

# The Reflex of the Living Image in the Poet's Mind: Victorian Mirror Poetry

During the eighteenth century, Chinese mirror painting became fashionable among English aristocrats. Oriental figures and scenes were painted in reverse on mirrored surfaces. Glazing was first removed from the back of the mirror and intended scenes and characters were literally painted into the glass. Fascination with the resulting product derived as much from the oriental subjects, invariably depicted with easily identifiable English appurtenances, as from the juxtaposition of artifact and spectator reflected in the mirrored surface. The rage for such artistic creations persisted unabated into the nineteenth century as England's trading contacts with the Far East expanded. Human vanity was rarely if ever so modestly yet elegantly served as in these richly ornamented depictions of oriental scenes, transparently reflecting their perceiving owners.<sup>1</sup>

British romantic poetry possesses something of this mirrored and mirroring artistry. Natural scenery is carefully recast to permit the informing presence of painter or poet to reveal himself from the innermost and outermost scenes. Singer becomes song, painter becomes canvas, and spectator recognizes himself in the scene portrayed, in the melodies overheard.<sup>2</sup>

The essentially 'expressivist' orientation Victorian aesthetics inherited from romanticism necessitated the artist's search for conformity between himself and the physical universe depicted in his work. It required as well disclosure of the artistic self to an audience intent upon seeing in the work of art a reflection of the perceiving self and of the depicting artist.<sup>3</sup> What is particularly intriguing about the Victorians' attempt at implementing this orientation is that they did so knowing full well that such conformity and disclosure was virtually impossible. A universe rendered increasingly inhospitable by the advances of science and industry constituted an environment antithetical to the production of art.<sup>4</sup> Poetry was incapable of being written, Arnold contended, in an unpoetical age thus defined.<sup>5</sup> The result of at-

tempting to create art in an 'unpoetical' environment was a poetry and art of discontinuity in which the artist stood mocked by his work: the artifact yielded no reflection to the perceiving artist, let alone to the viewing audience.

The following essay attempts to explore, through representative nineteenth-century poetry and painting, the Victorian artists' frustrated attempts at mirrored art. I should point out that I intend to use 'painting' in two senses here: first, as the traditionally understood visual mode of depicting ideas on canvas; second, as the verbal mode of delineation offered by certain poems intended as paintings in words of the artist's intention.<sup>6</sup> The unsuccessful results of what I have called Victorian mirror poetry will be evident as discussion progresses. Two examples will suffice for the moment to illustrate the disconcerting feeling Victorian artists experienced in this regard.

In the *Apologia*, Newman imagines the terror that overcomes a man who looks into the physical world for a reflection of the divine creator, only to discover no sign of him. The experience, Newman suggests, is analogous to the feeling a man has when he looks at himself in a mirror and finds no reflection of himself in the glass.<sup>7</sup> The twentieth-century painter Magritte renders this latter experience visual for us in the painting 'Not to be Reproduced', where we find a man fronting a mirror and seeing not a reflection of his face but a reflection of the back of his head. The physical universe, whether understood as an independent entity or as a discrete object refashioned by the shaping artist, fails to mirror what the viewer projects into it. If reflection occurs, as in Magritte's painting, what the reflecting medium discloses is distortion, not equivalence.

## I

Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "The Portrait" is a curious elegy. The speaker of the poem, a painter, while reflecting on the portrait he has