

The Modernist Mirror and the Hold of Being: Rilke and Zamiatin

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In Jean Cocteau's 1930 experimental film *Death of a Poet*, the hero, a young artist, plunges spectacularly into a mirror as its glassy surface suddenly turns into water. After a sojourn into a dark inner space behind this surface, he is thrown back out. In that moment a voice-over declares: "Mirrors should reflect a little before throwing back images." The witticism, as well as the entire scene staged by Cocteau, pivots on the double meaning of reflection, as both a physical process and a mental activity. On the one hand—reflection as redirection, an automatic occurrence; on the other—reflection as rumination, deliberation, a deliberate action. But the witticism is intuitively persuasive because the human faculty it slyly introduces into the image of the mirror seems to hit a spot that has always been there. We can imagine the mirror ruminating, because we are, if only vaguely, aware of a spot behind the glassy surface where there is room.

The mirror's cultural anatomy, as constructed in mythologies as well as literary and artistic discourses over the ages, has featured persistently the antinomy between externality and inwardness, between surface and depth, deflective plane and receptive recess, replication and absorption, recursion and incursion. The mirror not only reflects in the sense of turning back, bouncing outwardly (the rays that constitute the visible), it also turns inwardly, captures and holds the real in an unreal space beyond its surface. Well into the modern period, a debate continued as to the manner in which mirrors produce images: "Many think our image is actually in the mirror, that is, that the mirror replicates in itself an exact figure of our body. Others insist, on the contrary, that our image isn't in the

mirror at all, but that the rays bounce back” (qtd. in Nolan 287). The hesitation of this eighteenth-century German encyclopedia is still about the same: is there an in to the mirror, where our likeness is held, or is out all that there is to it?¹ The split along the lines of this ambiguity allows us to imagine two kinds of mirrors and two types of mirroring or reflection: one flat and one deep, one made purely of out, the other folded mysteriously into an in.

The latter imagination has served as basis for a great variety of metaphysical scenarios, such as the age-old superstition of the mirror as a soul thief, or its equally ancient reputation as a magic fortuneteller. The capture of souls and the holding-forth of what the future holds are both premised on the mysterious inward turn that could serve equally well as an exit for the deceased or as an entryway for things yet to come. That the mirror opened its inner recesses not just toward the chthonic but also toward the heavenly is shown in the practice of medieval pilgrims who attached small pieces of reflective glass to their caps when visiting the shrine of Charlemagne in Aix-la-Chapelle. In these mirrors, as if in minute grails, the divine grace emanating from the relics was believed to be captured and contained (Melchior-Bonnet 17; Goldberg 138-39). The looking glass as a holder of the sacred received a wonderful technical enactment in the Chinese religious mirror now housed in the Oxford Museum of the History of Science. Its composite construction features two surfaces: the reflecting convex glass and, behind it, a screen engraved with the image of Buddha; concealing this inner layer is a false metal back with the inscription, “Adoration for Amida Buddha.” When exposed to the rays of the sun, the mirror suddenly and mysteriously casts the figure it keeps hidden inside; the natural light shed from without causes the divinity of Infinite Light to materialize from within (Goldberg 72-75). In the inner screen responsible for this metaphysical trickery, we get a disenchantingly material instantiation of the enchanted inner space that has always characterized the imaginary anatomy of the mirror: the holder of the sacred turns out to be yet another flat surface holding a relief.

The European Middle Ages saw the development of an entire theology of mirroring and reflection. In a world that spread out as an infinite perpetuation of likenesses and resemblances, essentially

everything existent could be taken as a mirror of something else. The universe was conceived as a chain of creation leading from an ultimate source of being and unfurling its wealth down to the lowest and minutest worldly entities. Precisely to the extent to which this chain was an enchainment of being, it was also possible for it to be conceived of as a hierarchical structure of mirrors.² To be a mirror of, in this context, means least of all to procure a vision of, to reproduce in appearance. Rather, it means to draw from the source, to be *of* the stuff that it discharges; it implies a shared essence, a direct re-embodiment, a co-substantiality.³ Everywhere along the Great Chain of Mirrors the relay is ontological, not specular. Therefore, “Images produced by the divine mirror [i.e., the worldly things and beings themselves] are more properly called exemplars than reflections” (Goldberg 121). At the summit of the cosmological hierarchy, God is conceived as the *speculum superius* ‘ultimate Mirror,’ not because God should be somehow imagined as a reflective firmament vaulting over the world, but because, as an extension of the most primary being, called God, the world could be said to be of Him and in Him. Other privileged symbolizations of the mirror in medieval theology—Christ, the Virgin, the Angelic Host, the human soul, the Holy Scriptures, the Prophets—are figuratively specular because they partake most immediately of the divine Nature and/or Truth.⁴

One object that is excluded from this divine edifice of mirrors is ... the mirror, the actual item of daily use. It alone is not a mirror of anything. What may seem like a paradox is in fact in strict accordance with the manner in which the metaphoric specular edifice is constructed. The man-made looking glass represents the point where the figurative runs against the literal, and the relay of divine creation is cut off; from its surface another relay begins: no longer of essence but of mere appearance, of the superficial likeness of image rather than of being. We enter the domain of *vanitas*, of the deceptive, the fleeting, the ephemeral, in short—the domain of flat reflection.⁵

And how about the thing called art? How does it fit in this ancient cosmology of mirroring? The only answer is—it does not. In the sense in which we understand it today, art is made impossible by the medieval understanding of creation. Creations such as religious paintings could very well be thought of as mirrors of the divine, but

by the same token they cannot be called art. If they mediate between God and His children, it is not because they reflect His image and display it for the contemplation of churchgoers, but because they make God present, because, in the most essential sense of the genitive, they are images *of* God.⁶ He does not simply “resemble” what is depicted on them but is believed to come forth from within their thick medium.⁷

Only with the dissolution of the medieval world and the paradigm of deep (ontological) mirroring that it had supported is art born as art. The principal condition enabling this birth can be described as the turning of reflection inside-out: from the depth at which it had been synonymous with embodiment—into a surface that from now on proffers veracious images of external phenomena. As the existent ceases to be the universal spread of a common being through devolving materializations and becomes the objective world faced by human consciousness, we pass—now historically—into the domain of the mirror proper (rather than figurative) and its flat reflection. Coextensive with consciousness rather than with the world *in toto*, art is that which creates not by materially acknowledging its inherence in a pre-existing continuum of creation, but by displaying at a distance, in an ethereal medium of transparency, the true natures of beings and their relationships. An instrument of enlightenment, it sheds *lumen* ‘light’ upon phenomena, but in so doing it only testifies that it no longer abides in the constitutive *lux* ‘light’ through which phenomena first come into being (see note 3). This is, in Martin Heidegger’s words, the “age of the world picture.”

The metaphor of art as a mirror, ubiquitous in European culture since the Renaissance, is premised on that other relay which, in Cocteau’s language, is the bouncing back of images. It thus implies and relies on the supposed presence of someone to whom images are to be bounced back—a collective subject that would stand as the beneficiary recipient of its own truthful reflections. As M. H. Abrams points out, the viability of art’s comparison to a mirror does not in any way depend on the expectation that paintings or novels should deliver representations of things in the world “just as we see them” (35-39). The metaphor—which for Abrams is not a rhetorical ornamentation, but a fundamental figuration of modern Western culture—does not hinge on the prospect of external resemblance. It

hinges, I would argue, on the implied presence of a receptive outer space of bouncing-to. It is the historical vision of art as existing *in medias res*, in the midst of things, and acting as the reflective mediator of these things, since their unity is no longer ontologically pre-given. It must be put together beginning from representations—reflected images of the true, the good, the beautiful, the desired, and the possible. The imagination of art as a mirror of life can be sustained only for as long as this projecting (bouncing) of representation into a supposedly common social space of understanding and doing remains a viable project. The imagination collapses in those historical moments when the project is rendered suspect.

In his classic *The Mirror and the Lamp*, Abrams has shown how the first crisis of the Enlightenment project, at the end of the eighteenth century, results in a first disenchantment with the metaphysics of outer reflection (30-46). A century later, a second, much deeper crisis unfolds under the generic designation of modernism—deeper because it puts into question the very place of art in the world—that is, the existence of art as such. For all its rebellious gesturing against the dawning world of coarse materialism and calculating, instrumental intellect, Romantic art never abandoned its mediating role and place; it only shifted the source of mediation from one faculty to another: from the objectifying power of universal reason, to the expressive potential of the individual subjective. In modernism, by contrast, art confronts its own obsolescence in that the very space in which it had located itself and by which it had been constituted progressively disintegrates. That middle of things in which art was called upon to exercise its specular function is, in a profound sense, voided; at the beginning of the twentieth century, what one finds there is the barren distance of increasing alienation, of endemic social antagonism, as well as irreparable divorce from whatever used to be called nature. The mirage of some collective subject supposedly standing in front of the mirror dissipates, to reveal another, all-too-real presence: the market as the actual space for the circulation of artistic reflections, whose truthfulness proves to be but a highly ambiguous accessory of their commodity value.

It is against this background that one should view modernism's retreat from representation and mimesis. It is patently inadequate to speak of the distortive mirror of modernist aesthetics if one has

nothing further to say. Nor is it enough to refer to a revolt against the preceding tradition of naturalism, as if the whole matter could be grasped as interplay of artistic conventions. The anti-representational impulse of modernism is to be understood as a withdrawal from a paradigmatic position voided by history: the position of outer reflection, sustained by the prospect that the beings and things of an enduringly flawed human world could meet, recognize themselves, and agree in a common medium of transparency.

From its existence as a specular surface—now that this surface has been detached from the sustaining “out” that is the world—art’s retreat could only be a retreat off the surface into the surface. There is really nowhere else to go. Any other way would amount to abandoning art altogether (and we know that a few avant-garde currents like Dada and Soviet Constructivism/Productivism indeed aim in that radical direction). The last-ditch defense of art could only happen by way of driving reflection inwardly, into the surface, as a reflection of whatever the surface is made. It is the dialectics and meaning of this inner turn that I would like to explore on the following pages by analyzing the imagery of deep mirroring in Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) and Evgenii Zamiatin (1884-1937). From one to the other, I will endeavor to construct a single meta-story which is about reflective surfaces and receptive depths, but ultimately—about a constitutive dilemma of modernism. The image of the deep mirror interests me to the extent to which it symbolizes and dramatizes this dilemma.

I would like to begin with a poem by Maksimillian Voloshin which will help me register the crucial moment when reflection is sundered from its out, so that this out is shown to be tantamount to a void:

Zerkalo

Ia – glaz lishennyi vek. Ia brosheno na zemliu,
 Chtob etot mir drobit' i otrazhat'...
 I obrazy skol'ziat. Ia chuvstvuiu, ia vnemliu,
 No ne mogu v sebe ikh zaderzhat'.

I chasto v sumerkakh, kogda dymiatsia trubny
 Nad sinim gorodom, a v vozdukhe groza,-

V menia gliadiat bessonnnye glaza
I chernoii toskoi zapekshiesia guby.

I komnata vo mne. I kapaet voda.
I teni dvizhutsia, otkhodiat, vyrastaia.
I tikaiut chasy, i kapaet voda,
Odin vopros drugim vseгда perebivaia.

I chuvstvo smutnoe shevelitsia na dne.
V nem radostnaia grust', v nem sladkii strakh razluki...
I ia moliiu ego: "Ostan'sia, bud' vo mne,-
Ne preryvai rozhdaishcheisia muki..."

I vnov' prikhodit den' s obychnoi suetoi,
I blednoe litso lezhit na dne – gluboko...
No vremia nakonets zastynet nado mnoi
I tuskloi plevoi moe zatianet oko. (101-102)

Mirror

I am an eye without eyelids. I've been thrown on the ground
To break up and reflect this world...
Images glide. I feel, I hearken,
But cannot hold them within me.

And often in the twilight, when stacks blow smoke
Over the dark-blue city, and storm is in the air,—
Sleepless eyes peer into me
And lips sealed with black despair.

And the room is inside me. And water is dripping.
And shadows move, go off, grow bigger.
The clock is ticking, and water is dripping,
One question always breaking off another.

And a vague emotion stirs at the bottom.
There's happy sadness in it, and sweet fear of parting...
I plead with it: "Stay, dwell in me,—

Don't interrupt the nascent pain.”

And day arrives again, with usual commotion,

And one pale face lies on the bottom, deep...

But time will finally freeze up above me

And cover my eye with a dull membrane. (my trans.)

The striking image that opens the poem condenses the drama that is about to play out. We are presented with a mutilated organ of vision, and the elegy that follows will be the lyrical lament of this handicap. The mirror is an eye with no lid, meaning that it is an enclosure that lets in only to let out again, offering no possibility of containment. “Brosheno na zemliu” could mean ‘thrown on the ground’ or ‘flung on Earth’/‘thrown into the world.’ The second meaning is the more pertinent one here, supported as it is by the reference to “world” in the next line. Still, the first meaning hovers in the background along with the quite palpable suggestion of abandonment. To be here, on Earth, in this world, is the same as to be tossed on the ground, discarded by the wayside. We are reminded of Stendhal’s famous mirror representing the power of the novel’s realistic representation: the mirror travelling along the high road and imaging indiscriminately everything within the field onto which it opens (515). Stendhal’s mirror journeys proudly, supported by the confident meaningfulness of external reflection. Voloshin’s mirror lies forsaken. In it, the world does not come together; rather, it falls away from it, falls apart. Its being open is a *lishennyi vek* ‘state of deprivation.’

In Voloshin, to reflect conjugates with *drobit* ‘to break up.’ They are two sides of the same predicament. It is the quintessential modernist predicament: the experience of the world as having lost its substantiality, dissolving into a flux of unstable, fleeting appearances, sensations, moments.⁸ “All that is solid melts into air.”⁹ In our case, all that is solid has melted into an airy reflection: things pass through it, never caught, never held in it. The Russian *otrazhat*’, much more directly than its English counterpart, ‘to reflect,’ evokes the meaning of ‘turning outwardly,’ ‘repelling.’ Thus *otrazit’ udar* is to ‘ward off,’ to ‘deflect’ a blow. And so in Voloshin, the mirrored world is a world deflected and, in the same motion, splintered by reflection—a world that does not stick.

The void of external reflection receives anatomical expression: the mirror is likened to an eyeball whose containing element—the cover, the lid—is missing (until the ominous last line of the poem). We can imagine a polished concave surface, an eye-bowl more than an eye-ball, along which the images of the world glide in-and-out (*i obrazy skol'zhat*). The voice that speaks in the poem speaks precisely from there: from that void formed by the surface, from the opening of the empty convexity. It speaks as the agony of the uncontainable in-and-out, as the desperation of bouncing images.

Now this speaking, which constitutes Voloshin's poem, is itself constituted through another secondary, reflection. After all, the mirror we have here is not the obstinate thing of Cocteau's aphorism. It is very much capable of reflecting a little even as it is bouncing images in-and-out. What is more, it is capable of saying "I": "I feel. I hearken." What is the object of this sensibility? As we peruse the poem, we see that the unexpected subjectivity, the "I" of the mirror, has a singular content: it exists exclusively as the consciousness of the specular void, as the reflection of that other, privative, reflection. The only thing it feels and takes in is the hopeless passing away of shadowy faces and shapes. *Vnimat'* is to 'hearken' or 'hear,' but its morphology and etymology point to a more original meaning: an in-cursion ("v-") that becomes containment and belonging ("imet"); to take something in and hold it as one's possession, having it and keeping it in oneness. Because of this new moment, we need to imagine a corresponding complication in the anatomy of Voloshin's looking glass. The very voiding of the reflective surface creates an inner space, as if behind it. There, despite all declarations to the contrary, the mirror proves capable of holding and containing. But what it holds, the capture that makes for its imaginary depth, is just a reflection of a vacuous reflection.

One could write a history of modernism as the extended attempt to acquire this holding power, lacking in Voloshin's mirror, through which it will have a claim on being or essence. An important chapter in this history would certainly have to be dedicated to Rainer Maria Rilke, in whose *oeuvre* the image of the mirror plays a paradigmatic role. It appears repeatedly as one of several figurations for that space of perfect inwardness, contained and containing, in which the being of the world, the essence of its things, will be pre-

served and consecrated. For Rilke too, this imperative task asserts itself against the experience of the slipping and passing of earthly things, their inability to stick and hold for man. Rather than as a concrete historical condition—an aspect of modernity—this predicament appears in Rilke’s poetry as universal, a principal feature of the human condition. Man is the being for whom the world passes away. This fleeting quality of the world is just the other side of the fact that man is ontologically destined to be in the act of departing.¹⁰ While this drama is most properly played out in the dimension of time, Rilke stages it as a spatial relation as well: man is essentially that which is in a state of de-parting because of his peculiar place in being. Inhabiting the world, he also stands a-part from it, having the world over-against himself.¹¹ To be human is to have the world out in front of oneself as a field of objects.¹² This is, once again, the encounter with the world as picture, which Rilke, unlike Heidegger, treats predominantly in universal, ahistorical terms.¹³ Faced with the picture, the human gaze is crowded, shut out. The same relation that allows us to depict the world is what departs us from it.

Where mirrors appear a wholly different relation is established. They are invariably deep mirrors. With them Rilke visualizes a kind of gaze that without mediation takes in and preserves the beautiful Things of the world “ahead of all parting.”¹⁴ He imagines mirrors as surfaces curved inwardly into pure receptivity—imminently holders, rather than reflectors. In the Second Elegy, they are given a role diametrically opposed to the fate of humans:

Frühe Geglücte, ihr Verwöhnten der Schöpfung,
 Höhenzüge, morgenrötliche Grate
 aller Erschaffung,—Pollen der blühenden Gottheit,
 Gelenke des Lichtes, Gänge, Treppen, Throne,
 Räume aus Wesen, Schilde aus Wonne, Tumulte
 stürmisch entzückten Gefühls und plötzlich, einzeln,
Spiegel: die die entströmte eigene Schönheit
 wiederschöpfen zurück in das eigene Antlitz.

enn wir, wo wir fühlen, verflüchtigen; ach wir
 atmen uns aus und dahin; von Holzgut
 geben wir schwächern Geruch. Da sagt uns wohl einer:
 ja, du gehst mir ins Blut, dieses Zimmer, der Frühling

füllt sich mit dir... Was hilfts, er kann uns nicht halten,
 wir schwinden in ihm und um ihn. Und jene, die schön sind,
 o wer halt sie zurück? Unaufhörlich stert Anschein
 auf in ihrem Gesicht und geht fort. Wie Tau von dem Frühgras
 hebt sich das Unsre von uns, wie die Hitze von einem
 heißen Gericht. O Lächeln, wohin? O Aufschau:
 neue, warme, entgehende Welle des Herzens—;
 weh mir: wir *sinds* doch. [...]

Early successes, Creation's pampered favorites,
 mountain-ranges, peaks growing red in the dawn
 of all Beginning,—pollen of the flowering godhead,
 joints of pure light, corridors, stairways, thrones,
 space formed from essence, shields made of ecstasy, storms
 of emotion whirled into rapture, and suddenly, alone,
mirrors: which scoop up the beauty that has streamed from their
 face
 and gather it back, into themselves, entire.

But we, when moved by deep feeling, evaporate; we
 breathe ourselves out and away; from moment to moment
 our emotion grows fainter, like a perfume. Though someone may
 tell us:
 “Yes, you've entered my bloodstream, the room, the whole spring-
 time
 is filled with you...”—what does it matter? he can't contain us,
 we vanish inside him and around him. And those who are beauti-
 ful,
 oh, who can retain them? Appearance ceaselessly rises
 in their face, and is gone. Like the dew from the morning grass,
 what is ours floats into the air, like the steam from a dish
 of hot food. O smile, where are you going? O upturned glance:
 new warm receding wave on the sea of the heart...
 alas, but that is what we *are*. ... (338-41; emphasis in the origi-
 nal)

The break between the two stanzas is also an ontological break.

Where “we” begin—after the contrarian “but”—a rift opens in the fabric of worldly existence. On one side remain the primordial Things of the earth, steady, permanent, complete in themselves. They are consummate creations, which here means their essence is properly consummated, none of it scattered or wasted. On that side, mirrors circumscribe that deep space in which being is gathered in and preserved in “pure duration” (Rilke 341). On this side, where “we” are, this kind of deep hold is lacking. The leitmotif here is the to-and-fro of appearances and disappearances, the evanescence of presences, and the failure to contain. Human words of passion may speak of sublime penetrations, profound suffusions, and everlasting retentions but such claims are not to be trusted. It seems that man’s relation to his kind and to other kinds of beings simply cannot be consummated in the perfect way that Rilke had just shown us on the example of mountain ranges and lakes. In the *Elegy’s* second part, he inquires whether this is indeed the case, whether there may not be, say, in the way lovers come together, some firmer embrace with being (“Lovers, gratified in each other, I am asking you / about us. You hold each other. Where is your proof?” [341]). There is no definitive answer—only an ambiguous hope, a faint promise of “eternity, *almost*, from the embrace” (341-42; emphasis added).

But then, there is art. Its value, for Rilke, consists in nothing more than this: that it too promises to instantiate the deep space in which the essential abides and endures. And indeed, near the end of the *Second Elegy*, art makes its appearance as if to give an answer to the anguished questions voiced earlier. The figures engraved on Greek gravestones are evoked as a counterpoint to the embraces of living human lovers (342-43). The former manage to arrest and contain that which slips and dissipates in the latter. The surface of the gravestone appears to have accomplished the very same act that mirrors accomplished earlier in the text. The two are analogous surfaces: one kind of space in two phenomenal guises. Confirming the isotopic relation between art and mirror is a notebook entry by Rilke in which these same Attic reliefs are described:

Indeed, it seemed as if in these lingering gestures (which no longer operated in the realm of fate) there was no trace of sadness about a future parting, since the hands were not troubled by any fear of ending or any presentiment of change, since nothing

approached them but the long, pure solitude in which they were conscious of themselves as the images of two distant Things that gently come together in the *unprovable inner depths of a mirror*. (556; emphasis added)

In the Ninth Elegy, at last, we are introduced to a concrete antagonist, a worldly power opposed to the redemptive power of art, the inner, and the mirror. Rilke speaks here of a certain *Tun ohne Bild* ‘imageless act’ that crowds out the Things of the human world and makes them vanish. This effacing movement proceeds under the sign of pragmatic concern, accompanied by the ominous beating of hammers (Rilke 385). Not much more is said about it, yet we should certainly feel invited to fill in the picture of a crass and self-confident modernization that swiftly erases traditional ways of life, of experiencing the world, and of making things. This is the actual historical force of de-parting—what tears man apart from everything “simple which, formed over generations, lives as our own, near our hand and within our gaze” (385). The landscape produced by its depredations is given a poetic mapping earlier in the cycle:

....Wo einmal ein dauerndes Haus war,
 schlägt sich erdachtes Gebild vor, quer, zu Erdenklichem
 völlig gehörig, als ständ es noch ganz im Gehirne.
 Weite Speicher der Kraft schafft sich der Zeitgast, gestaltlos
 wie der spannende Drang, den er aus allem gewinnt.

....Where once an enduring house was,
 now a cerebral structure crosses our path, completely
 belonging to the realm of concepts, as though it still stood in the
 brain.
 Our age has built itself vast reservoirs of power,
 formless as the straining energy that it wrests from the earth.
 (Rilke 370-71)

Once again, two forms of being are brought head-to-head, and once again the opposition is established along the line of the enduring and the evanescent, but now in the more concrete setting of our age. On one side, entering the landscape aggressively and blocking the path of man, is a structure. It is seemingly erected in the world, but in such a way that it does not inhere there: it is really not of

the world. It comes from the brain and while standing on earth it appears to have never left the rarefied realm of the cerebral. The fact that it crowds man's path is a consequence of its nature as a projection. For Rilke here, structure is the result of having the world over-against oneself, treating it as an object subordinate to the mental representations of a domineering subject. The opposite term is house, something that stands firmly erect in the landscape by virtue of arising straight from the very essence of world—the habitat of man. The inherited is also the inhering. And yet, in the present moment, it has been uprooted by an imageless act of outward projection, whose violent power comes precisely from its being formless and ungrounded. Through this act men are “disinherited” (*Enterbte*, Rilke 372), and the world—dis-inhabited, de-worlded.

From the site of this—now more distinctly historical—emergency, Rilke calls for a counter-act. By this point, we could anticipate what such an act would amount to: against the effacing motion of outward projection, he sets the task of taking inwardly and “preserving the still-recognizable form” (373). The figure of the deep mirror concretizes and poeticizes this moment of salvational consecration. The rescue of being is to be accomplished by “[making] use of these generous spaces, these / spaces of *ours*...” (373, emphasis in the original). As I have pointed out, art in Rilke—inasmuch as it is a faithful perpetuation of the inner—figures as one such space. It is a realm in which the recoil from the brutal reality of advancing capitalism—even when not recognized in its historical specificity or causal depth—could be staged as an enduring penetration into the thick of ahistorical being.

Powerless to change the world directly, to step into its alienating landscape and concretely transform it, modernist art undertakes another type of transformation.¹⁵ As hopelessly divorced from the world as ever it enacts a vital hold upon it by effecting a thickening of its own surface. From the distance of something de-parted it organizes new intensities of signification in the hope that by this trick it will counteract the de-parting, that it will pass beyond signification, beyond representation, and will find itself once again, miraculously, in the midst of being. It is prone to mistaking the density of signification, that is, of its own medium, for the thickness of some primordial life-substance. In Zamiatin's *We* (1921), these two

moments—the reunion with being and the thickening of the representational medium—occur side by side. Their spectacular confusion, the substitution of one for the other, is what I would like to demonstrate in the following pages.

We begin with a hyper-modern world of the future that misses depth. It is a world of optimal transparency erected in an architecture of flat glass surfaces. Its inhabitants are likewise depthless creatures, ciphers in the all-encompassing arithmetic of the One State. They lack interiority. The interesting part is that this lack itself exists as a part of the landscape: both the external geography of Zamiatin's futurist world and the internal geography of the individual subject (D-503). The missing depth is not missing in an absolute sense: it appears, reified, as a thing apart. Just beyond the wall enclosing the domain of One State, its lost dimension sprouts as a primeval forest; just beyond the automatized waking consciousness of D-503, the lost dimension of the self sprouts in unsuspected impulses and desires. Life in the One State is, quite literally, de-parted from Being, with the Green Wall serving as the quite material partition between the two. We may say that the world in *We* exists with a permanent surplus; its excised essence is there as an unabsorbed excess that pushes against the confining boundaries of state and self, threatening to dissolve them both. The story Zamiatin tells, then, is about this coming irruption, about how the parted-off thing-in-itself pushes for recognition and re-absorption.

He depicts the movement, figuratively, as a passage from a flat, unremitting plane into a receptive, mossy interiority, a melting of the surface that produces, in its stead, form and volume. The mirror is, once again, the symbolic object through which this transformation is played out:

“You're in a bad shape. It looks like you're developing a soul.”

A soul? That strange, ancient, long-forgotten word. We sometimes used expressions like “soul-mate,” “body and soul,” “soul-destroying,” and so on, but soul...

“That's ... very dangerous,” I murmured

“Incurable,” the scissors snapped.

“But ... what is really going on? I don't ... I can't understand.”

“You see ... how can I put this? You're a mathematician, right?”

“Yes.”

“Okay ... take a flat plane, a surface, take this mirror, for instance. And the two of us are on this surface, see, and we squint our eyes against the sun, and there’s a blue electric spark in the tubing, and—there—the shadow of an aero just flashed by. But only on the surface, only for a second. But just imagine now that some fire has softened this impenetrable surface and nothing skims along the top of it any longer—everything penetrates into it, inside, into that mirror world that we peer into with such curiosity, like children—and I assure you, children aren’t so dumb. The plane has taken on mass, body, the world, and it’s all inside the mirror, inside you: the sun, the wash from the aero’s propeller, and your trembling lips, and somebody else’s too. And, you understand, the cold mirror reflects, throws back, while this absorbs, and the trace left by everything lasts forever. Let there be only once a barely noticeable wrinkle on somebody’s face, and it’s in you forever; once you heard a drop fall in silence—and you hear it right now.”

“Yes, yes ... that’s right,” I said, and I grabbed his hand. “I just heard it. From ... the faucet of a washbowl ... drops slowly dripping in silence. And I knew that would be forever. But, still, why a soul all of a sudden? There wasn’t one for such a long time, and now suddenly ... How come no one else has one, and I ... (Zamiatin, *We* 86-87)

The exchange takes place during a medical consultation. The doctor finds it difficult to explain what is wrong with his patient, D-503. Since soul is a word that has gone out of use in the vernacular of the One State, its meaning needs to be elucidated in a more roundabout way. And so the doctor reaches for a figure of speech, an allegorical image. The figure of the deep mirror emerges as merely a manner of speaking about the actual thing aimed at, the referent—the soul.

Let us note, first, that the doctor’s diagnosis resembles in one essential feature the way in which D-503 goes about the business of writing. He, the scribe of a documentary account that is to be taken to other worlds, is in a similar predicament, inasmuch as his words are intended for the inhabitants of more primitive civilizations. Thus he too cannot simply rely on habitual designation, but must proceed in a roundabout way in order to explain the reality of which

he is a part. D-503's predicament is compounded by the resurfacing of unknown contents within his own self. After all, for most of the novel, he, the diarist, has to record his own symptoms and produce an explanation in writing. D-503's inner turmoil, as we know, is paralleled by a revolutionary upheaval around him. Since his altering inner state and the violent unsettling of the One State repeatedly present him with enigmatic new events, he constantly finds himself compelled to reach for figurative linguistic means. Hence the language of the diary-novel is constitutively figurative: a kind of speaking that constantly morphs into a manner of speaking.

We should notice, furthermore, the discrepancy between the figurative substitute and the literal object, the real thing, to which it allegedly refers. The real thing turns out to be patently banal, a tritely familiar item: the human soul. The only reason such banality is allowed to stand in Zamiatin's text is that it will be immediately subsumed and defamiliarized by the description. We are surprised to find out that the soul is an absorptive recess formed by the melting of an obdurate surface into soft volume. To say that the extended allegory merely explains what to develop a soul means is, obviously, nonsense. The signifier does not actualize the signified; it erases it, placing itself in its stead; it sublates it. Where one expects to find a definition of a meaning, Zamiatin gives us an entire little world: two figures standing on a mirror surface, aeros flying above, fire burning below, drops of water falling and enduring, etc.

With these observations in mind, let us turn again to the tale of the deep mirror, as rendered in the doctor's extravagant diagnosis. In it we find the opposition—by now quite familiar—between two kinds of reflection. First comes the cold mirror; it merely *otrazhaet* 'reflects,' which here is followed by and equated with *otbrasyvaet* 'throws back.' And once again, this kind of reflection corresponds to a fleeting world with no staying power, composed of fragments that barely skim the surface before *skol'ziat* 'glide' away. In the next, opposite moment, after fire has melted the surface, a new space is produced that is capable of receiving deeply the impressions of the world outside, a space that catches and holds forever. It is the fold where one enduringly communes with the real, where the de-parting is overcome, where one is one with being. The image is rich, in a manner typical of Zamiatin's work after 1917.¹⁶ It picks up a series

of leitmotifs already established in the novel (surface, mirroring, solid, cold, ice, sterility, crystallization, monolithic stability, entropy, transparency, etc.) and co-articulates them with a semantic chain that runs in the opposite direction (liquid, absorption, dissolution, fire, conception, melting, dynamism, energy, opacity, etc.).¹⁷ The symbolic statement produced by this co-articulation, the statement of the melting mirror, appears overripe with meaning. It speaks of mysterious profundities within the self, some unrecognized surplus of the quotidian personality (the unconscious, deep memory, *durée*, etc.); at the same time, it also evokes the vision of similarly mysterious reservoirs of social energy beneath the flat surfaces of quotidian life (*bytie*, as opposed to prosaic *byt*); finally, it gestures toward a cosmic narrative in which the universal and super-personal forces of entropy and energy interact.¹⁸ In short, it condenses within itself the novel's principal thematic lines.

In the idiom of Zamiatin's own theorizing about literature, the melting mirror is a fine example of the so-called synthetic or integral image.¹⁹ In the idiom of post-structuralist theory, it should be called a master signifier—a unifying point in the semiotic fabric where multiple significations are brought together and knotted.²⁰ More colloquially, the master signifier is a moment in the text where it all seems to come together and make sense. It gives the appearance of optimal semantic saturation, a cornucopia of meaning. This is the reason the doctor's words cannot be taken seriously as offering just a description for developing a soul. The image he paints seems to say so much more, to capture a great deal of what the novel is all about.

But what is the novel really about? Is it about totalitarian government, revolution, love, the liberated self, true human nature, soulless modernization? After each of these (patently naïve) propositions, as well as any combination of them, we are compelled to say, Not really. We feel that *We* is about all of this and more. The more is not just a quantitative surplus (additional subject matter that has not been included in the enumeration). It is, first of all, qualitative: no listing of contents could exhaust the text's meaning because one thing will always be left out, namely, the movement whereby these same contents are symbolized and integrated in a fabric of recurrent images. We would be more justified in asserting that the novel is re-

ally about hardness and softness, transparency and opacity, straight lines and curves, conventional and irrational numbers, etc. These are higher-order signifiers; they re-symbolize, on a further level of abstraction, the more numerous and ordinary signifiers such as reason, passion, nature, soul, self, etc. In their enchainment, they appear to hold more meaning than what their lowly, trite counterparts can yield. At certain moments an additional, even higher level is reached when the few privileged signifiers are engaged together to form a more complex image, similar in kind to an extended metaphor. This is when the master signifier is born. It is the moment when the text appears densest, most meaningful, while it is, from a different point of view, most schematic. The doctor's diagnosis of D-503's condition, with the extended metaphor of the melting mirror, is just such a nodal moment.

Now I would like to suggest that the richness of this moment is even greater than we could have suspected at first glance. To the various textual meanings that Zamiatin's mirror actualizes, a further one should be added, incongruent with the rest, a meta-meaning that no longer aims at the world depicted in *We*, its characters, and themes. While speaking of a burgeoning self and the fomenting of a revolution, the image also speaks, albeit in a different way, about the burgeoning of meaning from within the surface of writing. It appears to tell us about how the modernized world and, within it, the modernized self come to have access to Being, but this is only in a manner of speaking. The ultimate object aimed at, the essential reality to which the image refers, is its author's manner of speaking, the reality of the artistic method itself. In one of the earliest critical responses to *We*, Viktor Shklovskii hit upon this essential secret of Zamiatin's text: "In my view, the world in which Zamiatin's characters find themselves is reminiscent less of the world of defective socialism than of a world constructed by Zamiatin's method. For, generally speaking, we study not the Universe but just our own instruments" (my trans., 258). The preponderance of the instrument or the method over the world to which they are meant to give access is, arguably, a feature of all modernist artistic discourse. In this general picture, the case of Zamiatin's *We* deserves attention for the singular fashion in which the properties of method and world become entangled and confused. In speaking against a flat civilization,

Zamiatin revolts against flat prose; in dramatizing dynamic social worlds and private selves, he enacts, in the very same motion, a dynamic style of writing; in probing suppressed depths of existence, he makes a claim for untapped depths of artistic meaningfulness.

The ambiguity of this double-speak is perpetuated in Zamiatin's principal statement on literary aesthetics, "On Literature, Revolution, and Entropy." The essay, which Irving Howe has dubbed "a decisive manifesto of the modernist outlook" (20), recycles the main themes and images of *We*: ice and fire, flatness and depth, line and curve (distortion), revolution and stagnation, energy and entropy, statics and dynamics. And once again, these capacious signifiers perform the function of unifying disparate phenomena: the laws of nature, society, and artistic creation. Unlike in *We*, however, the unification here serves explicitly ideological purposes: the point where nature, society, and writing are knotted in a homology is also the point where the actual social revolution could be subsumed under a loftier generality, its messiness redeemed by a higher, implicitly aesthetic function. After Zamiatin's crafty operation, we just might be convinced that revolution, beyond such crass trivialities as eliminating exploitation and redistributing wealth, is really about bending straight lines into unpredictable curves, thawing encrusted surfaces, and finding unexpected angles of vision. It would then be possible to privatize the revolution and stage it in the decidedly less messy quarters of artistic experimentation:

All realistic forms are projections along the fixed, plane coordinates of Euclid's world. These coordinates do not exist in nature. Nor does the finite, fixed world; this world is a convention, an abstraction, an unreality. And therefore Realism—be it "socialist" or "bourgeois"—is unreal. Far closer to reality is projection along speeding, curved surfaces—as in the new mathematics and the new art. Realism that is not primitive, not *realia* but *realiora*, consists of displacement, distortion, curvature, nonobjectivity. Only the camera lens is objective.²¹ (Zamiatin, "On Literature" 112)

It is not difficult to see that this passage recasts the doctor's diagnosis in *We* as a diagnosis on the state of contemporary literature and, more broadly, art. The mirror is absent (in its stead a differ-

ent optical contraption is evoked—the photographic lens); but the principal movement that the metaphor was called upon to execute is still in place: the transition from a flat surface/projection, incapable of capturing reality, to a curvilinear space synonymous with depth. As a bonus, the article spells out something which remains obscure in the novel: what is this strange fire that is responsible for the transformation of surface into depth? We can now see that this is the flame of formal heresy. The true modernist, the artist-heretic, breaks through the surface and uncovers essential reality by breaking with inherited (here, traditional realistic) convention, executing formal twists and turns, sharpening abstraction, distorting perspective, and so on.

My claim is that this story, explicit in the article “On Literature...,” is also the implicit message that we should read through the parable of the melting mirror in *We*. The parable does not simply allude to it by thematic hints; it enacts it. As I argued previously, the doctor’s words, apart from anything they openly say or suggest, are at the same time a concrete demonstration of how signification thickens. The melting mirror may be offered as a symbol of psychological or social upheaval, but it should be taken, first of all, as a performative statement of Zamiatin’s own synthetic method. It shows, ultimately, how signification produces a surplus, the *realiora* ‘Real,’ which is nothing else than the effect of integration (the coming together and making sense), achieved by the abstraction and re-symbolization of primary textual elements.

In the sweep of integration, something is irretrievably lost: the real Real, the actual referent. The capaciousness of Zamiatin’s synthetic images is due to the fact that they abstract from the real thing, leaving only a general feature, which can then be associated with other items in the text. The very means by which the sign yields surplus and writing acquires a depth are also the means by which the road back to lived reality is barred. Just as we cannot read the doctor’s parable as intending the soul, we cannot read it as intending some actual transformation, either in the self or in the world at large. Whatever revolution might have referred to in the real world dissolves under Zamiatin’s pen into impressionistic generality: something partly red, partly hot, irrational, dynamic, and furry on the inside. In the same act in which writing makes an appeal to the

fullness of life, to the depth of Being, it substitutes for these profundities the thickness of its own medium.

Like Rilke, Zamiatin reaches for the figure of the deep mirror when he wants to imagine a counter-action to the de-realizing, flattening, effects of modernization. He, too, undertakes the artistic construction of a counter-space—receptive, absorptive, retentive—from within modernity’s landscape of imposed cerebral structures. For both authors, this is a space of envisioned transformation through which alienation (de-parting) will be overcome and a vital communion with the world reestablished. What Zamiatin’s example shows is that the proclaimed hold of Being is nothing other than the effect of a holding-together of images and motifs within a fabric of writing. In the place of the voided external (flat) reflection, art organizes patterns of inner reflection between its own elements. Stephan Mallarmé had just such internal interplay in mind when he declared: “Our principal aim should be to make the words of a poem self-mirroring” (qtd. in Nicholls 38). From mirroring the world, art withdraws into a game of self-reflection that foregrounds the formal properties of its medium. The deepening of the mirror is a figure for this withdrawal and, thus, could serve as a metaphor for modernism itself. Yet I wanted to show it also as a figurative site of *méconnaissance*: the tendency within modernism to treat this withdrawal as transcendence; to misrecognize the new densities of discourse for depths of essential experience; to mistake the formal integration of textual marks (the chain of signifiers) for a reintegration with life (the Great Chain of Being).

Notes

1 “And just where does the image reside? At the same time both present and elsewhere, the perceived image has an unsettling ubiquity and depth, located at an uncertain distance. Looking into a mirror, an image for the most part seems to appear behind a solid screen, so that the observer may wonder if he is seeing the surface of the mirror or looking through it. The reflection creates the sensation of an ethereal world looming beyond the mirror, inviting the eye to cross through to it. Like a prism, the mirror can disrupt the field of vision because it hides as much as it shows” (Melchior-Bonnet 101-02).

2 In reading the allegory of the mirrors in Dante’s *Paradiso*, James Miller presents the following picture: “Creation becomes a hierarchy of mirrors, each casting an image of God. The further off the individual mirror is from God,

the smaller the image of Him it reflects, but his brightness never diminishes” (266).

3 In St. Augustine, the constitution of worldly beings is thought by analogy with the transmission of natural light, *lumen*. The irradiation through which God creates is that of a second, invisible light, *lux* (Goldberg 121).

4 The canonized image of Mary as the *speculum sine macula* ‘Spotless Mirror’ cannot be accounted for simply by associations with virginal purity. Equally decisive is the moment of miraculous pregnancy: having the divine within, as flesh of Her flesh, in a union of co-substantiality.

5 Quite understandably, then, Medieval and Renaissance iconography frequently pairs the depiction of actual mirrors with the figure of the devil.

6 For a classic discussion of religious painting as a manifestation, a bringing-to-presence, of the divine (rather than its mere representation), see Florenskii.

7 This belief is reflected in, among other things, the fact that Russian peasants referred to icon paintings as *bogi* ‘gods.’

8 See Nichols 5-6.

9 Marx’s famous phrase serves as a title of one of the most influential accounts of modernity—that of Marshall Berman.

10 Wer hat uns also umgedreht, daß wir,
was wir auch tun, in jener Haltung sind
von einem, welcher fortgeht_ Wie er auf
dem letzten Hügel, der ihm ganz sein Tal
noch einmal zeigt, sich wendet, anhält, weilt—,
so leben wir und nehmen immer Abschied.

Who has twisted us around like this, so that
no matter what we do, we are in the posture
of someone going away? Just as, upon
the farthest hill, which shows him his whole valley
one last time, he turns, stops, lingers—,
so we live here, forever taking leave. (Rilke 380-81)

11 Dieses heißt Schicksal: gegenüber sein
und nichts als das und immer gegenüber.

This is what fate means: to be opposite,
to be opposite and nothing else, forever. (Rilke 378-79)

12 Und wir: Zuschauer, immer, überall,
dem allen zugewandt und nie hinaus!

And we: spectators, always, everywhere,
turned toward the world of objects, never outward. (Rilke 378-79)

13 In an oft-quoted letter to Lev Struve, apropos of the Eighth Elegy, Rilke contrasts the human condition with that of the animal: “The animal’s degree of consciousness is such that it comes into the world without at every moment setting the world over against itself (as we do). The animal is *in* the world; we stand *in front of* the world because of the peculiar turn and heightening which our consciousness has taken. So by the ‘Open’ it is not sky or air or space that is meant; they, too, for the human being who observes and judges, are ‘objects’ and thus ‘opaque’ and closed” (566; emphasis in the original).

14 The phrase opens one of the “Sonnets to Orpheus.” See Rilke 487.

15 Transformation is a key term in Rilke’s aesthetic philosophy, with special pertinence to the Elegies. It names the sublime mission of being human and, by extension—that of being an artist. See Rilke’s letter to Witold Hulewicz (565).

16 The distinctive character of Zamiatin’s artistic method after 1917 is discussed in Layton and Kern.

17 For a useful tabulation of key images in *We*, see Cowan 161-62.

18 The dynamics of energy and entropy is introduced near the end of *We* in the words of I-330 (159, 168-69). Zamiatin discusses it at length in “On Literature.”

19 Zamiatin’s understanding of the synthetic image is expounded in “On Literature,” “On Synthetism,” and, more cursorily, in “New Prose.”

20 The master signifier is a key term in the theoretical work of Jacques Lacan and a number of post-structuralist critics, including Slavoj Žižek. For Lacan, master signifiers are those items (representations of objects, persons, phenomena) in the symbolic text of the subject’s psychological condition that totalize this text, endowing it with (the semblance of) unitary meaning. Žižek extends the notion’s applicability to the sphere of ideology. Here the master signifier is that ultimate ideologeme that seems to embody the fullness or substance of the ideological vision. Both Lacan and Žižek insist that the master signifier is, in fact, empty; rather than capturing some sublime content, it fulfils a purely formal role in the text: the quilting of the other signifiers that arrests the potentially endless play of their meanings. See Lacan 189-92, Žižek, *Enjoy* 102-103 and *Sublime* 98-105.

21 A passage of similar content appears in “The New Russian Prose” (105), a public lecture Zamiatin delivered in 1923 (the same year in which “On Literature” was written) to the Petersburg Soviet.

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