact, in which all distance between the subject and the object would be suppressed, and all form would therefore be impossible. Rather, each version of the mark draws on past experiences, ideas, associations and fancies, all of which inform the "thoughts" and their actions on the mark. The narrator's "thoughts" evoke the previous owners of the house, a series of objects lost over a lifetime, Shakespeare, and the undecided nature of the archaeological site on the South Downs; they

8 C. Delourme, "La Ponctuation…", 74-75: *"La ponctuation woolfienne […] se manifeste comme une ponctuation de la rupture, de la déliaison et le plus souvent on en perçoit les enjeux négativement, c'est-à-dire en définissant ce à quoi elle s'oppose : linéarité de la phrase, ordonnancement logique, polarité discursive."*

9 This nuances the frequent interpretation of this text as Platonist, for there is no progression to idealised form, nor is the sensory, perceptive and imaginative experience treated as but a step out on the path from the cave towards the sun of the ideal. This Platonism has been suggested, for example, by N. Skrbic, who supports the argument by the fact that the narrator is sitting by a fire. (*Wild Outbursts of Freedom*, 35)

also project, albeit momentarily, nails and rose leaves onto the mark. These perceptually *absent* elements invest the mark and draw out its possibilities, and testify to the workings, in the heart of the perceptive act, of cultural forms and images that exceed the "present moment" of perception[10]. The experience of the mark on the wall is thus set not in a homogenous present, but in heterogeneous time-frame, as the mark forms a bloc with the afterlives of absent forms reactivated in this fractured "present". *Immediate* material contact between the "thoughts" and the mark appears to be *desired* more than actually *realised* in the experience the text relates. The desubjectified self thus reaches for contact with an outside entity without attaining this contact completely. And it is in this interstice that the myriad possibilities of the mark momentarily, and insubstantially, appear.

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8. This impossibility of complete, direct contact with the object of attention is explicitly staged in "The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection." For the object of the narrator's musings, Isabella Tyson, is not physically present in the room in which the narrator is seated. The sensory fabric of attentive co-presence has been cut even before the narrative begins:

> Half an hour ago the mistress of the house, Isabella Tyson, had gone down the grass path in her thin summer dress, carrying a basket, and had vanished, *sliced off* by the gilt rim of the looking glass. (64, my italics)

In the absence of such material contact, the objects in the room become mediating elements, endowed with an understanding of Isabella: "Sometimes it seemed as if they [the rugs, the chairs, the cabinets] knew more about her than we, who sat on them, wrote at them, and trod on them so carefully, were allowed to know." (64) The furniture is granted a kind of "reversible" consciousness[11], and it also contains aspects of Isabella which have been lodged within them through their past contact[12]. This "reversible" attentiveness is again suggested when Isabella herself eventually appears in the looking glass at the end of the story:

> She came so gradually that she did not seem to derange the pattern in the glass, but only to bring in some new element which gently moved and altered the other objects as if asking them, courteously, the make room for her. And the letters and the table and the grass walk and the sunflowers *which had been waiting* in the looking-glass *separated and opened out that she might be received among them*. (67-68, my italics)

10 These aspects of the capture of the world were being explored by the art historian Aby Warburg at the time, as he developed his concept of *Nachleben* (survival). (Didi-Huberman, G. *L'Image survivante).*

11 R. Hoberman ("Collecting, shopping and reading", 89) refers to the "reversibility" I am discussing here in terms of Walter Benjamin's concept of the "aura", stating that in this story, "she [the narrator] recognizes the objects' auratic power to 'look back'." Benjamin uses this concept to discuss art objects in particular, and a detailed consideration of the notion in this context is beyond the scope of this paper.

12 In this sense, they play the role similar to that both Clarissa Dalloway and Mrs Ramsay will accord to things they come into contact with. (*Mrs Dalloway*. 135; *To the Lighthouse,* 123.)

Just as the mark shapes and informs the narrator's thoughts in "The Mark on the Wall", the objects here seem to participate actively in their relationship with Isabella. Not only do they return Isabella's gaze, but they also interact with that of the narrator:

> Under the stress of thinking about Isabella, her room became more shadowy and symbolic; the corners seemed darker, the legs of the chairs and tables more spindly and hieroglyphic. (p. 65)

However, as this quotation indicates, the furniture *suggests* rather than reveals its knowledge of the room's mistress. Though changing under the pressure of the narrator's thought, the room's objects do not divulge their secrets. Rather they serve as enigmatic signs, "hieroglyphs" in an unknown language, resisting attempts to transform them into transparent vectors of the subjectivity they encode.

9. Faced with the cryptic opacity of the room, the narrator attempts to reach the absent Isabella herself without their mediation. The "thoughts" of the 1917 text seem to correspond to the "imagination" the narrator refers to here:

> If she concealed so much and knew so much *one must prize her open* with the first tool that came to hand – the imagination. One must *fix one's mind upon her* at that very moment. One must *fasten her down* there. […] One must *put herself in her shoes*. If one took the phrase literally, it was easy to see the shoes in which she stood, down in the lower garden, at this moment. (66, my italics)

Like the "thoughts" of "The Mark on the Wall", the narrator's "imagination" materialises here, taking on the form of tools and ties in a progressive movement of approach and assimilation that will, the narrator hopes, capture and reveal Isabella. After announcing this goal, the narrator suddenly manages to "see" Isabella's shoes though her person was previously described as "sliced off" from the narrator's field of vision. The narrator's "imagination" thereby seems to transcend the narrator's physical position, leave Isabella's room and, visionary, "see" the invisible Isabella in the garden. As in "The Mark on the Wall", the "tremors of susceptibility" attempt to achieve intense proximity with their object.

10. The narrative voice of the 1929 text moves all the more easily beyond the self as it uses the third person pronoun "one", which enables it to enlarge itself beyond individual, subjective ties in a way the first person "I" of the 1917 short story cannot. And yet, the narrative voice always occupies a given point of view, albeit a mobile one, and does not attain the status of a transcendent narrator, and certainly not of an omniscient one.

11. The movement from armchair's perspective to the garden is clear in the tenses used. Leaving the room, the narrative voice slips from the conditional — "she *would be standing* […] the sun *would beat down* on her face […]" (66) —, to the affirmative — "she *stood* with her scissors raised […] she *snipped* the spray of traveller's joy […]" (67). After this last sentence, the narrator seems

momentarily to "penetrate" Isabella's mind and occupy her perspective. That is, the narrative voice seems to blend into Isabella's "profounder state of being […] the state that is to the mind what breathing is to the body, what one calls happiness or unhappiness" (66):

> As [the traveller's joy] fell, surely some light came in too, *surely one could penetrate a little farther* into her being. Her mind *then was filled* with tenderness and regret… To cut an overgrown branch *saddened* her because it had once lived, and life was dear to her. Yes, and at the same time the fall of the branch *would suggest* to her how she must die herself and all the futility and evanescence of things. And then again quickly *catching this thought up,* with her instant good sense, she *thought* life had treated her well; even if fall she must, it was to lie on the earth and moulder sweetly into the roots of violets. So she *stood* thinking. (p. 67, my italics)

However, the subsequent resurgence of the conditional — "*would suggest*" after "*saddened*"— seems to indicate that narratorial unity with Isabella's perspective is not attained, reminding the reader that, in spite of the affirmatives that follow, much here remains, in fact, "imaginary". Indeed, the status of "then" in the second sentence above is ambiguous: if it indicates chronological succession, the affirmative could be read as evidence that Isabella's mind *really was* "filled with tenderness and regret…"; however, "then" may also signify a logical deduction from the previous statement, "surely one could penetrate a little farther into her being". The hesitation between conditional and affirmative modes that follows only contributes this uncertainty, placing the narrator in a situation similar to that of *Jacob's Room*'s narrator, impelled to "hum vibrating […] at the mouth of the cavern of mystery", that is, on the *threshold* of the character's subjectivity, neither inside nor outside[13].

12. The narrator's "imagination" falls short of capturing Isabella definitively for another reason: what it perceives in her mind is as cryptic as her room. Indeed, Isabella's mind is described in terms of her room, which seems to be contained within her just as Isabella's subjectivity is inscribed in it:

> So she stood thinking. Without making any thought precise – for she was one of those reticent people whose minds hold their thoughts enmeshed in clouds of silence – she was filled with thoughts. Her mind was like her room, in which lights advanced and retreated, came pirouetting and stepping delicately, spread their tails, pecked their way; and then her whole being was suffused, like the room again, with a cloud of some profound knowledge, some unspoken regret, and then she was full of locked drawers, stuffed with letters, like her cabinets. (67)

Confronted with the same, indecipherable code, the narrator is again obliged to revise the methods of attaining the "truth" about Isabella: "To talk of 'prizing her open' as if she were an oyster, to use any but the finest and subtlest and most pliable tools on her was impious and absurd. One must *imagine* —" (67, my italics). This revision of the methods to be used in capturing Isabella therefore

13 V. Woolf, *Jacob's Room,* 61. C. Reynier, however, seems to read this penetration as effective, as she describes this "prizing open" as "a sort of visual rape" (*Virginia Woolf's Ethics of the Short Story.* 96).

does not stop, but rather re-launches the efforts of the "imagination".

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13. In both stories then, the narrator's "thoughts" or "imagination" seem to physically surpass the boundaries of the self in order to "embrace and create" the enigmatic exterior entity that acts as a constant, inexhaustible stimulus. In both texts, a de-centring moment of reversible dissolution of subject-object boundaries is indicated, a moment in which, however, the thoughts' "contact" with the object is denied immediacy, and the object escapes definitive capture.

An epistemological critique

14. This "moment" must now be read in the context of the critique of "knowledge" both stories engage in. The narrator of "The Mark on the Wall" makes a distinction between the worlds of the "surface" and the "depths", anticipating the opposition Woolf will draw up between the "materialists" and the "moderns" in "Modern Fiction"[14]. The "surface" is the world of "facts" and "learned men", where distinct objects may be "known" precisely and definitively by discrete subjects. The "knowledge" involved here seems to be intersubjectively – that is, reflexively – validated. For this is the world of "standard things":

> a whole class of things indeed which as a child one thought the thing itself, the standard thing, the real thing, from which one could not depart save at the risk of nameless damnation. (6)

"Standard things" include:

> Sunday in London, Sunday afternoon walks, Sunday luncheons, and also ways of speaking of the dead, clothes, and habits […] There was a rule for everything. The rule for tablecloths at that particular period was that they should be make of tapestry with little yellow compartments marked upon them, such as you may see in photographs of the carpets in the corridors of the royal palaces. Tablecloths of a different kind were not real tablecloths. (6)

This normalized definition of the real is a historically determined construction based on idealised forms, inseparable from a culturally situated — in this case, aristocratic — model. A hegemonic norm seems to determine not only behaviour here, but also the forms reality adopts. To put it in Jacques Rancière's terms, a certain "configuration of the sensible[15]", shaped by and interacting with society's political hierarchies and structures, has stamped the phenomenal world with its mark.

15. The narrator attacks this form of knowledge by seeking to "sink deeper and deeper, away from

14 V. Woolf, *The Common Reader,* 152-156; Baldwin, D. R. *Virginia Woolf,* 15.
15 J. Rancière, *Le Partage du sensible.*

the surface with its hard separate facts". This means rejecting figures of authority and regulation, and engaging in a different relationship with reality that attempts to establish unmediated contact with the world. For the "depths" involve:

> [a] world without professors or specialists or housekeepers with profiles of policemen, a world which one could slice with one's thought as a fish slices the water with his fin, grazing the stems of the waterlilies, hanging suspended over white sea eggs … How peaceful it is down here, rooted in the centre of the world and gazing up through the gray waters, with their sudden gleams of light, and their reflections — (8)

"Thought" here materialises and becomes mobile and tactile, "slicing through the world". The narrator herself seems to be submerged after the ellipse, attaining a kind of liquid continuity with the world. Free of "surface" appearance and subject-object distinctions, she is no longer confined to herself but "rooted in the centre of the world", from where she observes its flash and movement. The "depths" seem therefore to correspond to the direct contact with the mark on the wall the narrator attempts to practice in the text, making her narrative in itself a subversive gesture.

16. However, the narrator then exclaims: "— if it were not for Whitaker's Almanack — if it were not for the Table of Precedency!" (8) These tomes recording British social hierarchies are clearly associated with the "surface" in the story. The surface constantly colonises the "depths" in this manner, drawing the narrator from her underwater experience of the world. She then redirects her "thoughts" to the mark which acts as refuge against the authority of the "surface" relationship to the real.

17. In order to undermine the "surface"'s authority, the narrator emphasises that which escapes the reign of objective understanding or empirical verification. Early in the narrative, she decides against getting up and examining the mark to determine its nature, as empirical knowledge of its present state would be incapable of revealing anything beyond this state: "once a thing's done, no one ever knows how it happened" (4). She thereby highlights the irreducible mystery surrounding the lost origins of physically present phenomena. The mastery of objects is also shown to be impossible in the list of lost objects the narrator draws up (4). The failure of objective, verifiable "knowledge" to fulfil its promises of security and stability must, of course, be read in the story's historical context, the final years of World War I. At this conjuncture, rationality and "civilisation" were increasingly brought into question, and their complicity with their supposedly excluded negatives, irrationality and barbarity, thrown into relief.

18. Of particular interest here, however, is the narrator's questioning of "standard" perception engendered by deference to the "surface"'s socially sanctioned knowledge. Firstly, the narrator destabilizes the "standard"'s authority, by noting that once the norm has been questioned, alternative modes of perception suddenly seem possible: "How shocking, and yet how wonderful it

was to discover that these real things, Sunday luncheons, Sunday walks, country houses, and tablecloths *were not entirely real*, were indeed *half phantoms*, and the damnation which visited the disbeliever in them was only a sense of illegitimate freedom." (6, my italics) However, in spite of this initial exhilaration, the discarded "configuration of the sensible" is immediately replaced, as the following sentence states:

> What now takes the place of those things I wonder, those real standard things? Men perhaps, should you be a woman; the masculine point of view which governs our lives, which sets the standard, which establishes Whitaker's Table of Precedency, *which has become, I suppose*, *since the war half a phantom* to many men and women, which soon, one may hope, will be laughed into the dustbin where the phantoms go, the mahogany sideboards and the Landseer prints, Gods and Devils, Hell and so forth, leaving us all with an intoxicating sense of illegitimate freedom – if freedom exists… (6-7, my italics)

After emancipating oneself from the impressions mistaken for reality during childhood, another "standard" takes over. While it is different from the previous one, it is no less problematic, and no more stable. Recognising the "standard"'s contingency necessarily limits its authority, but a "surface" version of the real seems inevitable, and the existence of any genuine freedom is brought into doubt.

19. Secondly, in these passages, socially mediated forms, be they determined by parents, Whitaker, or the "masculine point of view", are described as suddenly appearing as "half phantoms", that is, as deprived of part of their reality. The spectral is, of course, the mode of presence of an absent entity. In repeatedly referring to the "standard things" as phantoms, the narrator draws attention to a ghostly quality that undermines their reality and authority from within. I would like to suggest that this ghostliness emanates from the gap that separates (a) an apprehension of the world through direct interaction with it, in a relationship of proximity and creation — the knowledge of the "depths" — from (b) the reflexive return to the self that produces a necessarily idealised conceptualisation of an object as an object — the knowledge of the "surface". The movement in this gap releases this ghostly apparition. In other words, the distance required to reflexively establish an object's objectivity and to normatively validate its status as a "hard, separate fact" generates this disturbing sense of absence at the very moment that its externalised, objective "reality" is captured and constituted. This unreality is therefore inherent to "surface", "standard" perception, though only apprehended when this perception is questioned. To put it in Derridean terms, the narrator seems to describe the fleeting movement of a *différance* in the objectifying relationship to the real[16]. The object itself — or what Woolf will refer to repeatedly in her essays as the "thing itself[17]" — thereby ever escapes definitive, reflexive capture as a "standard thing",

16 J. Derrida, *"La Différance"*, *Marges de la philosophie,* and Derrida, J., *La Voix et le phénomène*, in which this term is used in relation to Husserl's phenomenology.

17 For example, V. Woolf, *A Room of One's Own,* 109, 112.

leaving but a ghostly substitute, a "half-phantom" in the hands of the knower: a trace.

20. This is not, however, to imply that the "depths" constitute a more "genuine" reality. As already mentioned, the moment of contact with the exterior object is desired rather than realised. The enigmatic exterior entity continually escapes capture, and all sorts of *absent* forms are called up into the perceptual experience of the present. Absent forms thus operate, phantom-like, in both modes of apprehension of the world.

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21. At first glance, the "surface"/"depths" opposition seems to be transposed directly onto the distinction between the room and the mirror in "The Lady in the Looking Glass: A Reflection". The room in which the narrator is seated is the site of constant movement and change, charged with affect, and animated by "a perpetual sighing and ceasing sound, the voice of the transient and the perishing, it seemed, coming and going like human breath" (63). In the mirror within the narrator's field of vision, on the other hand, all lies "still". The looking-glass "reflected the hall table, the sunflowers, the garden path so accurately and so fixedly that they seemed held there in their reality unescapably. […] in the looking glass things had ceased to breathe and lay still in the trance of immortality." (63-64) The room is the site of resistance to definitive form and closure, a mobile space escaping fixed representation; the mirror allows permanence and distinct perception of discrete objects. The movement and "sighs" of the room, in which shy "nocturnal creatures" such "lights and shadows, curtains blowing, petals falling" live a constantly changing life, are directly apprehended by the narrator, while the fixed forms in the looking glass, mediated by the looking glass, have "ceased to breathe". As the looking-glass *obliquely* reflects images from the outdoors into the narrator's field of view, he or she has not direct contact with them[18].

22. The action of the mirror is analysed by the narrator when suddenly "a large black form" appears in the looking glass:

> A large black form loomed into the looking-glass; blotted out everything, strewed the table with a packet of marble tablets veined with pink and grey, and was gone. But the picture was entirely altered. For the moment it was *unrecognisable and irrational* and *entirely out of focus*. […] And then by degrees some *logical process* set to work on them and began *ordering and arranging them and bringing them into the fold of common experience*. One realised at last that they were merely letters. The man had brought the post.
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> There they lay on the marble-topped table, all dripping with light and colour at first and

18 D. R. Baldwin also points to this difference between direct apprehension and indirect apprehension of reality, (*Virginia Woolf,* 55). However, his interpretation diverges from the one suggested here as he privileges the mirror, which he reads as representing "art", over the room, which he reads as representing "life". J. Briggs also sees this contrast in terms of "art" and "life" ("'Cut deep and scored with meaning'" 176).

> crude and unabsorbed. And then it was strange to see how they were *drawn in and arranged and composed* and made part of the picture and granted that *stillness and immortality* which the looking-glass conferred. They lay there *invested with a new reality and significance* and with a greater heaviness, too, as if it would need a chisel to dislodge them from the table. (65, my italics)

The looking-glass and the "logical process" — the latter strangely detached from both the narrator and the looking-glass — function like a camera, bringing things into focus, conferring identity, form and permanence, validating still objects in terms of "common" — that is, shared, intersubjective — "experience".

23. However, the mirror's effects are not characterised as negatively as the "surface" with its "hard separate facts" is in "The Mark on the Wall". Rather, the mirror "invests" the objects with "a new reality and significance" which is not rejected by the narrator. Indeed, the "stillness and immortality" of the mirror are reminiscent of the permanence that Woolf so often wrote that fiction should strive for, and that many of her characters long for[19]. The surface/depths dichotomy of 1917 is therefore not so much *transposed* as *transformed* in the 1929 text. While the objects in the looking glass suffer from diminished vitality, they are nonetheless accorded a heightened "reality" and the capacity to endure. Rather than *opposing* two forms of perception, the narrator sets them in a dialectical tension. Indeed, from the outset, the narrator moves continually between these modes of apprehension[20]. Rather than resisting the attraction of the mirror, the narrator's eyes move between its static immortality and the evanescent, ever-changing "passions and envies" of the room: "*One could not help looking*, that summer afternoon, in the long glass that hung outside in the hall" (63, my italics); "It was a strange contrast – all changing here, all stillness there. *One could not help looking from one to the other*." (63, my italics) Distinct opposition gives way to movement between life and immortality; between perpetual, evanescent change and fixed permanence; between forms that escape identification and objectification, and clearly defined, distinct objects; between passion and affect on the one hand and still tranquillity on the other.

24. This suppression of the diametrical opposition between the two modes of apprehension is

19 For example, V. Woolf, *A Room of One's Own,* 108

20 N. Skrbic writes "what the mirror doesn't reflect, the story excludes" (*Wild Outbursts of Freedom*, 75). Similarly, for C. Reynier, the mirror forms the limits of the narrator's world: "the narrator-observer, sitting in an empty room, looks at an Italian glass and what it reflects; but it soon becomes clear that the mirror is but her mind's eye as it only reflects — at least for a large part of the story — what is going on in the narrator's mind. These objects symbolically seal the mind, a prerequisite for the creative process to start." Furthermore, C. Reynier defends the idea that the mirror in this text "underlin[es] the introspective nature of the process under way", "enclosing the narrator within his own thoughts" (*Virginia Woolf's Ethics of the Short Story,* 98-99). I have argued here that, far from sealing the narrating self in an interiority, the mirror represents one mode of perception the narrator continually contrasts with others. The external world that is *not* reflected in the mirror is described with a great deal of phenomenal subtlety in this text, and seems to depend on movements beyond the self that Woolf describes elsewhere as central to fiction. D. Bradshaw's interpretation is diametrically opposed to that of N. Skrbic and C. Reynier: "'The Lady in the Looking-Glass' is more concerned with what is not reflected, more attentive to what is sliced off by the frame than what is held by the mirror." ("Introduction" to '*The Mark on the Wall' and Other Short Fiction*, xxv) Each of these interpretations, however, overlook the movement between the mirror and the room.

underlined by the often-mentioned ambiguity of the story's subtitle[21]: is the lady appearing in the looking-glass at the end of the story but a reflection, or is the entire story that follows this title a reflection on the lady in the looking-glass, that is, a reflection on a reflection, as the use of the term "reflection" to designate the narrator's musings (65) within the diegesis suggests? The solidarity between these two modes of apprehension is further reinforced by the attribution of "knowledge" and "truth" to both the room *and* the looking glass. At the same time, both verifiable, objective "facts" *and* more fanciful "imaginary" "comparisons" are denounced as inadequate, falling short of truth:

> The comparison showed how very little, after all these years one knew about her; for it is impossible that any woman of flesh and blood of fifty-five or sixty should be really a wreath or a tendril. Such comparisons are worse than idle and superficial — they are cruel even, for they come like the convolvulus itself trembling between one's eyes and the *truth*. *There must be truth, there must be a wall.* Yet it was strange that after knowing her all these years *one could not say what the truth about Isabella was*; one still made up phrases like this about convolvulus and traveller's joy. As for *facts*, it was a fact that she as a spinster; that she was rich, that she had bought this house and collected with her own hands […] the rugs, the chairs, the cabinets which now lived their nocturnal life before one's eyes. Sometimes it seemed that they knew more about her than we […] For it was another fact — *if facts were what one wanted* — that Isabella had known many people, had had many friends […] (64, my italics)

The narrator wants not "facts" or exterior appearance, but idle "comparisons" are just as unsatisfactory. What the narrator desires is both the inaccessible, evanescent knowledge encoded in the room's transient animation on the one hand, and the "hard wall" of fixed, definitive "truth" on the other. In making "truth" equivalent to a "hard wall", "truth" is implicitly associated with the mirror's flat, hard surface that reflects definite shapes and accords "immortality". This association is confirmed when the looking-glass seems to grant a hidden, "eternal truth" to the letters the postman brings:

> […] they seemed to have become not merely a handful of casual letters but to be *tablets graven with eternal truth* — if one could read them, one would know everything there was to be known about Isabella, yes, and about life too. (65, my italics)

And yet both the room and the letters withhold the "knowledge" or "truth" they promise from the narrator. That is, knowledge of Isabella is inaccessible in both cases.

25. Therefore, although the incipit and excipit of this story both warn against looking-glasses — "People should not leave looking-glasses hanging in their rooms any more than they should leave open cheque books or letters confessing some hideous crime" (63) / "People should not leave

21 J. Briggs, "'Cut deep and scored thick with meaning'", 176

looking-glasses hanging in their rooms" (68) — and thus appear to betray a narratorial preference for the sighing, ever-changing room, such a reading misses more than it explains, as it does not take into account the desire, expressed repeatedly in this text, for the "truth" that the looking glass seems to distil. Indeed, the opening and closing injunctions against looking-glasses lend themselves to another interpretation. The looking-glass seems to confer the impression of "truth" to objects the narrator sees only *indirectly*; the outside garden and entrance hall fixed in its frame are *obliquely* reflected into the narrator's field of vision. At no point does the narrator see him or herself in the looking glass. And yet the potential for almost-immediate self-reflection is inherent to looking-glasses[22]. Such reflexivity — near-immediate presence to oneself, in which tremors of susceptibility instantaneously return to their source — may be read as the ultimate danger the narrative voice warns against here.

Shells, phantoms and looking glasses

26. This danger is clearly staged at the very end of the short story, when Isabella Tyson finally appears in the looking-glass. However, before examining this moment in detail, it is important to consider the meditation on self-image and looking-glasses in "The Mark on the Wall", for the narrator of the 1917 text seems to anticipate the fate awaiting Isabella. The consideration of self-image in the earlier text will shape my reading of the "The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection."

27. In "The Mark on the Wall", the narrator recalls a previous conversation amongst friends in which she'd distinguished herself as creative and interesting. As she recounts this conversation in the text, the narrator contrasts two types of self-reflection:

> All the time I'm dressing up *the figure of myself in my own mind*, lovingly, *stealthily*, *not openly adoring it, for if I did that, I should catch myself out*, and stretch my hand at once for a book in self-protection. Indeed, it is curious how instinctively one protects *the image of oneself* from idolatry or any other handling that could make it ridiculous, or too unlike the original to be believed in any longer. Or is it not so very curious after all? It is a matter of great importance. *Suppose the looking-glass smashes, the image disappears, and the romantic figure with the green of forest depths all about it is there no longer, but only that shell of a person which is seen by other people* – what an airless, shallow, bald, prominent world it becomes! A world not to be lived in. (5-6, my italics)

The "figure of myself in my own mind" is a semi-conscious construction, fabricated from remembered scraps of experience, fragments of conversations, projections and fantasies. Should this self-image disappear, that is, should the internal "looking-glass" be destroyed, only "the shell of a

22 Of course, the mirror only *seems* to promise such 'pure' reflexivity. The mirror itself is a form of mediation, and as such, mirror images are imperfect metaphors for 'pure' presence, which defies all representation.

person which is seen by other people" would remain. In other words, the world would be reduced to its "surface": a world described here as uninhabitable. The "looking-glass" in the mind of the narrator in this passage is not, therefore, a reflection of external appearance, nor does it involve reflexive self-consciousness. Rather, the image in this looking-glass is a creative collage of the self, ever in the process of being constructed, as the continuous tense seems to indicate. This collage is put together by a consciousness that does not quite coincide with the image reflected. And yet, this image is not entirely fanciful: it cannot become "too unlike the original" without being dismissed as unreal. The self gazing into this internal mirror is therefore not dissociated from the image it "reflects", though the two are not identical. In the gap between the self looking into the glass and the creative image it sends back, a proliferation of images are possible, and these images contribute to the continuing creation of the figure in the "depths". Indeed, the narrator writes that this "figure of the self in the mind" is constantly being obliquely reflected off onto another one, *ad infinitum*:

> As we face each other in omnibuses and underground railways we are looking into the mirror; that accounts for the vagueness, the gleam of glassiness, in our eyes. And the novelists in future will realize more and more the importance of these *reflections*, for of course *there is not one reflection but an almost infinite number*; those are the *depths* they will explore, those the *phantoms* they will pursue […] (6, my italics)

It is not, therefore, the "shell" that other people see that "novelists in future will pursue", according to the narrator, but the approximations of selves found in the "depths", the "reflections" that are only indirectly perceived. The "gleam of glassiness" in the gaze of the other is compatible with the survival of the figure in the depths *not* because the other's eyes faithfully reflect the subject's "shell" of a person, but because social relations nourish the gazer's *own* internal looking-glass self-image. That is, eyes in this passage do not represent *external* mirrors, allowing one to become reflexively conscious of oneself, but constitute surfaces that *trouble* rather than *permit* the establishment of intersubjective reflexivity, and thereby protect the images of the self in the "depths". Perpetually refracting from the "looking-glass" of the depths, the selves in the "depths" fall short of, or rather *exceed* self-consciousness apprehension, and appear as ever changing phantoms, mobile products of the subject's "embrace" and "creation".

28. Described as "phantoms", these self-images are given the same ghostly quality that haunts the "standard" knowledge of the "surfaces" in this story: the "thing itself" — that is, the "self" itself — continually escapes objective capture. For the "self" of the "depths" can only be approached through a series of approximations; its fabrication is mobile; it emerges in the interstice separating the subject's consciousness from its "surface" image of itself, an interstice traversed by the creative embrace of "tremors of susceptibility". This is the mobile, dynamic concept of the self that writers must attempt to get at, as opposed to an objective, "surface" vision. Should the interstice between the "surface" and the consciousness be suppressed, however, the "depths" would be destroyed and

the internal looking-glasses would be "smashed". This situation, the narrator states, would be unbearable: "an airless, shallow, bald, prominent world […] A world not to be lived in."

*

29. This unbearable experience is approached at the end of "The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection". The narrator, about to embark on another series of "imaginings" in order to capture Isabella, is interrupted by Isabella's appearance in the looking-glass. She first appears as a vague, indefinite, mobile form:

> She was so far off at first that one could not see her clearly. She came lingering and pausing, here straightening a rose, there lifting a pink to smell it, but she never stopped; and all the time she became larger and larger in the looking-glass, more and more completely the person into whose mind one had been trying to penetrate. (67)

Constantly in movement, like the room itself, Isabella's image in the looking-glass cannot be fixed or stabilized. As long as this is the case, the narrator's imagination moves easily between the previously imagined versions of Isabella and the movements in the looking glass that do not yet constitute a fixed person:

> One verified her by degrees — fitted the qualities one had discovered into this visible body. There were her grey-green dress, and her long shoes, her basket, and something sparkling at her throat. She came so gradually that she did not seem to derange the pattern in the glass, but only to bring in some new element which gently moved and altered the other objects […] (67)

This situation changes however when Isabella enters the house and stops moving:

> At last there she was, in the hall. She stopped *dead*. She stood by the table. She stood perfectly *still*. At once the looking-glass began to pour over her a light that seemed to *fix* her; that seemed like some acid to bite off the unessential and superficial and to *leave only the truth*. It was an enthralling spectacle. Everything dropped from her — clouds, dress, basket, diamond — all that one had called the creeper and the convolvulus. *Here was the hard wall beneath*. *Here was the woman herself*. She stood *naked* in that pitiless light. *And there was nothing. Isabella was perfectly empty. She had no thoughts. She had no friends. She cared for nobody*. As for her letters, they were all bills. Look, as she stood there, old and angular, veined and lined, with her high nose and her wrinkled neck, she did not even trouble to open them. (68, my italics)

Isabella stops "dead" in the looking-glass, where things become, as the narrator has previously stated, "still" and "cease to breathe". The mirror's work on Isabella is compared to "acid", stripping her not only of all the narrator's easy associations and external observations — "all that one had called the creeper and the convolvulus" —, but of her very clothes, leaving her "naked" as it

converts her into fixed form. The mirror thus seems to both confer and create the promised "truth", the desired "hard wall" the narrator's "imagination" had been pursuing in vain. But this revelation is terrible: as the reflected external image of Isabella coincides with the presence of the real Isabella, she is reduced to a withered body, to the "shell of a person" other people see, eliminating the narrator's imaginings in the "depths". This, then, is the danger of the external looking-glass: it bears the potential to precipitate the perceiving self into a surface world "not to be lived in".

30. What is more, the "hard wall" of "truth" seems also to eliminate any figure that may have existed in the "depths" of Isabella. For the "truth" of Isabella in the looking glass is at once *revealed* and *eliminated.* Isabella is shown to be, in fact, void: a pure absence: "And there was *nothing*. Isabella was perfectly *empty*. She had no thoughts. She had no friends. She cared for nobody." The "eternal truth" her letters seemed to hide, and that the mirror itself had conferred earlier in the narrative, was also an illusion: "they were all bills". The moment, then, that the external reflected image is brought into contact with Isabella's person in the present is the moment of her annihilation, bringing about an awful apparition of absence, thereby questioning the very existence of a "hard wall", of the "permanence" and "truth" the narrator yearns for.

31. The mirror seems therefore to bring the narrator to the precipice of a gaping void that opens up when Isabella's person and image coincide, a void that undermines the externally reflected image's capacity to serve as a foundation for knowledge. Worse, the "truth" of the reflected image in this story is that there is none. The promises of *both* the evanescent movements of the breathing and sighing room, and the still immortality of images in the looking glass seem to be dashed. The "hard walls" of "truth" fall in ruins, or rather disappear into emptiness, as the mirror is shown to be just as inadequate source of knowledge as the convolvulus and the clouds of thoughts the narrator had "imagined" inside Isabella.

32. If this unbearable experience can be described — that is, represented — in this text, it is partly because the story is not narrated from Isabella's perspective. Though the "phantoms" refracting from the collaged figure of Isabella created in the "depths" have been suppressed in this final "enthralling spectacle", the narrator, still seated on angle to the mirror, is left with another "phantom": the "shell-like" image of a completely empty Isabella, that is, the strange *appearance* of an *absence*. The Isabella of the "surface" is no less ghostly and insubstantial than the images of the "depths", and the "truth" is made equivalent to a void. "Surface" mirror images seem therefore to have no firmer foundation than internal, spectral figures of selves. But these traces, the text seems to imply, are all we have to follow.

Impossible conclusions

33. Perhaps, then, the narrator's "tremors of susceptibility" will pursue this last "phantom" image of Isabella after the final lines of the story, embarking again on the infinite quest for a "truth" about Isabella that no longer has, or never had, a foundation. The final "reflection" related in "The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection" thus, by its very existence, fails to entirely eliminate the possibility of such movements of trembling susceptibility "outside of the [narrator's] self and beyond", and allows us to imagine that these movements continue beyond the end of the diegesis.

34. The same might be said for "The Mark on the Wall". In the final lines, another person comes into the room and reveals the mark to be a snail. This has frequently been interpreted as being the "termination" of the narrator's "reverie", in which a "genuine" reality is revealed[23]. However, given the critique of knowledge that the narrator of "The Mark on the Wall" has been engaged in, such an attribution of superior authority to the final "objective", "surface" version of the mark seems problematic. That this "objective" reality should be represented by a living, mobile organism with soft, malleable contours seems to confirm this, particularly as "snail" differs from "nail" by a phoneme only, further undermining neat separations of this new "surface" definition from the narrator's musings in the "depths"[24]. The fact that "Kew Gardens", the next short story Woolf would publish, adopts the point of view of snails for long passages would seem to support this more open-ended reading of the 1917 narrative's final line, in which movements of "embrace and creation" continue after the "end" of the diegesis[25].

35. The epistemological critique both texts stage therefore encourages readings that emphasise their inconclusive nature. For in both texts, "knowledge" is sought through different modes of apprehension of the world, but never definitively attained, and seems to reside, only ever partially, in the movements "outside of the self and beyond" into the world. This world, like the self that lives and moves in it, is constituted by traces that promise "truth" while simultaneously withdrawing it from the seeker, and the texts themselves seem to do the same. For obtaining such a "truth" would lay all ghosts to rest in an irrepresentable reflexive coincidence with the self, a complete presence that would also constitute an absolute, mortal absence[26]. Which is why the narrator of "The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection" repeats the warning against looking-glasses in the last line of the narrative: the impossibility of coincidence with the object — be it a mark or the self — is the condition of the movements of "embrace" and "creation" outside of the self and beyond, and, therefore, the very condition of fiction.

23 S. P. Rosenbaum ("The Philosophical Realism of Virginia Woolf") writes that the story ends with a "deflating revelation […] of the true nature of external reality." See also D. Bradshaw, "Introduction", xv-xvi.

24 D. R. Baldwin, *Virginia Woolf.* 15. E. Delgrano also mentions the phonetic proximity of the two terms, but in her reading of this text, the "naming" of the object "brings closure" to the story (*Virginia Woolf and the Visible World,* 9).

25 The open-ended nature of this story has also been emphasised in M. D. Cyr's article "A Conflict of Closure".

26 This is, of course, the argument advanced by Jacques Derrida in his reading of Husserl's *Logical Investigations.* See J. Derrida, *La Voix et le phénomène,* 115. Woolf's work can be read as an anticipation of such a critique.

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