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Abstract

Starting from Plato, continuing through Ovid and reaching down to the present day, there is a long tradition of using mirrors, mirror imagery or mirroring techniques in literature. Contemporary British poet Hugo Williams is one of the several representatives, who connects himself to this living tradition. His 1985 volume *Writing Home*, deals with the past through a subtle employment of mirrors, or any other reflecting surfaces and photographs. In these autobiographical poems, the poet mostly talks about his childhood experiences dominated by his father, who appears as his mirror image. We see young Williams trying his father's clothes, imitating his signature, comparing his image to his own in front of the mirror in order to find his own identity. The poet also uses mirror opposites like day and night, black and white, past and present in his poems. Besides, the letters written by the son and the father mutually reflect each other. Shortly, Williams uses mirrors or mirroring-technique as an inversely functioning periscope to bring up his deep-buried memories as if to say the past is never past.

Key Words: Hugo Williams, *Writing Home*, mirrors, reflecting

Periscope into the Past : Hugo Williams' *Writing Home* as a Play of Mirrors.

Williams is a contemporary British poet who especially in the early phase of his career went under the influence of "The Movement" poets, the most representative name among whom is Philip Larkin. However, unlike Larkin, who turned his back to the past, Williams finds in the past great stimulation for his muse. In "No Particular Place to Go" to the warning "Look here old boy, / the past is out of bounds, you should know that" he replies, (Williams 1985) "But sir, [...] where else is there to go?" (p.67). That explains why, almost in all his books, he reaches for his childhood memories. When asked about his choice to write confessional poetry, he says,

Desperation really. I mean, what else do you use? The habit of poetry is to look into what you're doing yourself, there's nowhere else to look really. I've got an incredibly narrow outlook. I mean, just two or three subjects... Feelings about women and memories of the past (East).

His collection of poems in his *Writing Home*, published in 1985, might be taken as an instance of how the poet attempts to align the (by nature) irrecoverable *past* with *writing* which is, again inevitably, a native inhabitant of the present. While reading the volume, one is struck by the abundance of actual mirrors hanging on the housewalls, all the mirror-like bright surfaces of some objects or photographs that function as mirrors reflecting life from the past, or by the mirror effects created by juxtaposing the letters written by the father and the son side by side. These all are essential for what he is doing: By means of several mirrors placed at strategic curves of his past, he manages to obtain in the present, a variety of past experiences that seem sometimes to negate and sometimes to complement each other, but almost always negotiate for their share in the making of what is and what will be.

Mirrors bridge the broken time regions. Throughout the volume, we often witness little Hugo wearing his father's clothes as in "Degage" (p.42), and curiously watching himself in a mirror and fashioning his identity after his father, whose name (Hugh), tellingly, mirrors the son's. In "Waiting To Go On", the poet narrates how he looked at the photos of his father and "searched [his own] face for signs of excellence, turning up his collar in the long mirror on the stairs" (p.14). In other words, the father is waiting among the pages of the album, as the title suggests, to go on, to continue in the son, as Williams says, "He wanted me to look like him". Or, since the title does not make it explicit who is actually waiting to go on, the son finds in the different images of his father a guide for his life and sees in them his own future image, beckoning him to go on.

William Empson says "...the past lies ahead, stretched out in the memory, a place you...will eventually reach. The future is dark and unknown; it must lie behind your back" (as cited in Fulton, p.10). It is this kind of anachronistic interconnectedness that he expresses in the lines from "Walking Out Of The Room Backwards" :

The future stands behind us...
 The past stretches ahead, into which we stare,
 As into the eyes of our parents,
 On their wedding day.
 (p.27)

This reversal of time's flow takes us back to the first poem of the book "At Least a Hundred Words" where, as a student in his letter-writing assignment, he is not allowed to say "And then this happened, / And then that happened" (p.9), putting the events in their objective linear order. The poem ends with the image of the poet rolling a marble –a mirror like object, which, in its roundness is suggestive of a cyclical concept of time, and the marble travels

round a system of books
 and rulers : a tip-balance, then a spiral,
 then a thirty year gap, as it falls through
 the dust hole into my waiting hand.
 (p.10)

Williams describes his process of writing as "...more like archaeology. Digging away until you find something" (Wroe). Looking at the way these poems borrow from each other, (e.g. The title of a poem "Waiting To Go On" becomes one of the lines in "Death of An Actor") it is safe to infer that the poems reflect not only childhood memories but also each other, hence giving rise to the idea of a periscope in our title: a system of strategically placed mirrors, lifting up one image from the depths and carrying it up to the surface through a series of reflections. As the above example shows, in this system, there is place alongside real mirrors for mirror-like objects as well :

You opened the front door
and stood for a moment on the step.
Little pieces of metal
shone in the asphalt on the road.
(p.11)

These lines come from "Just Another Day", a title that connotes to a mirror-multiplication of days. With their suggestion of a second world as reflected in them, mirrors often lead the onlooker to question the reality of his existence. Here too, the child sees the shining metal pieces and then needs the sense of hearing to verify his reality: "You cleared your throat or coughed / And the dawn chorus started up-". Such an experience of getting lost in the mirror world must be frightening. But this fear is temporary as in time, Williams will become so intrigued with this reflected world. Miller says,

Duality interests him, and his interests may originate, as the phenomena of psychic division are often thought to do, in the pains and uncertainties of childhood, and the roles that childhood can seek to play - roles that seem to have been accentuated, in this case, by the presence on the stage of an actor father.

The poem "Scratches" describes him as a child already enjoying his journey on reflecting surfaces:

My mother scratched the soles of my shoes
to stop me slipping

when I went away to school.

 Her scratches soon disappeared
 when I started sliding
 down those polished corridors
 ...
 I slid into class.
 I slid across the hall into the changing-room.
 I never slipped up.
 (p.29)

Now that he has grown up and mastered the journeys on reflecting surfaces, the poet feels free to employ more mirror-techniques in his attempt to narrate his childhood memories. Mirror opposites like days and nights, (Just Another Day, p.11, “Unfinished Poem, p.61) black and white, (“Tangerines”, p.24) the time before and after the war (“Before the War” p.12), the past and the present (“Death of an Actor”, p.55, “Now That I Hear Trains”, p.70), are often put side by side, to provide a background, on whose surface the Other can be observed in clear outline. The boy’s imitating his father’s signature to practice his own (“Unfinished Poem”, p.61) is another mirror play between the father and the son. In “Shelf Life” little Williams asks “Who am I?” (p.35). And here the child is trying to find his self through identification with the father. This concern for identity continues along other poems too and in fact, seems to extend to his adulthood, as when asked by *Financial Times*, which literary character most resembles him, Williams replies “Hamlet”, one, also in search of his identity among the several alternatives, like the son or the nephew, the prince or the king, a carefree youth or a responsible adult etc.

The poet also presents side by side the letters written by his father from the war front and by himself from the boarding school. These letters reveal, unmistakably, the similarities in their accounts of miserable conditions. The father writes:

Well, here we are in our Tropical Kit-
 Shirts and shorts and little black toques,
 Looking like a lot of hikers or cyclists
 With dead bluebells on the handlebars...

I saw a stork flying and heard a lark singing
 As though he were on Goodwood race course...
 (“An Actor’s War”, p.17)

And the boy writes almost in the same tone and with an obvious attempt to parallel his own case to that of his father, the school life to that a war:

There is quite a lot of news from this front,
 I got hit in the face, but I am alright now.
 How are you? How is the play?
 A little dog called Bobby ran out into the road
 And was run over by a car.
 (“A Letter to My Parents”, p.32)

Yet, once confronted with the present, the all-powerful past cannot remain immune to change and Williams’ memories too, undergo a process of radical transformation, which gains him the title of a “creative chronicler”, who writes “the chronicle of a private life, and [...] wants people to respond to it that way, but it's also a performance” (Campbell).

Such playfulness, such practical concern with the need to do something with the past in the present shakes off the dust of what has already been lived. It is obvious that by insistently writing about the past, the poet is struggling to achieve an end beyond the mere recording of the by-gone days: Despite all the sunny pictures depicted in his poetry, his biography reveals that his life was not as happy as it looks. Understandably, it should not be easy for a child whose father suddenly decides to join the war and leaves his family uncared for. Williams sounds bitter when he says, “He didn't really have to go. He could have stayed at home and done his bit by making morale-boosting films or something, but he insisted on it” (Campbell). This absence of the father eventually leads to the separation of his parents, which must have given the little boy a strong blow. With this assumption in mind, Williams’ aim in *Writing Home* might be to bring this family together again, through poetic memory, if only to understand the reasons behind its inevitable disintegration. In this attempt, the act of writing comes to mean something more than “passive recording”, and it gains a more creative function of writing (building) a home (past) in the present. If, as again Campbell marks,

“His house in Islington bears out this dedication. Not only is there the scrapbook industry, but the walls of the hallway and living room are a record of Williams-related activity over the past four decades,” this must be the reason. With all the notes and the scraps and slips of paper on the walls of his house, Williams is probably decorating a stage to perform a play of mirrors, often used as a metaphor for writing.

In conclusion, the employment of mirrors in literature is no new issue, but has a long tradition, which owes its origin to Plato’s *ideas*, and is continued with Ovid’s “Story of Narcissus”. To limit ourselves to English Literature only, we can name John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, where Eve is created as an image of Adam who in turn is nothing but an image of God. During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance period, mirror was also called as “vanity glass”, and an 18th Century work, Alexander Pope’s *The Rape of the Lock* (Pope 2006) is unforgettable with its scene of Belinda putting on her make up in front of a mirror, the altar of pride (Canto I, lines 122-149). As M.H. Abrams asserts in his *The Mirror and the Lamp*, for the Romantic poets, poetry was a lamp emitting light from the mind of the poet on the outside world, as opposed to the earlier metaphor of a mirror passively reflecting what it receives from its surroundings. (as cited in Goode, p.129). In other words, it is still a mirror but this time turned inward. In the 20th Century, W.H. Auden wrote his long dramatic poem, “The Sea and the Mirror: A commentary on Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*”, where the sea stands for life and the mirror for art. Finally, John Ashbery wrote his masterpiece “Self-portrait in a Convex Mirror”, in which he told about a 15th century painter’s attempt to portray himself in a convex mirror. Hugo Williams’s “Writing Home” rightfully belongs to this tradition and contributes to it with his novel use of that ancient device, mirrors, to offer a way of writing the past in the present. As Ryan observes:

[Williams] picked up from Hamilton a sense of poems as possible means of reparation, or ministration — of the poetic address as a place where someone who couldn’t be

reached by other means might be spoken to, and ever since *Writing Home* he has reached out to all his dead or departed by just such a method[...]But his isn't a poetry of nostalgia or anecdote in the ordinary sense: Often Williams's poems occur in the present tense, or close to it.

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