

As Silent...

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As silent as a mirror is believed, realities plunge in silence by
~ Hart Crane, "Legend" (1960)

We are reading—a novel, a story, a poem. The eyes and the mind are working as a smooth, efficient, flawless, finely crafted mechanism of precision, while the body is at rest. There is nothing more beautiful in the universe than ourselves while we are reading, our eyes and minds in synchronization. Suddenly, quite as quick as a flash, our eyes, our minds, encounter a certain word, a phrase, that stops us firmly in our tracks. What has just confronted us holds us frozen to the page, and the mind takes us to a deeper, more complex place, and we go with the overwhelming pleasure of discovery.

From where comes the curiosity, the impulse, to read a word or line and then to plunge deeper into the water to grasp its essence for ourselves? We, as readers, scan with our eyes, our minds, and suddenly a certain something—that light which will overcome us, overcomes all our other senses of place and purpose, and we are gladly blinded by the flash, devoting our minds to this and this alone, with the single purpose of gaining access to its meaning. And the meaning we want, as much as we ever need food and water for our sheer survival, is for ourselves alone. We need to be touched, grasped, moved, nourished and sustained, by that something which will take us deeper into the well of ourselves.

It is beyond what we think of as belief. Indeed, we must suspend belief in order to enter into what the page offers us, because what is there will create for us (such a gift!) quite another time, place, character, purpose, action, that the author of which begs us to accept, to believe in. Yet *there* are the leaves, branches, and blossoms described by, say Yasunari Kawabata or Marcel Proust,

that we recognize; *there* are the times and places in which we might readily accept a recognition of ourselves. But of course it is not exactly what we know, what we believe to be true, just as when we gaze at our silent reflection in a mirror—there is always something different right before us, notwithstanding the switch of the vertical planes: right becomes left in a mirror, yet we forego or suspend, even trivialize, that essential facet of nature.

What do we believe when we look into the mirror? Of course, the first thing any of us sees is an image of ourselves, which offers an “interior” sense of ourselves; and secondly, it reflects what surrounds us or frames us. But importantly, it is a partial reverse, only along a single axis—the vertical—of what we know, or think we know, our true selves and surrounds to be. Yet do we still believe...? We believe any input as far as we believe what a mirror gives us.

Among the works of authors, as Yukio Mishima offered in his introduction to Yasunari Kawabata’s *House of the Sleeping Beauties*, can be found “the obverse or the exterior, their meaning on the surface, and those of the reverse or interior.” (7) It is this latter narrative tenor, the interior of meaning to both the character as well as the reader—yet another mirror image—that I would like to pursue.

I am reading a poem. It is called *Legend*, by the American poet Hart Crane. Reading, but also gazing at it, my mind troubling it, winking out a meaning from it, a sea urchin from its spiny shell. I even read it aloud to gain a feeling of the rhythm of Crane’s phrases. It does sound very good out loud. Knowing full well that what we read or see is a mirror before us (as Lewis Carroll’s Alice knew, and as Cocteau’s Orpheus knew; although it wasn’t until that fateful plunge that Narcissus knew it, too...), the black typeface on the white page suddenly becomes the surface of a well into which I gladly plunge. I plunge into the poem (but did it pull me in, or perhaps push me from behind?), and down into the depths do I fall.

What about the poem has pushed or pulled me so? It is the first line, in fact: 'As silent as a mirror is believed, realities plunge in silence by'. It intrigues me when read in silence and even more so when read aloud. (The reader should try this.)

What catches me initially is the syntactic switch that Crane makes with the phrase 'realities plunge in silence by,' which a more pedantic but grammatically literal reader would wish as 'realities plunge by in silence.' *Plunge*, of course, is a dramatic lexis to mean to drop suddenly and deeply, and connotes a leap into water. So we are confronted with the idea that realities can plunge by us, and in silence. Then we have the reflecting usage of *silent* and *silence*, within the same line, which also constitutes a type of mirror image.

Silent realities. The realities we believe for ourselves. Those beliefs qualified by the mirror image, which we also believe in. Do we believe in mirrors? Is that a possibility for us? The mirror as metaphor?

Now I am looking at the landscape before me, and I see unique realities that are reflected back to my mind's experience, memory, sensations of sight, hearing, smell. I bend down, I plunge, and touch the dry grass for a deeper reality, crumbling the stalks in my fingers and holding them up to my nose. Landscape is our mirror by which we collect and measure such realities. Gazing out on a summer or winter field, looking up, or down from, Mt. Iwate, staring out to sea from the cliffs of Kitayamazaki... As Lawrence Durrell wrote of the Egyptian desert and the sea, "We are the children of our landscape; it dictates behaviour and even thought in the measure to which we are responsive to it." (23)

The landscape mirrors us. Thereby do our realities plunge, as it is reflected in ourselves as we wish it.

The metaphor of the mirror is also interpretation, retelling. As Alberto Manguel, Jorge Luis Borges, and every experienced reader have all understood, all stories are interpretations of stories. It can also be described as a palimpsest,

where a story is placed upon another story, but where all the stories beneath can still be seen through the pages. And yet the idea that 'there is nothing new under the sun' is discredited by the very existence and workings of the human mind and imagination, in that we can, and need to, gaze into the mirror in order to re-imagine an event for ourselves. Anything and everything becomes something new for each of us.

We see this in Yasunari Kawabata's *House of the Sleeping Beauties*. Here, the unseen is yet believed, but only by those who can see into the mirror of what they believe is happening. In this intriguing story, a service is provided for old, lonely men to spend the night in bed beside a young woman who has been drugged asleep. The men are forbidden to abuse the women. They can only gaze and imagine, to touch, and perhaps remember their own past. Furthermore, the women beside whom they sleep are completely unaware of their bed-partner, and most likely they are blind to the nature of this service that pays them. The women are drugged and put to bed before the old men arrive. The men must be gone by dawn, before the young women awaken.

Several deeper levels of 'awareness' are at work here. One image that sets up this tenuous "mirror of meaning" is when an old man sees a painting in the alcove of this secret house just before he enters the bedroom; Kawabata writes that it is "probably a reproduction." (14) The two words *probably* and *reproduction* leap out at the reader with the meaning of ambiguity, that the old man can probably rely on nothing he experiences here as absolute truth, and he is thus plunged into uncertainty.

The old man lies beside the 'sleeping beauty,' and may reproduce a reality in his past by simply gazing at her hair or neck, or listening to a sigh uttered, as the woman sleeps. The man might even imagine that the woman knows he is there, and so begins a kind of 'dialog of experience' where the old man creates thoughts and even memories for the woman, for any woman, to have. In a way,

she becomes his mirror of realities. His own silent thoughts do indeed 'plunge in reality by' throughout the night until he can fall asleep, and the woman's own (un)consciousness remains internal and silent.

Thus, this story placed before us, so to speak, is a mirror by which our own minds can intermingle with all the reflections Kawabata provides us with. The old men are our mirror, as are the young women, and all the thoughts, real and imagined, that emanate from the characters. So each reader, whenever he or she opens a book, becomes "the old man." With Crane's first line as tableau, an author's realities plunge by us in a silence as we pick up a story and read, and of course we believe the story as much as the mirrored characters do— Implicitly.

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