

# **In the Mirror**

Valery Bryusov

# Table of Contents

|                                   |          |
|-----------------------------------|----------|
| <b><u>In the Mirror</u></b> ..... | <b>1</b> |
| <u>Valery Bryusov</u> .....       | 1        |

# In the Mirror

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I have loved mirrors from my very earliest years. As an infant I wept and trembled as I looked into their transparently truthful depths. My favourite game as a child was to walk up and down the room or the garden, holding a mirror in front of me, gazing into its abyss, walking over the edge at every step, and breathless with giddiness and terror. Even as a girl I began to put mirrors all over my room, large and small ones, true and slightly distorted ones, some precise and others a little dull. I got into the habit of spending whole hours, whole days, in the midst of intercrossing worlds which ran one into the other, trembled, vanished, and then reappeared again.

It became a singular passion of mine to give my body to these soundless distances, these echoless perspectives, these separate universes cutting across our own and existing, despite our consciousness, in the same place and at the same time with it. This protracted actuality, separated from us by the smooth surface of glass, drew me towards itself by a kind of intangible touch, dragged me forward, as to an abyss, a mystery.

I was drawn towards the apparition which always rose up before me when I came near a mirror and which strangely doubled my being. I strove to guess how this other woman was differentiated from myself, how it was possible that my right hand should be her left, and that all the fingers of this hand should change places, though certainly on one of them was my wedding-ring.

My thoughts were confused when I attempted to probe this enigma, to solve it. In this world, where everybody could be touched, where voices were heard I lived, actually; in that reflected.

world, which it was only possible to contemplate, was she, phantasmally. She was almost as myself and yet not at all myself; she repeated all my movements, but not one of these movements exactly coincided with those I made. She, that other, knew something I could not divine, she held a secret eternally hidden from my understanding.

But I noticed that each mirror had its own separate and special world. Put two mirrors in the very same place, one after the other, and there will arise two different universes. And in different mirrors there rose up before me different apparitions, all of them like me but never exactly like one another. In my small hand-mirror lived a naive little girl with clear eyes, reminding me of my early youth. In my circular boudoir mirror was hidden a woman who knew all the diverse sweetness of caresses, shameless, free, beautiful, daring. In the oblong mirrors of the wardrobe door there always appeared a stern figure, imperious, cold, inexorable. I knew still other doubles of myself in my dressing-glass, in my folding, gold-framed triptych, in the hanging mirror in the oaken frame, in the little neck mirror, and in many other mirrors which I treasured. To all the beings hiding themselves in these mirrors I gave the possibility and pretext to develop.

According to the strange conditions of their world they must take the form of the person who stands before the glass but under this borrowed exterior they preserve their own personal characteristics.

There were some worlds of mirrors which I loved; others which I hated. In some of them I loved to walk up and down for whole hours, losing myself in their attractive expanse. Others I fled from. In my secret heart I did not love all my doubles. I knew that they were all hostile toward me, if only for the fact that they were forced to clothe themselves in my hated likeness.

## In the Mirror

But some of these mirror women I pitied. I forgave their hate and felt almost friendly to them.

There were some whom I despised, and I loved to laugh at their powerless fury; there were some whom I mocked by my own independence and tortured by my power over them. There were others, on the other hand, of whom I was afraid, who were too strong for me and who dared in their turn to mock at me, to command me. I hastened to get rid of the mirrors where these women lived, I would not look in them, I hid them, gave them away, even broke some in pieces. But every time I destroyed a mirror I wept for whole days after, conscious of the fact that I had broken to pieces a distinct universe. And reproachful faces stared at me from the broken fragments of the world I had destroyed.

The mirror with which my fate was to become linked I bought one autumn at a sale of some sort. It was a large pier-glass, swinging on screws. I was struck by the unusual clarity of its reflection. The phantasmal actuality in it was changed by the slightest inclination of the glass, but it was independent and vital to the edges. When I examined this pier-glass at the sale the woman who was reflected in it looked me in the eyes with a kind of haughty challenge. I did not wish to give in to her, to show that she had frightened me, so I bought the glass and ordered it to be placed in my boudoir. As soon as I was alone in the room, I immediately went up to the new mirror and fixed my eyes upon my rival. But she did the same to me, and standing opposite one another we began to transfix each other with our glance as if we had been snakes. In the pupils of her eyes was my reflection, in mine, hers. My heart sank and my head swam from her intent gaze. But at length by an effort of will I tore my eyes away from those other eyes, tipped the mirror with my foot so that it began to swing, rocking the image of my rival pitifully to and fro, and went out of the room.

From that hour our strife began. In the evening of the first day of our meeting I did not dare to go near the new pier-glass; I went to the theatre with my husband, laughed exaggeratedly, and was apparently light-hearted. On the morrow, in the dear light of a September day I went boldly into my boudoir alone and deliberately sat down directly in front of the mirror. At the same moment, she, the other woman, also came in at the door to meet me, crossed the room, and then she too sat down opposite me. Our eyes met. In hers I read hatred towards myself; in mine she read hatred towards her. Our second duel began, a duel of eyes two unyielding glances, commanding, threatening, hypnotising. Each of us strove to conquer the other's will, to break down her resistance, to force her to submit to another's desire. It would have been a painful scene for an onlooker to witness; two women sitting opposite each other without moving, joined together by the magnetic attraction of each other's gaze, and almost losing consciousness under the psychological strain. . . . Suddenly someone called me. The infatuation vanished. I got up and left the room.

After this our duels were renewed every day. I realised that this adventuress had purposely forced herself into my home to destroy me and take my place in this world. But I had not sufficient strength to deny myself this struggle. In this rivalry there was a kind of secret intoxication. The very possibility of defeat had hidden in it a sort of sweet seduction. Sometimes I forced myself for whole days to keep away from the pier-glass; I occupied myself with business, with amusements, but in the depths of my soul was always hidden the memory of the rival who in patience and self-reliance awaited my return. I would go back to her and she would step forth in front of me, more triumphantly than ever, piercing me with her victorious gaze and fixing me in my place before her. My heart would stop beating, and I, with a powerless fury, would feel myself under the authority of this gaze.

So the days and weeks went by; our struggle continued, but the preponderance showed itself more and more definitely to be on the side of my rival. And suddenly one day I realised that my will was in subjection to her will, that she was already stronger than I. I was overcome with terror. My first impulse was to flee from my home and go to another town, but I saw at once that this would be useless. I should, all the same, be overcome by the attractive force of this hostile will and be obliged to return to this room, to this mirror. Then there came a second thought to shatter the mirror, reduce my enemy to nothingness; but to conquer her by brutal strength would mean that I acknowledged her superiority over myself; this would be humiliating. I preferred to remain and continue this struggle to the end, even though I were threatened with defeat.

## In the Mirror

Soon there could be no doubt that my rival would triumph. At every meeting there was concentrated in her gaze still greater and greater power over me. Little by little I lost the possibility of letting a day pass without once going to my mirror. She ordered me to spend several hours daily in front of her. She directed my will as a hypnotist directs the will of a sleepwalker. She arranged my life, as a mistress arranges the life of a slave. I began to fulfil her demands, I became an automaton to her wordless orders. I knew that deliberately, cautiously, she would lead me by an unavoidable path to destruction, and I already made no resistance. I divined her secret plan to cast me into the mirror world and to come forth herself into our world but I had no strength to hinder her. My husband and my relatives seeing me spend whole hours, whole days and nights in front of my mirror, thought me demented and wanted to cure me. But I dared not reveal the truth to them, I was forbidden to tell them all the dreadful truth, all the horror, towards which I was moving.

One of the December days before the holidays turned out to be the day of my destruction. I remember everything clearly, precisely, circumstantially. Nothing in my remembrance is confused. As usual, I went into my boudoir early, at the first beginnings of the winter dawn twilight. I placed a comfortable armchair without a back in front of the mirror, sat down and gave myself up to her. Without any delay she appeared in answer to my summons, she too placed an armchair for herself, she too sat down and began to gaze at me. A dark foreboding oppressed my soul, but I was powerless to turn my face away, and I was forced to take to myself the insolent gaze of my rival. The hours went by, the shadows began to fall. Neither of us lighted a lamp. The glass of the mirror glimmered faintly in the darkness. The reflections had become scarcely visible, but the self-reliant eyes gazed with their former strength. I felt neither terror nor ill-will, as on other days, but simply an intolerable anguish and a bitter consciousness that I was in the power of another. Time swam away and on its tide I also swam into infinity, into a black expanse of powerlessness and lack of will.

Suddenly she, that other, the reflected woman, got up from her chair. I trembled all over at this insult. But something invincible, something forcing me from within compelled me also to stand up. The woman in the mirror took a step forward. I did the same. The woman in the mirror stretched forth her arms. I did so too. Looking straight at me with hypnotising and commanding eyes, she moved forward and I advanced to meet her. And it was strange with all the horror of my position, with all my hate towards my rival, there fluttered somewhere in the depths of my soul a painful consolation, a secret joy to enter at last into that mysterious world into which I had gazed from my childhood and which up till now had remained inaccessible to me. At moments I hardly knew which of us was drawing the other towards herself, she me or I her, whether she was eager to occupy my place or whether I had devised all this struggle in order to displace her.

But when, moving forward, my hands touched hers on the glass I turned quite pale with repugnance. And she took my hand by force and drew me still nearer to herself. My hands were plunged into the mirror as into burning-icy water. The cold of the glass penetrated into my body with a horrible pain, as if all the atoms of my being had changed their mutual relationship. In another moment my face had touched the face of my rival, I saw her eyes right in front of my own, I was transfused into her with a monstrous kiss. Everything vanished from me in a torment of suffering unlike any other and when I came to my senses after this swoon I still saw in front of me my own boudoir on which I gazed from out of the mirror. My rival stood before me and burst into laughter. And I oh the cruelty of it! I who was dying with humiliation and torture was obliged to laugh too, to repeat all her grimaces in a triumphant joyful laugh. I had not yet succeeded in considering my position when my rival suddenly turned round, walked towards the door, vanished from my sight, and I at once fell into torpor, into non-existence.

Then my life as a reflection began. It was a strange, half-conscious but mysteriously sweet life.

There were many of us in this mirror, dark in soul, and slumbering of consciousness. We could not speak to one another, but we felt each other's proximity and loved one another. We could see nothing, we heard nothing clearly, and our existence was like the enfeeblement that comes from being unable to breathe. Only when a being from the world of men approached the mirror, we, suddenly taking up his form, could look forth into the world, could distinguish voices, and breathe a full breath. I think that the life of the dead is like that a dim consciousness

## In the Mirror

of one's ego, a confused memory of the past and an oppressive desire to be incarnated anew even if only for a moment, to see, to hear, to speak. . . . And each of us cherished and concealed a secret dream to free one's self, to find for one's self a new body, to go out into the world of constancy and steadfastness.

During the first days I felt myself absolutely unhappy in my new position. I still knew nothing, understood nothing. I took the form of my rival submissively and unthinkingly when she came near the mirror and began to jeer at me. And she did this fairly often. It afforded her great delight to flaunt her vitality before me, her reality. She would sit down and force me also to sit down, stand up and exult as she saw me stand, wave her arms about, dance, force me to repeat her movements, and burst out laughing and continue to laugh so that I should have to laugh too. She would shriek insulting words in my face and I could make no answer to them. She would threaten me with her fist and mock at my forced repetition of the gesture. She would turn her back on me and I, losing sight, losing features, would become conscious of the shame of the half-existence left to me. . . . And then suddenly, with one blow she would whirl the mirror round on its axle and with the oscillation throw me completely into nonentity.

Little by little, however, the insults and humiliations awoke a consciousness in me. I realised that my rival was now living my life, wearing my dresses, being considered as my husband's wife, and occupying my place in the world. Then there grew up in my soul a feeling of hate and a thirst for vengeance, like two fiery flowers. I began bitterly to curse myself for having, by my weakness or my criminal curiosity, allowed her to conquer me. I arrived at the conviction that this adventuress would never have triumphed over me if I myself had not aided her in her wiles.

And so, as I became more familiar with some of the conditions of my new existence, I resolved to continue with her the same fight which she had carried on with me. If she, a shadow, could occupy the place of a real woman, was it possible that I, a human being, and only temporarily a shadow, should not be stronger than a phantom?

I began from a very long way off. At first I pretended that the mockery of my rival tormented me quite unbearably. I purposely afforded her all the satisfaction of victory. I provoked in her the secret instinct of the executioner throwing himself upon his helpless victim. She gave herself up to this bait. She was attracted by this game with me. She put forth the wings of her imagination and thought out new trials for me. She invited thousands of wiles to show me over and over again that I was only a reflection, that I had no life of my own. Sometimes she played on the piano in front of me, torturing me by the soundlessness of my world. Sometimes, seated before the mirror she would drink in tiny sips my favourite liqueurs, compelling me only to pretend that I also was drinking them. Sometimes, at length, she would bring into my boudoir people whom I hated, and before my face she would allow them to kiss her body, letting them think that they were kissing me. And afterwards when we were alone she would burst into a malicious and triumphant laugh. But this laugh did not wound me at all; there was sweetness in its keenness:

my expectation of revenge!

Unnoticeably, in the hours of her insults to me, I would accustom my rival to look me in the eyes and I would gradually overpower her gaze. Soon at my will I could already force her to raise and lower her eyelids and make this and that movement of the face. I had already begun to triumph though I hid my feeling under a mask of suffering. Strength of soul grew up within me and I began to dare to lay commands upon my enemy: Today you shall do so-and-so, to-day you shall go to such-and-such a place, to-morrow you shall come to me at such a time. And she would fulfil them. I entangled her soul in the nets of my desires woven together with a strong thread in which I held her soul, and I secretly rejoiced when I noticed my success. When one day, in the hour of her laughter, she suddenly caught on my lips a victorious smile which I was unable to hide, it was already too late. She rushed out of the room in a fury, but as I fell into the sleep of my nonentity I knew that she would return, knew that she would submit to me. And a rapture of victory gushed out over my involuntary lack of strength, piercing with a rainbow shaft of light the gloom of my seeming death.

## In the Mirror

She did return! She came up to me in anger and terror, shrieked to me, threatened me. But I was commanding her to do it. And she was obliged to submit. Then began the game of a cat with a mouse. At any time I could have cast her back into the depths of the glass and come forth myself again into sounding and hard actuality. But I delayed to do this. It was sweet to me to indulge in non-existence sometimes. It was sweet to me to intoxicate myself with the possibility.

At last (this is strange, is it not?) there suddenly was aroused in me a pity for my rival, for my enemy, for my executioner. Everything in her was something of my own, and it was dreadful for me to drag her forth from the realities of life and turn her into a phantom. I hesitated and dared not do it, I put it off from day to day, I did not know myself what I wanted and what I dreaded.

And suddenly on a clear spring day men came into the boudoir with planks and axes. There was no life in me, I lay in the voluptuousness of torpor, but without seeing them I knew they were there. The men began to busy themselves near the mirror which was my universe. And one after another the souls who lived in it with me were awakened and took transparent flesh in the form of reflections. A dreadful uneasiness agitated my slumbering soul. With a presentiment of horror, a presentiment even of irretrievable ruin, I gathered together all the might of my will.

What efforts it cost me to struggle against the lassitude of half-existence! So living people sometimes struggle with a nightmare, tearing themselves from its suffocating bands towards actuality.

I concentrated all the force of my suggestion into a summons, directed towards her, towards my rival 'Come hither!' I hypnotised her, magnetised her with all the tension of my half-slumbering will. There was little time. The mirror had already begun to swing. They were already preparing to nail it up in a wooden coffin, to take it away: whither I knew not. And with an almost mortal effort I called again and again, 'Come!' And I suddenly began to feel that I was coming to life. She, my enemy, opened the door, and came to meet me, pale, half-dead, in answer to my call, with faltering steps as men go to punishment. I fastened my eyes on hers, bound up my gaze with hers, and when I had done this I knew already that I had gained the victory.

I at once compelled her to send the men out of the room. She submitted without even making an attempt to oppose me. We were alone together once more. To delay was no longer possible.

And I could not bring myself to forgive her craftiness. In her place, in my time, I should have acted otherwise. Now I ordered her, without pity, to come to meet me. A moan of torture opened her lips, her eyes widened as before a phantom, but she came, trembling, falling she came. I also went forward to meet her, lips curving triumphantly, eyes wide open with joy, swaying in an intoxicating rapture. Again our hands touched each other's, again our lips came near together, and we fell each into the other, burning with the indescribable pain of bodily exchange. In another moment I was already in front of the mirror, my breast filled itself with air, I cried out loudly and victoriously and fell just here, in front of the pier-glass, prone from exhaustion.

My husband and the servants ran towards me. I could only tell them to fulfil my previous orders and take the mirror away, out of the house, at once. That was wisely thought, wasn't it?

You see she, that other, might have profited by my weakness in the first minutes of my return to life, and by a desperate assault might have tried to wrest the victory from my hands. Sending the mirror out of the house, I could ensure my own quietude for a long time, as long as I liked, and my rival had earned such a punishment for her cunning. I defeated her with her own tools, with the blade which she herself had raised against me.

After having given this order I lost consciousness. They laid me on my bed. A doctor was called in. I was treated as suffering from a nervous fever. For a long while my relatives had thought me ill, and not normal. In the first outburst of exultation I told them all that had happened to me. My stories only increased their suspicions. They

## In the Mirror

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Besides—shall I say it?—there is one thing which I am bound to do as soon as possible. I ought to have no doubt that I am this I. But all the same, whenever I begin to think of her who is imprisoned in my mirror I begin to be seized by a strange hesitation. What if the real I—is there?

Then I myself who think this, I who write this, I—am a shadow, I—am a phantom, I—am a reflection. In me are only the poured forth remembrances, thoughts and feelings of that other, the real person. And, in reality, I am thrown into the depths of the mirror in nonentity, I am pining, exhausted, dying. I know, I almost know that this is not true. But in order to disperse the last clouds of doubt, I ought again once more, for the last time, to see that mirror. I must look into it once more to be convinced, that there—is the imposter, my enemy, she who played my part for some months. I shall see this and all the confusion of my soul will pass away, and I shall again be free from care—bright, happy. Where is this mirror? Where shall I find it? I must, I must once more look into its depths!