

THE SOUND THAT THE LOOKING-GLASS MAKES

by Aimee Walleston

On Sunday, January 29, 1939, Virginia Woolf wrote a diary entry detailing her experience meeting an elderly Sigmund Freud at his home in London. At this, their first and only encounter (he would die this same year), Freud presented Woolf with a single narcissus flower. In the same year, Woolf wrote an autobiographical essay titled “A Sketch of the Past,” in which she describes a feeling state that has been with her since she was a child: “the looking-glass shame.” She writes that she cannot look in the mirror and take pleasure in her own appearance, though she knows she was born to a family admired for its feminine beauty. She describes how difficult it is for her to walk into a room wearing a new dress—how self-conscious this experience makes her feel. In this essay, Woolf also describes being sexually abused as a child, and her “tomboy phase” in the years following. She contemplates an unexplained psychic condition of losing time that she calls the “cotton-wool”—a figure of speech that I believe she has designated for the lingering dissociative states many people experience, particularly those who were abused as children. In a dissociative state, individuals spontaneously “tune out” the world. During abuse, children often involuntarily dissociate to keep their sanity intact, and this becomes a way of negotiating reality after the abuse has ended. I am struck by the names Woolf gave to these sensations, and by her effort to make sense of them. I think about Freud’s potentially symbolic gift of the narcissus, a flower that directly connotes both an obsession with gazing into mirrors and an overvaluation of one’s own reflection. To me, Freud’s narcissus represents a psychological polarity to the looking-glass shame. I wonder what Freud knew, without knowing, about Woolf.

In this poem, I have taken excerpts from Woolf’s essay and her diary entry and reformed them. I wanted to peer into Woolf’s looking-glass shame from a different angle—from my own perspective. I’ve also added in my own lines, to join Woolf as a sister might.

Every day includes more non-being than being.

What would the looking-glass say, if it could speak? I’m so sorry. Not now.

Immense potential, I mean an old fire now flickering.

There is always too much of me to hate. There is never enough of me to hate.

Dr. Freud gave me a narcissus.

When I stand here I can barely look at you. I can’t think about you looking at me. I can’t look at myself.

I remember how I hoped that he would stop; how I stiffened and wriggled as his hand approached my private parts.

It opened its mouth. It was made all of petals. It did not stop.

I can't remember the last time I could stop. A mirror that had a mind of its own and could not stop.

I feel that strong emotion must leave its trace; and it is only a question of discovering how we can get ourselves again attached to it, so that we shall be able to live our lives through from the start.

You want it all to make sense. You want to tie it up with ribbons and bows. You want it to have a beginning and an end, like a book. You want it to be all over.

At any rate, the looking-glass shame has lasted all my life, long after the tomboy phase was over.

A mirror that eats people. A mirror that eats itself. A mirror that grows up. A mirror that boys up. A screwed up shrunk very old man: with a monkey's light eyes, paralysed spasmodic movements, inarticulate: but alert.

You know. You can see it.

It doesn't hide itself from you anymore. It wants you to see it. For now.

As a child then, my days, just as they do now, contained a large proportion of this cotton-wool, this non-being.

Where should we put the mirror? I am hardly aware of myself, but only of the sensation. Where does the mirror belong? A great part of the day is not lived consciously.

Who belongs to the mirror? Who belongs in the mirror?

I could feel ecstasies and raptures spontaneously and intensely and without any shame or the least sense of guilt, so long as they were disconnected with my own body.

Do you find my appearance pleasing? Do I please you? I remember resenting, disliking it—what is the word for so dumb and mixed a feeling?

You can do whatever you want to me. I'm not even here.

Just as I raised my fist to hit him I felt: why hurt another person? I dropped my hand instantly, and stood there, and let him beat me.

I can't feel you anymore. I don't care.

I remember the feeling. It was a feeling of hopeless sadness. It was as if I became aware of something terrible; and of my own powerlessness.

I don't have to see it if I don't want to. I don't have to do anything.

I dreamt that I was looking in a glass when a horrible face—the face of an animal—suddenly showed over my shoulder.

Generation before the poison will be worked out. It isn't even my face.

Bleed the mirror. Pull out all its petals.

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