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The Mirroring Phenomenon in Cultural Consciousness of Russia

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Abstract

The article considers the understanding of the phenomenon of mirroring. In particular, the specifics of the mirroring phenomenon interpretation in scientific studies is analyzed with the help of the comparative historical method and the integral method of literary work analysis. Mirroring is considered as a philosophical and aesthetic phenomenon, as well as a category of modern cultural studies, semiotics and literary studies. The paper in question follows the history of mirror not as a materialistic object, but rather as the phenomenon which meaning goes beyond “physical” nature; it is traced what meanings mirroring acquires in different epochs in the European and Russian culture – from ancient times (the folklore understanding of a mirror as a boundary between worlds) to modern interpretations. It is mentioned in the work that the mirror was not only a common household item, but also a symbolic object that accompanies an individual’s search for himself in the process of self-understanding since one’s own reflection can reveal similarities or differences, kinship or alienity within oneself. The article examines the interpretation of the phenomenon of mirroring in the humanitarian thought of the twentieth century, primarily in the research of M. M. Bakhtin. The entire corpus of the most important scientific works of M. M. Bakhtin has been analyzed: “Author and hero in aesthetic activity”, “Man at the mirror”, “Problems of Dostoevsky's creativity”, “Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics” etc. It is found that the phenomenon of mirroring in the works of M. M. Bakhtin is directly associated with the categories of the “other”, “out-of-search”, “double”, which are dominant in the dialogical concept of the scientist (the other as an “I-twin” turns “others” into objects of his own vision with the help of the mirror). The mirror appears as the object of a character’s identification with his own reflection, himself, and is connected with the conception of “strange consciousness” as a means of “internal” self-equality on looking at yourself with “other’s” eyes.

Keywords: M. Bakhtin, Y. Lotman, J. Lacan, cultural studies, the mirroring phenomenon, Self-identification.

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Introduction

Mirroring is a philosophical and aesthetic phenomenon, as well as a category of modern cultural studies, semiotics and literary studies. The mirroring phenomenon, having undergone a significant evolution and transformation, is a fundamental one in the culture and literature of the twentieth century. In the mythological consciousness, the mirror played a crucial role, because it was seen as the boundary of the in-between world (the earthy world and the spirit world), and also as one of the essential attributes of death. In consequence, it was reflected in the literary texts on a folk basis: “the Tale of the Dead Princess and the Seven Knights” by A. Pushkin, “Aelita” by A. Tolstoy. The folklore function of the mirror was reduced to the possibility to see what was happening in any point of space with the help of it, in addition, it became a source of strength and power for the one who comprehended its magic. Moreover, in the folk tradition the mirror had a certain value and the superstitious beliefs associated with it (Frazer, 2001: 186-187). In folk tradition a double of a person appears in the form of a reflection (or a shadow) ambivalently signifying the life force or turning into a rejected “I” pursuing their “character” (“the Wonderful History of Peter Schlemihl” by A. von Chamisso, “William Wilson” by E. A. Poe, “the Double” by F. Dostoevsky). It was the reflection (shadow) that was the very first means by which a person saw his own body and “objectified” his own soul. The derived as a result of the division of the human “I” double, who had the gift of immortality, both protected from death and reminded people about it, demonstrating the “phantom of death.”

In the Middle Ages, the concept of “mirror” carried not only a mystical mood (it was believed that the shine of mirrors is deceptive, the mirror itself was associated with the devil and was able to lure a person into a trap), but also a different meaning, traditionally transmitted by the form of “mirror” – a special genre of moralizing, didactic narratives that offer the reader an ideal behavioral model and pretend to be a kind of “encyclopedias” in various fields of knowledge (“Mirror of History” by Vincent of Beauvais, “the Knightly Mirror” by I. Rote). During the Renaissance, the focus of the “mirror” theme was changing somewhat, in accordance with the understanding by the personality the idea of the infinity of the universe and the use of the “science of vision and sight” for the purpose of distancing from the world. Now the mirror served not only as a mediator in the system of analogies and hierarchical relations, but also as an expression of the equivalence between the world of the sensual with the supersensual, a means of comparing the outer space and the world of the tangible (the philosophical system of Nicholas of Cusa). The mirror is a spectacle tool that allows you to indulge in “optical games” that reveal the identity between the object and its image, as well as the “accomplice” of the collision and fusion of a person with themselves (Melchior-Bonet, 1994). In the XVII century, the mirror replaced reality with its symmetrical copy, turning life into a theatrical performance, the mirror gallery symbolized the social paradox where everyone was seen and could see others, turning their looks on themselves. The search for the hidden “inner” man, the truth under the cover of the imaginary was carried out at that time by means of picturesque and literary portraits, which served as a functional analogue of mirrors (“Painter in his Studio” by Johannes Vermeer, “Self-Portrait” by Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn). In the years to follow, the mirror was not just a common household item, but also a symbolic object that accompanied the search for a person in the process of becoming a personality, self-cognition, because you could discover similarities or differences, affinity or strangeness to yourself in your own reflection.

Materials and methods

Naturally, many of the functions of the mirror (or the reflecting surfaces replacing it — water, glass, etc.) have found adequate expression in artistic culture, both Russian and European, from W. Shakespeare, Baroque literature and culture to modern prose. The mirror motive played a no less important role in the literature of Romanticism, Acmeism, and artistic practice of OBERIUs (Kobrinsky, 2000: 47-81), surrealists (Galtsova, 2008). Many Russian and Western scientists have considered the mirroring concept. However, until now, the specificity of studying the phenomenon of the mirroring in the heritage of the largest thinker,

philologist, reformer and methodologist of the humanities M. M. Bakhtin, the object of understanding of which the mirroring phenomenon becomes already from the beginning of the 1920s, remains unexplored. The general methodological basis of the research is the systemic unity of the approaches developed by literary scholars to the consideration and analysis of both the historical and literary process as a whole, and individual phenomena in fiction. The methodology is based on the principles of Russian comparative historical literary criticism, implemented in the works of M. Bakhtin (1979) and Y. Lotman (1992). In our work, we used comparative-historical, typological, and sociocultural methods, as well as the method of holistic analysis.

Literature Review

The mirroring phenomenon, having undergone significant evolution and transformation, is not only one of the fundamental motives in the culture and literature of the twentieth century and strongly promoted topic of many poets and writers, but also gets an understanding in several scientific works when addressing self-consciousness issues, as a means of self-identification of the “I-being”. The problem of the mirroring phenomenon becomes transparent in the western culture studies thought of the twentieth century – from the works of G. Shpet, who used the image of a mirror to consider the problems of consciousness and self-consciousness (Shpet, 1994: 97), to Yu. Lotman (1992: 23-24; 157-160). Yu. Lotman reasonably pointed to the crucial role of mirrors in Baroque culture: “The mirror played the role in the Baroque interior by pushing the actual architectural space for the creation of the illusory infinity (a mirror reflection in a mirror), a doubling of the artistic space by reflection of the pictures in the mirror or breaking up the boundaries of “inside/outside” by the window reflection in the mirrors” (Lotman, 1992: 115). In addition, Yu. Lotman considered the theme of the double as a literary adequate of the mirror motive: “Just as the mirror-world is a strange model of the everyday world, a double is a defamiliarized reflection of the character. By changing the image of the character according to the laws of mirror reflection (enantiomorphism), the double is a combination of features that allow us to see their invariant basis, and shifts (substitution of the symmetry of the right to the left can receive an extremely broad interpretation <...>: a dead is a double of the living, non-existing-existing, ugly – beautiful<...>), which creates a field of wide opportunities for artistic modeling” (Lotman, 1992: 157). Yu. Levin analyzed the mirror, its capabilities, and enantiomorphism from the point of view of semiotics (Levin, 1988: 10-11). It suffices to recall the works of J. Lacan, who investigated the role and functions of the mirror within their own psychoanalytic and structuralism concept. The mirror, more precisely, the “stage of the mirror”, as well as the doppelganger, and the “split” of the personality are considered by J. Lacan as the basic mechanism of self-identification. In the process of this, the construction of the “ontological structure of the human world” occurs, the creation of links between “the organism and reality” and “imago” emerges as an image of alienated ideality (Lacan, 1997: 7-14). The history of the mirroring phenomenon and its intersection with the phenomenon of duality is elaborated in S. Melchior-Bonnet’s monograph “The History of the Mirror”. The researcher claims that the duality occurs only when “relationships with other people are either perverted or interrupted, and a person feels their absence”. The scientist also associates the appearance of twins with the loss of the hero's own shadow or when a connection between the hero and the broken mirror has taken place (Melchior-Bonnet, 2006: 383-390).

Results and Discussion

The most complete mythologeme of the mirror is realized in the literary and artistic consciousness of the early twentieth century, especially in the poetics of symbolism, besides that the motive of mirroring becomes one of the foundations of the artistic method of symbolists and firmly roots in consciousness. In review of the pertinent remark made by A. Kobrinsky, the mirror was “an excellent mechanism for the embodiment of ontological and gnosiological representations of symbolists. It had a functional role of a

boundary between the worlds – of the border line which is material (because the mirror is a material object made of glass) and immaterial (because the reflecting surface of a mirror is impossible to see) at the same time. The worlds themselves, reflected and reflecting, corresponded to the symbolist world perception of “the congruities between the ideal and the real in the universe, while at the same time the interdependence of these worlds was emphasized, their inextricable link and similarity, and their autonomy, ostensibility of the resemblance” (Kobrinisky, 2000: 58-59). In the poetics of symbolism, the mirror, in addition to the theme of the mask, duplicity, correlates with the theme of death, acquires an erotic connotation, and is combined with the motive of madness (“Mirrors” by Zinaida Gippius, “Mirror” by Voloshin, “Christmas at the Ivanovs” by A. Vvedensky), and also becomes a subjectified meta-description of narrative relationships between the author-narrator and characters (“Goat Song” by K. Vaginov, “Mary (Mashenka)” and “the Gift” by V. Nabokov).

A. Bely, according to the memoirs of contemporaries, had an extraordinary, actually mystical interest in mirrors as in his own work (for example, the Third Symphony “Return (Vozvrat)”, “the artistic whole” of which is based on the principle of “mirror symmetry of the worlds” (Lavrov, 1995: 93), or the poem “Melancholy”, which describes the unexpected appearing of a mystical double in the mirror belonging to the lyrical character), and in real life, as evidenced by F. Stepun: “< ... > talking to us, Bely did not even look away from the mirror for one minute. At first, each time, while passing by it, he gazed in it carefully and for a long time, and then sat in a chair in front of the mirror blatantly and talked to us, being all the time in mimic communication with his reflection: at these moments, the answers I received were just “aside” remarks; the main conversation clearly focused on the dialogue between Bely and his double. <...> I remember that I began to look in the mirror and listen to Bely’s mimic communication with himself. <...> his words hopped more and more meaningfully over the meanings, and the meanings more figuratively and mysteriously mixed with each other” (Stepun, 1962: 175).

V. Khodasevich, noting that symbolic thinking based on the “category of conformity” referred a mirror to the ideal “fundamental principles”, wrote that “symbolic presence played with us unpleasant things” (Khodasevich, 1996: 103-104), and used in this regard a very significant example: “Muni and I were sitting in the Prague Restaurant. A broad archway divided its main hall. Curtains were hung on both sides of the archway. A waiter <...> was standing next to one of the curtains <...>. A short while later another waiter of the same height appeared from behind his back, having stopped facing us in the same manner as the first waiter, he happened to copy latter’s posture, only in reverse <...>. It looked like the same person was standing in front of a mirror. Muni said with a sarcastic smile: “Here comes the reflection”. We began watching them. The waiter who stood with his back to us put his right arm down. Immediately, the other one put down his left arm. It was beginning to feel eerie. Muni watched them in silence, tapping his foot. All of a sudden, the second waiter turned in haste and disappeared behind the ledge of the arch. <...> Muni jumped to his feet, pale as chalk. Then he calmed down and said, “Had our waiter gone, and the reflection stayed, I wouldn’t have survived that” (Khodasevich, 1996: 292). Furthermore, if mirroring was traditionally connected with a theme of a mask, duplicity, in poetics of symbolism the mirror not only correlated with a theme of death (for example, in the story “Mirrors” by Z. Gippius or in the eponymous poem by M. Voloshin), but also it quite often found erotic connotation and was combined, according to A. Kobrinisky, with a motive of madness, probably, under the influence of so popular ideas of F. Nietzsche, in particular, the Nietzsche’s idea of “sacred madness” (Kobrinisky, 2000: 57).

In the context of such an interest in the mirroring phenomenon, attention to it as an object of scientific understanding becomes logical in the work of M. Bakhtin. Already in the early 1920s, the scientist in the work “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity” analyzed the spatial situation of “the man at the mirror”, in which the mirror is nothing but a kind of specific means of self-objectivation, it becomes possible to comprehend yourself with its help:

“A very special case of seeing your appearance is looking at yourself in the mirror. <...> We stay in ourselves and see only our reflection, which cannot become the immediate moment of our vision and experience of the world: we see the reflection of our appearance, but not ourselves in our appearance, the appearance does not embrace me as a whole, I am in front of the mirror, not in it; the mirror can give only the material of self-objectivation. <...> our position in front of the mirror is always somewhat artificial: since we have no access to ourselves from the outside, here we get used to some uncertain possible other, with the help of which we try to find a value attitude in relation to ourselves. We try to revive and put ourselves into shape from the other; hence there is the peculiar unnatural expression of a face, which we see in the mirror and what we do not notice in real life, kind of multi-faceted emotional-volitional orientation <...>. We almost always somewhat pose in front of the mirror, giving ourselves this or that expression that seems to us significant and desired. <...> I'm not alone when I look at myself in the mirror, I'm obsessed with someone else's soul” (Bakhtin, 1979: 31-32).

It is noteworthy that the mirroring phenomenon is directly associated with the category “the other” (acting in fact as “I - double” and transforming “others” into objects of their own vision), “outsideness”, “self-objectivation”, which later became dominant in the scientist’s dialogical concept, as indicated by one of the leading Russian Bakhtin expert V. Makhlin: “The mirror is the boundary and the metaphor of sight, seeing outside itself, but not seeing itself, or, essentially, seeing only itself; Bakhtin would say, “sight, with vision but without surroundings”. Here, on the border of the sight, Bakhtin's aesthetics begins, the original anatomical and anatomophenomenological novel “I” and” the other” (Makhlin, 1992: 164).

As it was rightfully marked by commentators of the fifth volume, the situation of “man at the mirror” becomes the “universal metaphor” (Bakhtin, 1997: 465), which is implemented in the first edit of the book about Dostoevsky, in the context of the analysis of the spiritual situation of an individual-personality self-consciousness: “The mirror function is performed by a constant and a painful heroes’ reflection on their appearance, and for Golyadkin it is his double” (Bakhtin, 1997: 44). This metaphor would be subsequently introduced and somewhat modified in the “Problems of Poetics”. Further study of the mirroring phenomenon was planned by M. Bakhtin in prospectus of editing of the book about Dostoevsky, “Dostoevsky, 1961”, where the mirror appears not just as the identification object of the hero's own reflection, or himself, but communicates directly with the concept of “another consciousness” as means of “internal” self-identity when you look at yourself through the views of the “other”: “Dostoevsky's Hero is always in front of the mirror, i.e. looking at himself and his reflection in someone else's mind. This creates a special character of its expression on the outside. <...> Extremely strained attitude to his reflection in the mirror of someone else's consciousness, up to hatred for this mirror, to the desire to break it” (Bakhtin, 1997: 368-369). The importance of M. Bakhtin's mirroring problem is probably evidenced by the fact that in the “Additions and amendments to “Dostoevsky” he not only addressed this topic again, but also outlined its further development, putting a mirror and contemplation of his own appearance in a consistent semantic line with the “mirror of someone else's consciousness”, offering a dialogical context of “mirror” - Dostoevsky's characters reflect not only on their own appearance, but also on the “inner” appearance reflected in the “other”: “Looking at oneself in the mirror appears in the first work of Dostoevsky, and this act assumed great significance for him. All the characters of <...> the clandestine type <...> look excruciatingly or smugly at the reflection of their appearance in the mirror. The characters like Raskolnikov, Stavrogin, Ivan do not look in the mirror at their appearance, but no less painfully see or catch a reflection of their spiritual appearance in the mirror of someone else's consciousness. <...> We will return to the complex act of looking at ourselves in the mirror. <...> Looking into the mirrors of other people's minds. <...> Mirror and the problem of expressiveness” (Bakhtin, 2002: 308-306).

In the works of the 1940s – early 1960s, the scientist associated the mirroring phenomenon with the concepts of “the other” and “outsideness”, acquiring a special significance in the preliminary essay “To questions of self-awareness and self-esteem...”, when considering theoretical questions of self-awareness.

M. Bakhtin, going beyond purely philosophical issues, comprehends the image of “man in front of the mirror” as several components – “basic position of self-consciousness” contemplating its own appearance (“external” image), and at the same time “self-consciousness” from the position of “the other”: “Man in front of the mirror. The complexity of this phenomenon (with apparent simplicity) is its elements. A simple formula: I look at myself through the eyes of the other, evaluate myself from the point of view of the other. <...> Outsideness (I see myself outside myself)” (Bakhtin, 1997: 72). This interpretation of the mirror as the object of merger of “my” and “other’s” view, consciousness and speech, rising to “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity” and to the first editing of the book about Dostoyevsky, was presented in the notes dated 1961: “The man from the underground in front of the mirror”. <...> After Dostoyevsky’s “other” confessions, the old genre of confession became, in fact, impossible. <...> The role of the other has been revealed, in the light of which any words about oneself can be rested. The complexity of the simple phenomenon of looking at oneself in the mirror was revealed: with one’s own and other’s eyes at the same time, the meeting and interaction of others and one’s eyes, the overlap of horizons (one’s and the other’s) and two minds” (Bakhtin, 1997: 346).

In the text “To the philosophical fundamentals of the Humanities” there is an image of a slightly different mirror - “mirror of absolute sympathy”, associated by commentators of the fifth volume with the “gracious mirror of existence” (going back to one of the poetic images of F. Tyutchev) (Bakhtin, 1997: 465-466), reflecting the personality adequately – as “true” “I-for-myself”: “The shell of the soul is devoid of inherent worth and left to the mercy and forgiveness of the other. The unspoken core of the soul can only be reflected in the mirror of absolute sympathy” (Bakhtin, 1997: 9). A similar idea about the impossibility of reflecting the true “face” with the organic fusion of the “external” and “internal” appearance of a person, but the probability of their “mixing” can also be seen in the essay «Rhetoric, to the extent that it lies...»: “A solitary voice of pure self-utterance and a correspondence image never meet (there is no area for this meeting), or naively mix (navel-gazing in the mirror)” (Bakhtin, 1997: 68).

It remains to be noted that the mirroring, being a cross-cutting theme of the thinker’s actually half a century long scientific heritage (from the “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity” to the “Problems of the Text”), appears not just as remarks to the analysis of Dostoyevsky’s works, metaphors in the descriptions of existential situations, or is associated with the motives of the “double”, “mirror obsession” and hatred for it, “outsideness”, but also as a special short text “the Man at the Mirror”, in which the most crucial aspects in the scientist’s opinion are outlined, considers this idea: “Falsehood and lies, inevitably looking through in relationship with yourself. The external image of thought, feelings and external image of the soul. It’s not me looking from inside at the world with my own eyes, but it is me looking at myself through the eyes of the world, someone else’s eyes, and I am obsessed with the other. There is no naive integrity of internal and external. To peek at your absentee image. The naivete of the merger of yourself and the other in mirror image. Abundance of the other. I have no point of view of myself from the outside, I have no approach to my own inner image. Someone else’s eyes look from my own.” (Bakhtin, 1997: 71).

It is particularly indicative is that the Bakhtin dialogical concept, through the prism of which the scientist analyzed the mirroring phenomenon, had a noticeable impact on subsequent interpretations of the mirror mythologeme of the mirror and was apprehended by modern researchers. In this regard, it is enough to recall the work of V. Hayrapetyan “the Letter on the Theme of the Mirror”, in which the mirror is considered as an object of connection of two hypostases of the person’s image, in which it is possible to acquire one’s own authenticity and vision of oneself as “the other”: “The mirror doubles me for another person, not for myself, but I myself, different in relation to other people, unique and not like everyone else, see myself in the mirror as another and learn to recognize myself in my reflection” (Hayrapetyan, 1996: 146). V. Makhlin, analyzing the “anatomy of a glance” on the level of “meta-historical revelations” starting from the classic “esthesiology” to J. P. Sartre, R. Barthes and, of course, M. Bakhtin, notes the direct interrelation of the mirror with the appearing “double” (both abstract and real, that changes the structure of the “artistic

vision” and generates the situation through the looking glass, which is the “doubling” of the mirror), whose eyes in the mirror are a possible vision of the world, and with the concepts of “negative face” and “deconstructed” author: “<...> looking at yourself in the mirror, I no longer coincide with myself, but on the contrary, I hate my face, as it wasn’t created by me, I deconstruct the “author” of my view and my image “for the other”, trying to make myself the author, i.e. I make a “face” and look “at the face” by myself and for myself (Makhlin, 1992: 171).

Conclusion

Thus, the mirroring phenomenon becomes not only one of the most important motifs of the artistic culture of the twentieth century and actively pedaled by many poets and writers, but also receives insight into a number of cultural and philosophical studies, the most important of which are the works of M. M. Bakhtin, who studied mirroring, primarily as a means of self-identification of his “I-being” in the context of the dialogical concept. In the scientific heritage of M. M. Bakhtin’s mirror, being the cross-cutting theme of the virtually half a century of the scientific heritage of the thinker (from “The Author and the Hero” to “The Problems of the Text”), appears not simply as remarks to the analysis of Dostoevsky’s works, metaphors in descriptions of existential situations or is associated with the motives of the “double”, “Mirror obsession” and hatred for it, “out-of-reach”, but in addition, a special short text “Man at the Mirror” is devoted to it, in which the most important, in the opinion of the scientist, aspects of the problem being studied are outlined.

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