

## WOMANHOOD – THE MIRRORED IMAGE OF THE OTHER

### A Victorian Perspective

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**Abstract—** The allegory of the mirror is as multifaceted as any piece of glass itself, for, in relationship with the quest of the self, and most of all, with the quest of the female self, it composes and recomposes images born out of broken or scratched surfaces. Broken or scratched and never neat, or elegantly adorned surfaces as the ones Victorians would hang above the fireplace in their sacred mansions, for broken and scratched were the stories behind the destinies that came to find their reflections in the mirrors of the self.

**Keywords-** *self, otherness, identity, womanhood, Victorianism*

The mirror, a symbol of reflection as initiatic journey towards self-discovery, scratched or broken as it was, played the same fundamental part of fellow-pilgrim, accompanying guiding star that would gather all the pieces and reflections in a more coherent and unifying final perspective. Women would begin to assemble their image broken as it was by the mirror of the Victorian society of the time that would deny them any right and identity and value, characters portrayed by Victorian lady novelists would mirror their self not only in the general mirror of their age, but also in the mirror-image of the other, the symbolic companion in relationship to whom they would eventually define themselves and their status.

Psychoanalysis was not one of the attributes of the nineteenth century, but psychoanalysis may be applied when it comes to this extremely peculiar metamorphosis, the so called mirror stage, the one that is endowed with the power to simply replace the idea of fragmentation, of bits and pieces with that of wholeness, unity and completeness.

This allegoric mirror is the one that subtly but irreversibly opens the dramatic perspectives upon women's uniqueness. It is a symbolic dualism between the *I*, emaciated and almost socially annihilated, and the *self*, the inner voice of any woman's identity that thrives to articulate its first metamorphoses.

The immense suffering that women have accumulated through centuries must have forced their conscience to withdraw from the identification with an unhappy and miserable self that simply ripped away any form of identity from them.

Cathartically speaking, this withdrawal started with the first attempts to take up other identities in order to be able to build their own. The result was nothing but the emergence of a real female profile, of her genuine nature as symbol of

continuous existence, conscience at its purest and highest level imaginable, that would later on lead to a deliberate sinking into that special, interior beyond time and death world, that was initially perceived as emptiness, only to reveal itself as the spring of innumerable and inexhaustible energies.

It could be said that it was the Victorian woman novelist, the one that assumed a fictional male identity in order to be able to voice her self, and the one that played the part of this I we have brought into discussion, whereas the question of the self came with the portrayal, in artistic terms, of their inner thoughts and turmoils.

It is as if the authoress herself, this 'audacious' being who defied the common laws of a heavily male oriented society, gained the right to be more than an I. She pours her self through her writing, immortalising the female soul of the time, and in her doing so we must find the incipient, although firm roots of a coherent, socially acknowledged identity of what used to be considered a nonessential dimension of the world.

It is this artistic enterprise that probably made women themselves more than men aware of their immense inner richness, of their extremely complex and complicated self, and urged them to voice it to the world, and thus, to voice themselves and urge the others not only to listen to it, but also to start the journey towards discovering it, men and women alike.

It is an epiphany of the self, that simply restores a state of peace with oneself and brings about the chance to live in identity with the verb to be, that has long surpassed its mere ontologic dimension, and has stepped into another stage, one that stays under the sign of voicing, intellectually uttering the sign of being. And this is what echoes women's encounter with their true self, beyond name, false assumed identities and appearances.

There is a symbolic overlapping of meanings when we refer to the previously mentioned concept of epiphany and we relate it to the question of women during the past 19th century, if we link it with the connotation Buddha gives to the concept, for he used to say that epiphany is the end of suffering.

By starting to write, by challenging their own limits and by tearing down the stifling enclosures society has imposed upon them, women have put an end to their wailing, and have embarked upon the road towards initiation.

This is what such extraordinary women as the Brontës or George Eliot have taught an entire age, the right to discover what lies beyond the mere conventionalism of an almost ‘inexistent’ existence, the shallowest form of ‘breathing’, women’s genuine soul and their true identity, a concept almost impossible to match up to women’s condition at the time.

It is as if Catherine Earnshaw’s most famous cry ‘I cannot live without my life! I cannot live without my soul!’, transcends the conventionalism of the literary work and reveals itself for what it really is, for it really stands for, the wail that marks the beginning of an articulate female self-consciousness.

It marks one of those magical moments of illumination, that reshapes the horizons, and this time the core dimension resides somewhere deep within women’s soul and consciousness. Thoughts are uttered, echoed, symbolically projected into vibrant energies that break the narrow patterns of a time that seemed to obstinate itself into shaping a totally different dimension for women.

In times that broke conventions and expanded limits beyond the power of prediction, women were still kept prisoners, doomed to bear a confinement whose burden and dramatism reached its climax in its inner, rather than outer facet. Oppression fails to entangle more dramatic connotations than the moment it lies somewhere within the being it corrodes and annihilates the most.

The volcano comes to meet its lava; it seems to be aware for the first time in a long run of its own incandescence, troubled self springing from the entrails of the earth engaged as it is in one of the most spectacular, breathtaking and powerful display of forces and vital energies that shape the world from within.

This is exactly what Cathy’s cry does, what these astonishing lady novelists succeed to do, what their *écriture* manages to shape – a new self that claims its rights to the stage of the world, one for which Shakespeare wrote consistent parts, while the Renaissance conventionalism forbid access to, and mask-free entrée to. In such a total numbness of uttering comes the Brontëan cry; the cry of the swan that voices its end, marking the closure of the self-estrangement score, one that women have been forced to play for generations and generations.

Women can no longer live without their soul, without their life, women begin to conquer the stage and, once there, fail to abandon it, for they simply erupt with all the incandescence of their lava onto a world that was already changing. Furthermore, women not only conquer the stage as actresses, timidly throwing away their masks, but they dare conquer it as directors and scenarists as well.

This is where the outstandingness of these ladies lies, in the deep and most profound melting of their life and soul into their words, words infused with memories and fragranced with some of the most intimate and ‘feeling-provoking’ recollections.

The Victorian age comes thus to add invaluable gems of complexity and greatness, trailed as an epic journey of becoming – not only in terms of political and economic power but also in terms of spiritual and moral recalibration.

Without the endeavours of these special ladies, who outlined the missing portrait of their time, adding the ying pieces to the yang-dominating puzzle of the time, the Victorian mightiness would have failed to reach the splendour and uniqueness it enjoys today.

This is one of the clues that should be used in interpreting Victorianism and its atemporality, for this is what rounds it up, in a kind of symbolic reunion of the age with its very self. Without this ‘encounter’, the prominence of the age would have been incomplete, a splendid body with no soul, a glorious existence with no life of its own, though.

Who else could have endowed Victorianism with this symbolic self, so full of infinite connotations if not the expression of self itself, women, special women, whose most sensitive self, a peculiar blend of unique proportions between frailness and firmness, shaped the intimate identity of a whole time and, most importantly, infused the age with their self.

The image that would best describe this is that of rippling circles, of diffused sensitivity that wraps up in fine laces and embroideries of introspection, a time that otherwise would have been described as a time of science, breakthrough, territorial extension of the British dream of power and glory.

We present here the two dimensions of time as projected against the background of an entire age, thoroughly blended in what has come to epitomize the greatness of all times, the Victorian age, and we refer to the internal and the external projections of the mighty Chronos. The dualism of this Janos-reminding perspective is what forges the complete picture of an age that should have failed to melt both the external as well as the internal dimension of time, had not turned into what it is considered today – a time of glory, and a glorious moment in time.

If we are to portray the age in terms of masculinity and femininity related to time, we could come up with the following dichotomic polarity,

***Masculinity***

Technical breakthroughs (powerful intellectually-articulated endeavours, attributes that bear the hallmark of masculinity);
Literature – ways of exploring the world and portraying an age, a turmoiled and ever-changing world; a journey towards the outer world, with special sparklings onto the self;
Architecture of the famous Victorian lodgings; if men are the bricklayers;
Pragmatism of thinking, logic, rationalism, detachment, analytical spirit;
Radiography of an ever-changing society, study of its time and morality;
Professionalism, glory, reputation, socially-acknowledged roles;
Light, predictable but yet no less fascinating;
Leading part on a stage that no longer hosts masculinity on an exclusivist basis;
Matrix of ‘technical and technological’ genesis, the wise and skilled perpetrator of ‘articulated’ civilization;
Bearer of the seeds of the verbs to possess, to make, to achieve, to succeed, to dare, to secure, to know.

***Femininity***

Journeys to far-away, mysterious places (earth and water stand for the very essence of maternity, creation, epitomising life-generating matters);
Education, health, literature – sensitivity infused manners of expressing one’s self, paths that lead towards the discovery of one’s true self; a journey towards the inner dimensions;
Responsible for the ‘inner’ architecture of any Victorian house; women are the vestals that watch over the sacral fire of their hearths;
Compassion, empathy, sympathy, self-identification with the many and the poor;
Depicture of the minute, delicate issues of the soul that has begun to occupy a place on the stage of the world;
Subtle awkwardness, generously compensated with dedication, self-commitment;
Clarobscurer, mysterious and ever more enthralling;
Antique choir, powerful voices in the background that start to shape the part of the leading characters;
Matrix of ‘biological’ genesis, the heroic perpetrator of life, the civilization of an eternally conjugated verb ‘to be’;
Bearer of the seeds of the verbs to be, to forge, to perpetuate, to dream, to hope, to love.

Once the roles and polarities are reversed, womanhood starts its voyage deep into the mines bringing the hidden treasures of the self to the light, bestowing them to the world heritage, claiming their existence, pleading for their acknowledgement, whereas manhood architectures with infinite ‘poetry’ a time of unparalleled mightiness, embroidering passionately and dedicatedly a unique social canvas that weaves together the threads of doing with those of forging and embellishing.

The two permanently communicate between themselves, in a special ballet of fusion and interdependence, intimately correlated with the cosmic cycles of life, death and becoming.

The large interval between sunrise and sunset is the one that describes the whole arch of becoming, of accomplishing even the most audacious things, is the one that melts into the light both the ying as well as the yang element, so very different, so very much apart from each other but still so very dependant on each.

Should we paraphrase the title of a famous novel that bears the signature of a special lady, we could affirm that masculinity and femininity boil down to Sense and Sensitivity, fusing an age that has initiated a breakdown of patterns and has opened large breaches into the traditional, somewhat stiffened social common laws of the time. Victorianism echoes its peculiar polarity masculinity/femininity even further when we reach the very top of the pyramid for there the traditional epitomes of power are all in the hands of a Woman, a special, most sensible mind that has shaped the great destiny of even a greater nation.

This time the circle closes upon the masculine element as the one that adds the final element to the general picture, and this time it is the female element that is completed by the masculine dimension, for it no longer completes the masculine one. This is the most articulate example that gives

the measure of women’s greatness drenched as it is by the glaring lights of the main stage.

Once this capacity is assumed, that of monarch of a great country, the epithets of power transfer themselves onto the very subject, a woman, who started to be perceived less as what she was and more as a dignified representative of a time of reason and change, in a symbolic projection of male attributes over her. She is regarded to be more of a man for she has come to embody and stand for what manhood has stood for millennia, courage, determination, and, most of all authority and supremacy.

Surprisingly enough, a recent discovery has managed to surprise today’s public to seem to have inherited the same pattern of judgement when it comes to sovereigns of such outstanding profile, namely that the 21<sup>st</sup> century public sees Queen Victoria as a woman, but can not hide its mesmerism when then see the sensual woman too.

A rarely displayed portrait, commissioned by the queen herself for Prince Albert’s 24<sup>th</sup> birthday and painted by F.X. Winterhalter, shows the queen leaning against a red cushion with her hair half unravelled from its fashionable knot. Furthermore, Victoria refers to it in her journal as ‘my darling Albert’s favourite picture’, maybe because it shows the queen as a young, blossoming woman that boasts of liveliness and romanticism and mystery; that mystery that women started to melt in the depiction of their lady-characters and which bears the name of self, identity, personality.

A simple painting like this tells us a different story of Victoria to the one most people are acquainted with, although the romance the queen and the prince consort embodied has long defeated the pass of time. Still, regardless of the fact that Victoria was beyond any possible doubt a great monarch, she was and never ceased to be a woman, who loved, suffered and grieved her love as any ordinary woman did, simply discarding the idea of showing up in public for years, discretely performing her duties as sovereign, mourning a lot and ruling less. After Albert’s death, Victoria remained in self-imposed seclusion for ten years. This genuine, but obsessive mourning kept her occupied for the rest of her life and played an important role in the evolution of what would become the Victorian mentality.

At the end of the day she was as much an other as any other woman, suffering, offering, sympathising, simply constantly referring to the other half in order to be complete, to add consistency and weight to her decisions, known being the fact that she would always be assisted by her husband in all her royal duties. An extraordinary woman, ever more extraordinary since she performed in the same ordinary framework that was assigned to womanhood, subjection and devotion. Queen Victoria was thoroughly devoted to her husband, and completely submitted to his will. Victoria did nothing without his approval. She was the sailor wisely guided and guiding itself after the polar star. Extraordinary times for extraordinary people, whose inner structure would echo the same pattern womanhood has avowed for ages. The peculiarity here springs from the almost perfect blending of the two elements, manhood and womanhood, one

complementing the other and this may be regarded as a sign of incipient modernity. The queen was a woman who was offered the rare gift of speech, whose reason was further heard and taken into consideration, but who could not forget what she was.

Lytton Strachey chronicled her last days with the sentimentality that had developed by the end of her reign, in the biography that simply bears her name and title as heading, Queen Victoria, 'By the end of the year the last remains of her ebbing strength had almost deserted her; and through the early days of the opening century it was clear that her dwindling forces were kept together only by an effort of will. On January 14, she had at Osbourne an hour's interview with Lord Roberts, who had returned victorious from South Africa a few days before. She inquired with acute anxiety into all the details of the war; she appeared to sustain the exertion successfully; but, when the audience was over, there was a collapse. On the following day her medical attendants recognised that her state was hopeless; and yet, for two days more, the indomitable spirit fought on; for two days more she discharged the duties of a Queen of England. But after that there was an end of working; and then, and not till then, did the last optimism of those about her break down. The brain was failing and life was gently slipping away. Her family gathered round her; for a little more she lingered, speechless and apparently insensible; and, on January 22, 1901, she died.' [1]

Interesting enough, if we look at one of the words the chronicler chose to depict her dusking days, we cannot fail to notice that she ceased to be a woman, a human being anymore, the very moment she became 'insensible'.

Queen Victoria herself may be regarded as the other woman, the woman who managed to shape the new face of a new era, who brought about changes that history had not experienced until that moment, and who ruled one of the vastest empires ever, but who still could not break away from the framework imposed on all women of her time. Whether members of the peerage or simple commoners, all Victorian women were expected to be weak and helpless, a fragile delicate flower incapable of making decisions beyond selecting the menu and ensuring her many children were taught moral values. A gentlewoman ensured that the home was a place of comfort for her husband and family.

Victoria and Albert had no more than nine children whom she brought up with all the family love and attention. Queen Victoria always gave close attention to the education of her children, repeating in their case with greater advantages, yet with some drawbacks, the systematic training which she had herself undergone, and whose benefits she had learned to prize. To the royal children a Swiss cottage at Osborne was given in entire charge. There the princes dug in the garden, while the princesses performed the duties of the kitchen. As they grew older the girls studied natural history and made large collections of birds and insects. The boys learned something of fortifications under the direction of their father. Prince Albert, both by precept and example, endeavoured to make his sons feel the responsibilities belonging to their station.

The exceptionality of these destinies lies in their accomplishments and not so much in the patterns they had to follow. The quest of self and the idea of self-encounter through writing is also to be found in the fascinating life story of Queen Victoria. Devastated as she was by the loss of her husband, she felt the need to pay tribute to his memory not only in building the famous concert hall that bears his name, but also in placing on record the memorials of his life. In 1862 his 'Speeches and Addresses' were first published, followed in 1867 by 'The Early Years of H. R. H. the Prince Consort', compiled by Lieutenant-General C. Grey, and in 1875 by 'The Life of H. R. H. the Prince Consort' signed by Theodore Martin.

Furthermore, the queen's close and constant connection with the literary labours led her also to venture modestly into the field of authorship. Thus, the first book she wrote, entitled 'Our Life in the Highlands', records her memories of the happy days spent with Prince Albert, the great love of her life. Fifteen years later she sent forth another book, known as 'More Leaves from the Journal of a Life in the Highlands', that showed how she had learned lessons of resignation and faith from the simple mountaineers, and was cheered by romantic excursions in nature's wilds.

Such admission of the public to the quiet joys and sorrows of the domestic life of the Queen makes the reader feel as a privileged guest.

Every record of her life and actions portrays her as a most noble woman, who has in one of the most difficult stations in life grandly, yet quietly, discharged her duty as daughter, wife, mother and queen. The inspiration of her whole life is perfect faith in God and devotion to duty. And if we accept the fact that the nineteenth century was called the Era of Woman, we are given the ultimate measure of this statement and of its immense truth, gloriously portrayed by Queen Victoria herself, a woman of her time, a woman of all times.

Thus, embroidering a female psychology always conditional and opposed to the patriarchal male culture women come to claim the right to the identity in an almost violation attitude of a deeply-rooted taboo that would grant stability and a 'persona' status to men, and men alone. This presence-to-itself of a central axis, centralizes the world through the authority of its self-presence and subordinates to itself all the other recognizable elements of the same ontological system.

Thus, the metaphysical dimension of dichotomous oppositions of Presence/Absence, Being/Nothingness, Truth/Error, Same/Other, Identity/Difference, Reason/Feeling, Speech/Silence coincides with the polarity Masculinity/Femininity, further deepening the abyss that widely breaks open between the two, as ultimate expression of the mastery of difference as such.

The woman is otherwise, the woman is difference, for she is the other, different from the world as long as the world as long as the world is wrongfully and exclusively represented only by the archetypal, dominant, overwhelming male element. If so, woman is simply an outsider, an already 'discarded' entity, since she is the other polarity that is not

considered to add value to the whole, but to merely perform a decorative, auxiliary part.

Moreover, the European culture has long legitimated the idea of womanhood as absence, incompleteness, deficiency, failure even, when none of the fundamental attributes manhood has come to embody is characteristic and emblematic to the other side. This balanced conception of otherness is a kind of symbolic blindness to the woman's real difference, enriching, ennobling, that actually asserts itself and its claim to a new kind of logic and logos.

The French philosopher Luce Irigaray [2], in her book *Speculum de l'autre femme*, raises the problem of 'utterance' when female voices are involved. We can continue the enquiry and relate it to the literature signed by the extraordinary ladies of the Victorian era and we can ask ourselves who is 'speaking' in their novels and who is asserting the otherness of the woman? As Luce Irigaray suggests, the woman's silence, or the repression of her capacity to speak are constitutive of the philosophy and of theoretical discourse. The puzzling issue is whether she, the lady author, comes to speak the logos of men, or if it is the silence of women that utters the language and music of the female self. Is she speaking as a woman, is she just echoing the silence for others women to hear? Does she do it to reach the others, the world, or does she do it in the name of the woman? Is 'speaking as a woman' a fact determined by a series of biological predetermination, by social impositions, culture? Allow us to quote Freud and his famous verdict on women, 'Anatomy is destiny', in order to highlight the perception of the time when the problem of womanhood was approached. And even so, the very idea of speaking in the name of, or speaking for opens the same perspective towards appropriation and further silence. The discourse would thus lack thoroughness, depth and success. It is true that women speak for themselves, but not exclusively for their own selves, that they want to shape and bring to light.

Furthermore, it is of importance the very substance of women's écriture that Christiane Makward, one of the most important commentators and translators of French feminism, describes as being 'open, nonlinear, unfinished, fluid, exploded, fragmented, polysemic, attempting to speak the body i.e., the unconscious, involving silence, incorporating the simultaneity of life as opposed to or clearly different from pre-conceived, oriented, masterly or 'didactic' languages.' [3]

Victorian women writers speak and write in the name of their self, for women to dare and men to understand. Manhood is, in fact, what conditions womanhood as its universal equivalent, as what determines and measures its value, the *axis mundi* against which all aspects of feminine identity are projected and carefully scrutinised and

dramatically reduced to a zero. What seems to be the quest of men's pursuit in women is not a correspondent individual, an interlocutor, a face, but a mirror that would reflect back his own image and his self-absorbed ego along with it.

Virginia Woolf writes that 'women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size.' If men desired not knowledge of women themselves but their acknowledgement of them, pushing them into the direction of recognition, of their almighty recognition, women started, through writing as well, to fight for cognition, of their own self, for themselves.

It is much more than a simple quest; it is a dramatically assumed quest of a world, of the world itself that can never be complete without its ying and yang, dawn and dusk, trails and roads, voices and murmurs, steps and dances, for it is always the dawn that blooms the colours of dusk, the trail that leads its way into the road, the murmur that echoes its song into a voice, the step that blends its rhythm into a dance; the dance of life, the voice of the consciousness, the road towards the real self, the dawn of a new dimension, one in which the mere acceptance is no longer sufficient, for a woman's self, in order to be complete, needs not only to be acknowledged, but also to be understood and accepted. And this acknowledgement, understanding and acceptance must come, first and foremost, from women themselves, for it is they who need to find the path first towards themselves in order to be able to later point the others in the direction of the road that reaches their soul and essence.

Women can no longer afford to be Penelopes, they have to start sail in search not of Ulysses but of that magic mirror that would not only reflect their image but would dare to push the horizons of perceptions a self further. Sumptuous, richly adorned, massive mirrors are known to embellish and decorate the Victorian lodge, but such a mirror would only reflect the sheer materiality of the female outer lining, whereas the inner one is to be reflected by this magic mirror Penelopes have to search for. The entrails of the female world will be reflected by the very eyes of those Victorian women who dared to replace the conventional mirrors, nothing but false, shallow friends of centuries of mere contemplation, with the need to search for the genuine image, the real thing, the true self, the one and only identity.

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