

# "O ribald company": Reflections on Ezra Pound's Reflections

*Ching Yuet May*

## ABSTRACT

Here I take Pound's reflection "On His Own Face in a Glass" as the basis for a reflection on some modern and post-modern revisions of the classical "mimetic" and Romantic "creative" models. Whereas Abrams sees the Romantics as giving priority to the originary light ("lamp") of creation over the classical "mirror" that reflects a transcendent reality, Pound sees the eternal as itself transient and the mirrors of phenomenal reality as vitally expressive. While Krieger distinguishes a poem's inward-reflecting "mirrors" (objectivism) from its "windows" onto reality, Culler, for whom free origination is still a version of imitation, claims we never get beyond the "mirrors and lamps" of signifying language. But Pound's "scintillating beauty" of the mirror-world, of pure specularity is perhaps the most playful and subtle of all these views of light-mirror relationship.

## KEY WORDS

mimetic  
mirrors  
transcendence  
scintillating  
creative

windows  
specularity  
lamps  
immanence  
objectivism

"O Strange face there in the glass!" Ezra Pound, in an early poem "On His Own Face in a Glass,"<sup>1</sup> gazes at his own reflection, and ponders. Unlike Narcissus, who mistook image for reality, Pound in this poem questions the reality of the image reflected. The train of images that are shown in the mirror, though full of sound and fury, probably fails to capture the true being of the poet. "O ribald company," "O ye myriad / That strive and play and pass," Pound writes, and ends his poem by asking a series of questions: "I? I? I? / And ye?" In his mistrust of the mirror the poet subscribes to a tradition that distinguishes between reality and the reflected image, and his preference for truth seems obvious.

The same poem, however, provides clues pointing in a different direction, and these clues are, curiously, most detectable in the last two lines of intense questioning. The very repetition of the questions "I? I? I? / And ye?" suggests that they may never be answered. Their typographical layout imitates a mirroring effect, with the second line "And ye?" indented so that the line break serves like a mirror surface from which the two lines open out. Furthermore, though the series of questions begins by doubting the reality of the image, the last question "And ye?" gives the doubted image a personal pronoun of its own, raising its status to a strategic position in the poem. Thus Pound, who doubts the reality of his semblance in the mirror, also reveals a fascination with the reflected image, giving it a sort of "reality" of its own.

The distinction between reality and imitation has long been established in the occidental literary and philosophical traditions. It has often been represented by the distinction between the two metaphors of light and the mirror, and it constitutes one permutation in a series of distinctions between essence and phenomenon, creation and imitation, origin and derivation, truth and copy. It can be traced back to Plato's *Dialogues*,<sup>2</sup> and a work as recent as M. H. Abrams' *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*<sup>3</sup> testifies to it. The distinction, however, was made not so much to put the two terms in opposition to each other as to set one term above the other, reality above reflection, an example of what Jacques Derrida calls "hierarchical opposition."<sup>4</sup> Plato preferred light and origin to reflection, and Abrams' preference for the creative light is evident in the way he sets off the Romantics' revolutionary poetics against the convention of mimesis. Ezra Pound, true to the hierarchical opposition he inherits, often distinguishes between light and reflection and disparages the latter. But is there not a "ribald company" that conspires to reverse the hierarchical

opposition between light and reflection? In this paper, we will first take a brief look at the tradition itself, then discuss Pound's re-working of the established paradigm in his reading of Dante and in the early poem "Blandula, Tenulla, Vagula," and end by drawing parallels between Pound's mirror and the mirror of two twentieth century critics. Pound's response to the opposition both affirms and questions it, and the way in which he re-works the paradigm is echoed by two important figures in recent critical theory, Murray Krieger and Jonathan Culler. Poet and critics alike join the "ribald company," while Abrams himself, the one who contributes significantly to detecting this pattern and formulating it for twentieth century criticism, also cannot escape the mirror world.

Plato's philosophy provides much of the background for the distinction between light and reflection. Plato used the mirror as an analogue for his mimetic theory of poetry. In his criticism of the vain efforts of poets, Plato compared their writing to the performance of a mirror trick, for with this trick of turning a mirror round and round, one could easily make the sun and the heavens and the green earth appear, while the images possess no substantial being.<sup>5</sup> Worse, the mirror reflection of the poets cannot even give a first-hand imitation of reality, but copies the phenomena of the world that are modelled after the eternal ideas—so Plato went on to derogate further the status of poetry in his parable of the three beds.<sup>6</sup> In Plato, as in the tradition that follows him, the imitative nature of poetry is closely tied to a transcendental world view. The philosopher's Theory of Forms entails a distinction between the permanent, real world of Ideas or Forms and the changing, mirror world of phenomena. The relationship between the two worlds is described in the *Timaeus* as one of imitation, with the first world prior and superior to the second. Barring the inevitable nuances in a complex philosophical system like Plato's, the division between idea and phenomenon, spirit and matter, light and reflection, the transcendentalist desire to leave the phenomenal world of non-being behind to reach the true source of being, as well as the derogation of poetry as far inferior to the eternal world of being, characterize the mainstream of Platonic influence on the later ages.

Plato is the authoritative figure Abrams cites for the mimetic theory of art in his book *The Mirror and the Lamp*, a systematic study of the distinction between light and reflection in the critical tradition. Abrams demonstrates that the mimetic orientation of the critical tradition, mainly a legacy of Platonism, finds for poetry an analogue in the mirror that merely reflects and imitates. But the Romantic poets use light and the lamp as

analogues for the creative mind, and project the qualities of these analogues to their poetry, thus reifying poetry to make it participate in the divine flow of creativity, energy, and truth.<sup>7</sup> In his presentation, Abrams tends to concur with the Romantic poets' view that in emphasizing creativity rather than imitation and passivity, Romantic poetics advances beyond the traditional mimetic theory of poetry.

In the above discussion of Plato and the critical tradition as summarized by Abrams, we see that the mirror metaphor has long been appropriated by the mimetic theory of poetry, and that mimesis, whether in critical theory or in philosophical discussions, is often disparaged in favor of a transcendental, originary force. Pound in his poetry often displays a similar distinction between light and reflection, and his preference for the former seems to be unmistakable. In the poem "On His Own Face in a Glass" cited at the beginning of this paper, Pound distinguishes between image and reality and questions the truth value of mere images. His fascination with the mirror begins to reveal itself only in the over-enthusiastic rhetoric of the poem. In other poems Pound also makes obvious gestures proclaiming his mistrust of the mirror. Disparaging the mirror, Pound in a poem titled "The Flame" writes, "Call not that mirror me, for I have slipped / Your grasp. I have eluded."<sup>8</sup> In "Prometheus," Pound continues using light imagery, and sees poets as "bearers of flame" who desire to transcend earthly phenomena and rise to the eternal light: "Flame, flame that riseth ever / To the fl ame within the sun."<sup>9</sup> The Chinese ideogram 耀, called the "Rays ideogram [*sic*] from the Fenollosa collection," marks the beginning of the history cantos.<sup>10</sup> With prompts like these, Poundian critics legitimately focus on the poet's light imagery, and Angela Elliott in "The Word Comprehensive: Gnostic Light in *The Cantos*" has produced a substantial study on this subject.<sup>11</sup>

All these examples cited from Pound's work, however, have counterparts either in the same poem or in a companion piece that point in a different direction. The Chinese ideogram of Rays has in its upper right-hand corner an "abbreviated picture of wings,"<sup>12</sup> thus adding to the ideogram the element of light reflected off the wings of birds in flight. Of a related Chinese ideogram, 明 (Ming), Pound has written, "The sun and moon, the total light process, the radiation, reception and reflection of light; hence, the intelligence."<sup>13</sup> The emission and reflection of light are inseparable: interdependence is what counts. The poem "Prometheus" has a companion piece, "Plotinus," in the same volume of poetry, *A Lume Spento*. In this companion poem, Pound uses images of reflection in describing the work of

a poet who creates "New thoughts as crescent images of *me*."<sup>14</sup> Besides linking reflection with creation, this poem shows more vigor than the other poem of ascension and flame, for this poem emphasizes "me," the self, while in the other poem, the poets are always lumped in a group and called "we," and they actually "have died lang syne."<sup>15</sup> As for the poem "The Flame," in which Pound says "Call not that mirror me" and celebrates the upward movement of the flame, the poet presents an image of dark, bright beauty deep in the sea:

Sapphire Benacus, in thy mists and thee  
 Nature herself's turned metaphysical,  
 Who can look on that blue and not believe?

Thou hooded opal, thou eternal pearl,  
 O thou dark secret with a shimmering floor,  
 Through all thy various moods I know thee mine. . . .<sup>16</sup>

Now we can see the tension and interplay of light and reflection in Pound. Pound finds in the classical worlds of both the East and the West a preference for the metaphor of light, but he also detects in these cultures a strain that counteracts the hierarchical opposition. Even the world of nature provides Pound with the flame as a metaphor for the ever upward movement to reach the empyrean, but the same world of nature gives Pound Lake Benacus and its shimmering floor, the opposite of ascension. Pound writes, "Who can look on that blue and not believe?" This line reminds us of the close connection between nature, aesthetics, and religion, only to highlight the change Pound makes in the connection. St. Augustine has opposed the mirror world of nature to the true words of God: "Now your words appear to us in the enigma of the clouds and by means of the mirror of heaven, not as it is."<sup>17</sup> But Pound believes in the mirror world of nature.

Pound's reading of Dante in his essay in *The Spirit of Romance* shows his response to the transcendentalist tendency in Christian theology. The emphasis he shows in his selection of quotations from the *Paradiso* and the way he describes Dante reveal certain subtle changes in the opposition of light and reflection that Pound would make, and would like Dante to have made. Dante is a Christian poet who gives ardent praise to the divine and eternal light. The *Paradiso* especially sparkles with the many splendors of light, and Pound's quotations from the poem attest to his awareness of the importance

of light imagery in Dante. But the word splendor (which also appears in *Canto 116* — “A little light, like a rushlight / to lead back to splendour”)<sup>18</sup> is actually a technical term for reflected light.<sup>19</sup> Also, Pound’s appreciation of the images of reflection in Dante is as prominent as his appreciation of light imagery, if not more so. The very first quotation from Dante in Pound’s section on the *Paradiso* contains an image of reflection: “The All-mover’s glory penetrates through the universe, / and regloweth in one region more, and less in another.”<sup>20</sup> Most of the passages that Pound quotes contain gems and crystals of exquisite beauty, gems and crystals that reflect the divine light of God. We may argue that these reflected splendors are in fact inextricable from the glory of God. In fact Dante affirms the dependence of reflection on its light source: “The river and the topaz-gems which enter and go forth are shadowy prefaces of their truth.”<sup>21</sup> But it is significant that to describe this poet of light, Pound repeatedly uses the image of the mirror. Of Dante’s *Vita Nuova*, Pound writes, “We find not the action itself, but the action reflected in Dante’s heart.”<sup>22</sup> Of Dante and Shakespeare, Pound writes: “nothing is more natural than that the two greatest poets of Christendom, holding up their mirrors to nature, should occasionally reflect the same detail.”<sup>23</sup> And Pound also says, “Dante is in some ways one of the most personal of poets; he holds up the mirror to nature, but he is himself that mirror.”<sup>24</sup>

In two important quotations Pound draws our attention to Dante’s merging of light with the mirror, reality with reflection. On the planet of Venus, Dante reverses the error of Narcissus on earth. He sees beautiful faces like faces in a glass, thinks these are only reflections, and turns round to find out that what seem to be images are real:

In such guise as, from glasses transparent and polished, or from  
waters clear and tranquil, not so deep that the bottom is  
darkened,  
come back the notes of our faces, so faint that a pearl on a  
white brow cometh not slower, upon our pupils;  
so did I behold many a countenance, eager to speak; wherefore  
I fell into the counter-error of that which kindled love  
between the man and fountain,  
No sooner was I aware of them, thinking them reflected images,  
I turned round my eyes to see of whom they were.<sup>25</sup>

Narcissus has been deceived by the illusion of reflection, but in this

passage that Pound quotes, what seems unreal is in fact real. For Dante, this miracle has to be made possible by a divine act, but what about divinity itself? Pound quotes this second passage in which reflection equals reality, and image merges with the divine paragon:

That circling, which so conceived appeared in thee as a reflected light, beheld awhile by my eyes, within itself, of its own color, appeared to me painted in our image, wherefore my sight was all committed to it.<sup>26</sup>

This passage from *Canto XXXIII* of Dante's poem writes of Christ as a mirror. Dante, now in the highest of heavens, sees the reflection of man in the circle of Christ which in turn appears as a reflected light. Christ, then, is a reflection of God, while also bearing in himself the image of man. He is the divine imitation, or similitude, which links both God and man. The description of Christ as a mirror in this passage brings into focus an important concept in Christian theology, the concept of similitude.

Etienne Gilson, whose summary of Grosseteste on light in *Philosophie au Moyen Age* Pound quotes and praises,<sup>27</sup> writes of similitude in another book of his on medieval philosophy: *Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*. He begins his chapter on the concept of similitude in Augustine by saying that creation imitates God. But not only creation is a mirror, Christ is also a mirror, Gilson goes on to say. Christ as the divine similitude makes possible the marvellous, total identification between paragon and image, the imitated and the imitation. Gilson gives a detailed explanation:

Consequently, everything is what it is because it participates in God's ideas. But to get down to the very root of this relation, we must go beyond it and extend the relation of participation to participation itself. . . . This primary Resemblance is none other than the Word. Being the perfect imitation of the Father, the Son is the identical representation of the one who begets him. For even as there is nothing more chaste than Chastity, nothing wiser than Wisdom, nothing more beautiful than Beauty, so too is there nothing more similar than Resemblance itself. That is why the Father's Resemblance is so like the Father that He reproduces the nature of the Father to absolute fullness and perfection.

The result is that the universe of images in which we live is

not only composed of images of one kind or another because of the ideas they represent; it is also composed of images in a wider sense because there exists an Image-in-itself, a Participation-in-itself which is perfect and in virtue of which everything that exists can participate in God and imitate Him.<sup>28</sup>

In order for resemblance to exist, there has to be a divine model of resemblance. Thus curiously, model and resemblance combine, and Christ plays both the role of paragon and imitator. This passage from Gilson explains the quotation from Dante in which Christ is the divine mediator who joins God and man, the supreme being and its images, but there can be a further twist to the conflation of image and reality implied in this passage.

In a modern translation of the same stanza that Pound quotes from *Canto XXXIII* and of the stanza just before it, even God is seen as a mirror:

That light supreme, within its fathomless  
Clear substance, showed to me three spheres, which bare  
Three hues distinct, and occupied one space;

The first mirrored the next, as though it were  
Rainbow from rainbow, and the third seemed flame  
Breathed equally from each of the first pair.<sup>29</sup>

In these two stanzas, as the three persons of the Trinity appear as three circles, the explicit reference to the circles of Christ and of the Holy Spirit as mirrors can be used to infer that the circle of God is also a mirror. This interpretation may sound unorthodox, but again, medieval theology provides the clue to such a reading. James L. Miller in the article "Three Mirrors of Dante's *Paradiso*" refers to Aquinas, who writes of God as a "*speculum superius*":

. . . in spiritual things we call that a mirror in which other things are represented, just as the forms of visible things appear in a material mirror. Therefore, some say that the divine mind, in which all the intelligible characters of things shine forth, is a kind of mirror, and that it is called the mirror of eternity because it is eternal, inasmuch as it has eternity.<sup>30</sup>

By analogical thinking, Aquinas makes God a spiritual mirror. Using Aquinas'

concept, Miller writes of the vision in Dante as a unity of reflections as well as a unity of both light and the mirror: "The second circle is reflected from the first, and the third from the first and second. The final vision eliminates even the distinction between mirrors and light source, for the mirrors themselves are ablaze."<sup>31</sup>

Although the translation Pound uses in *The Spirit of Romance* does not explicitly point to a conflation of God and the mirror as postulated by Aquinas, the possibility in the original text opened up by Miller's discussion should help to elicit a strand of what Pound would call the "subtlety" of Dante's poetry.<sup>32</sup> The Augustinian theory of similitude evidently helps to explain the reflection of the circle of Christ. The idea of a miraculous union of light and the mirror, reality and reflection, first appearing in the prelude of the sphere of Venus, now emerges again in the culminating vision in the highest of heavens. Pound in his reading of Dante draws our attention to the interplay between light and reflection in Dante and the possible union of the two, broaching the possibility of a way to subvert the traditional opposition. Pound is very close to finding "ribald company" in Dante. Certainly, Dante accords such light-reflection union to the all-powerful Christian God, and in the Augustinian identification of similitude and being, the emphasis is also clearly placed on the prior existence of the divine being. It would be blasphemous to say that man can achieve this miraculous union on earth.

But in the poem "Blandula, Tenulla, Vagula," Pound goes further than Dante. He would replace orthodox Christianity, and subvert the distinction between reality and reflection. He would found a "cult" on the unstill waves of Lake Garda:

Will not our cult be founded on the waves,  
Clear sapphire, cobalt, cyanine,  
On triune azures, the impalpable  
Mirrors unstill of the eternal change?

Soul, if She meet us there, will any rumour  
Of havens more high and courts desirable  
Lure us beyond the cloudy peak of Riva?<sup>33</sup>

In this poem, the eternal is but change, and havens high and courts desirable, in other words, paradise, are but rumors. The eternal partakes of the mutability of the phenomenal, the originary may not be a desirable state after all, and the unstill reflections are caused not solely by the unstillness

of the mirrors but also by the changeability of the paragon itself. Thus the poet, instead of struggling after the transcendental, will build his faith on the phenomenal waves of Lake Garda, "Mirrors unstill of the eternal change." Hugh Witemeyer comments: "Pound's poem proposes an alternative to the Christian heaven."<sup>34</sup> It should also be noted that as the transcendental no longer occupies a privileged position, the mirror also eludes the grasp of mimesis.

In the above discussion of Pound's reaction to the distinction between light and reflection, we have seen that the distinction is deeply entrenched and hard to avoid. Still, Pound often, in the same piece of writing, proclaims a preference for light and then subtly undermines this preference. In "Blandula, Tenulla, Vagula," Pound does state a preference for the mirror, but in this poem we can also see clearly two changes he makes in the conventional distinction. The first change bears on the status of the transcendental which becomes mutable. The second bears on the status of the mirror, whose relationship with the transcendental cannot be limited by the term mimesis, because the transcendental has become like a mirror, while the mirror of waves, compared to "Clear sapphire, cobalt, cyanine," possesses a reality more solid than the rumor of a realm beyond, and a beauty more tangible, and clearer, than what lies beyond the "*cloudy peak of Riva*" (emphasis mine). These two changes summarize well the subtle changes Pound makes in the mirror metaphor as discussed earlier in this paper. From Pound's essay on Dante, we have seen an attraction towards the beauty of reflected light and a suggestion as to the closeness of God and man, even the identification of God and man through the figure of Christ. From the shorter poems and the Chinese ideograms cited, we have seen the importance of interaction for Pound (the total light process is the interaction of both radiation and reflection), as well as the attribution of creativity and vitality to the phenomenon of reflection. Indeed, the beauty of phenomena, long regarded as unreal, becomes close to man, while the transcendental ideas, remote and cloudy, become unreal. The Platonic hierarchy is thus reversed, and the relationship between light and the mirror opens up into an unstill, scintillating beauty.

Thus Pound is a member of the "ribald company" that "strive and play and pass," enjoying fully its participation in the vicissitudes of life on earth, knowing well the interactive quality of earth and heaven. This term "ribald company," incidentally, makes an interesting contrast with the term "visionary company," a phrase from Hart Crane and the title of a book on

Romantic poetry.<sup>35</sup> The Romantic poets' response to the opposition between light and reflection has been studied by Abrams. However, the priority to light that Abrams detects in the Romantic poets meets with reservations that Abrams himself makes, and with reversals that critics of Abrams make. Two critics, coming from two schools of critical theory after the publication of Abrams' book, succeed in putting Abrams in the "ribald company," and they also, significantly, make changes in the hierarchical opposition that are very similar to Pound's changes, thus joining the company that Pound jeers at and participates in.

Though he formulates the hierarchical opposition between light and reflection into a pattern, Abrams knows well the rigidity of any schema. He cites not only the Romantic poets' light imagery but also a few instances in which the mirror and the lamp are combined, e.g., in Hazlitt and in Coleridge's "To William Wordsworth."<sup>36</sup> A harmony between light and reflection is sometimes desired in Romantic poetry. However, a more radical subversion of Abrams' schema is seen in two other critics. Murray Krieger, a prolific critic whose literary theory has been variously called the "New New Criticism" or "neo-New-Critical poetics,"<sup>37</sup> literally turns Abrams' mirror around, using a method similar to Pound's: he releases the mirror metaphor from mimetic theory.

In *A Window to Criticism*, Krieger proposes three ways in which the language of poetry functions: "(1) as window to the world, (2) as an enclosed set of endlessly faceted mirrors ever multiplying its maze of reflections but finally shut up within itself, and (3) as this same set of mirrors that miraculously becomes window after all."<sup>38</sup> The importance of the mirror analogue in this passage reminds one of the importance it has in the tradition of critical theory, but the import of it is completely changed. In one sense Krieger's first two functions of poetic language correspond to Abrams' classification. As the window of poetry can give a view of truth, suggesting that there is a relationship between external reality and the reality created by a poem, Krieger's first function may be termed the mimetic function. As the self-reflexive mirrors create a self-contained reality, Krieger's second function corresponds to what Abrams calls the "coherent" theory. But in another sense Krieger subverts Abrams' argument. By making what he calls a "slight shift of metaphor"<sup>39</sup> Krieger changes Abrams' mirror to a window, and makes his own mirror an analogue for the objective orientation of poetry, for a theory of poetry that cuts off the link between external reality and the reality created by the poem. In Krieger, the mirror

still reflects, but it “turns its back on the outside world,” reflects its own kind, and suggests a function of poetic language that is antithetical to the emphasis on truth and reality in traditional mimesis.<sup>40</sup>

In making the mirror a metaphor for the objective theory of poetry, which views poetry as a self-sufficient entity, Krieger sees in the mirror a structured beauty that is not transcendent but immanent in the poetic work itself. He is attracted to the beauty of mirrors, like Pound. However, unlike Pound who in “Blandula, Tenulla, Vagula” sees mirrors as unstill and has no desire to ascend beyond them to an eternity that is but “eternal change,” Krieger builds a glass house, sees his mirror world as a still one, and appeals to a magical power to invigorate this self-enclosed mirror world. To join this glass house with the vitality of the living world outside, Krieger in *A Window to Criticism* appeals to a unifying power that is best symbolized by the miraculous, specifically the Incarnation. Thus for the third function of poetic language, for what Krieger would deem as the ideal function of poetry, the poem’s closed context miraculously opens to and sheds a new light on the reality of history and existence.<sup>41</sup> This appeal to a supernatural source of power, however, tallies with Plato’s transcendentalism and Theory of Forms. Krieger appreciates the mirror world, but he is finally lured beyond the “cloudy peak of Riva.”

Jonathan Culler, a critic of the postmodern period, also writes of Abrams’ book in the chapter “The Mirror Stage” in *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction*.<sup>42</sup> In this chapter, Culler deconstructs the hierarchical opposition between the mirror and the lamp in a number of ways, but two main approaches echo Pound’s handling of the issue. Like Pound, Culler extends the meaning of the mirror metaphor, but unlike Krieger, he does not make it an analogue for just aesthetic beauty or any one particular poetic theory. Instead, he links it with the mirror stage of Jacques Lacan, thus making the mirror world the very world of seeming plenitude that we inhabit. In Lacan’s mirror stage, the subject learns about itself through its reflection in the mirror: “the constitution of the self is dependent on the perception of the self as other.”<sup>43</sup> This interdependence between subject and object can be explained in specular terms, where the mirror and the lamp join to participate in one specularity, shedding light on each other and reflecting each other. Drawing even Abrams into this mirror world, Culler uses the same verses that Abrams quotes from Coleridge’s “To William Wordsworth” to illustrate this specular relationship:

... of moments awful,  
 Now in thy inner life, and now abroad,  
 When power streamed from thee, and thy soul received  
 A light reflected, as a light bestowed . . . .<sup>44</sup>

Coleridge's lines praise the ability of Wordsworth both to originate and to reflect, to create and to harmonize. Culler uses these same lines to show the ambiguity of the source of illumination, and the interdependence of light and reflection. He illustrates Lacan's mirror stage by using Abrams' commentary and Coleridge's poetry.

Thus Culler has strong support for his concluding dictum: "We do not escape mirrors and lamps."<sup>45</sup> Even Abrams cannot make the escape. Despite his preference for light, Abrams' book is shown by Culler to reflect the Romantic period and to act as a mirror in which twentieth century criticism learns about itself and its linkage with Romanticism.<sup>46</sup> Yet unlike Krieger, Culler does not appeal to a transcendental power in bringing the mirror and the lamp together. He would not be lured by the rumors of a realm beyond. Furthermore, he debunks the myth of the transcendental. Romantic poets, as Abrams puts it, emphasize originality and see their own poetic creativity as like God's creativity. They would distinguish their free acts of creation from imitation, a second-hand, dull exercise of servitude. However, the opposition of the mirror and the lamp, imitation and creation, is but a way to cover up the interdependence of the two. The creative freedom that a Romantic poet thinks he has is in fact another version of mimesis, a mimesis of God's creativity, and the distinction between creation and imitation is only made to hide the imitative nature of the so-called "original" creation. Culler writes: "By distinguishing imitation from true creativity one sets aside the imitative aspect of creation so as to produce, as the norm for poetic activity, an ideal, God-like act of free origination. But in such operations the repressed term always inhabits its opposite. . . . what is called 'free origination' can in fact be seen as a particular version of imitation."<sup>47</sup> As in Pound, the transcendental is questioned, and merges with the repressed, lower realm.

The transcendental thus exercises no mesmerizing power over Culler, but the lure of the beyond may still leave a trace. Despite his acknowledgment that "We do not escape mirrors and lamps," and that mirrors and lamps belong to the same specularly, Culler still points to a way to go beyond the mirror. Pound has seen mirrors as "unstill" and the eternal as mutable, but

Culler, like Krieger, associates mirrors with stillness. Comparing the mirror metaphor in traditional criticism with the mirror stage in Lacanian psychoanalysis, Culler focuses on the self-sufficiency and the closure of "subject reflected in object and object in subject."<sup>48</sup> One needs to break away from this mirror world, Culler thinks, just as a child will have to break away from the seeming plenitude presented by the image in the mirror as he grows up. Language can help in this liberating movement: "Language disrupts or displaces the self-sufficient visual presence of object to subject in the mirror stage."<sup>49</sup> This suggestion of moving beyond the mirror world makes one wonder if the distaste for the mirror, if not the preference for light, still persists.

The mirror, be it a symbol of imitation, or of the self-contained beauty of art, or of the self-contained plenitude in a necessary stage of human cognition and development, cannot quite be pinned down for analysis. Once Abrams has established the mirror as an analogue for mimesis, Krieger uses it for a very different purpose. Once Culler has reified the mirror to an important position overshadowing the lamp, the image of seeming plenitude it offers needs to be shattered. The mirror analogue exemplifies the mercurial character of the mirror itself, where subject and object, absence and presence interact and coexist. To maintain the hierarchical opposition between the mirror and the lamp has proved difficult, and to subvert the distinction needs even greater tact. Krieger and Culler have tried to subvert the distinction, and Pound's response to the mirror in a way parallels their response. However, in the very inconsistency and unstillness with which he approaches the issue, Pound significantly demonstrates a playfulness: He at times professes his preference for light as opposed to the mirror, yet this professed preference under analysis turns out to be suspect. The mirrors are unstill, the ribald company that appears in them is passing, even the paragon that has often been supposed to be immutable becomes mutable. Thus the hierarchical opposition between the mirror and the paragon is in a state of constant change and exchange. Pound and the three critics, including Abrams, succeed in perceiving an ambiguity in the distinction between light and reflection. Pound and Culler in particular detect the myth of the eternal lying behind this distinction, but the unstillness of Pound's response probably best reflects the scintillating beauty of the world of specularity.

## Notes

1. Ezra Pound, *Personae: Collected Shorter Poems of Ezra Pound* (London: Faber & Faber, 1952), p. 49.
2. See notes 4 & 5 below.
3. M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1953).
4. Jacques Derrida, "Economimesis," trans. R. Klein, *Diacritics*, 11, No. 2 (1981), p. 5.
5. Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: Colonial Press, 1901), X. 597, p. 300.
6. Plato, X. 597, pp. 301-302.
7. Abrams, Chapters II and III, *passim*.
8. Pound, *Personae*, p. 65.
9. Ezra Pound, *Collected Early Poems of Ezra Pound*, ed. Michael John King (New York: New Directions, 1976), p. 37.
10. Ezra Pound, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1972), p. 254.
11. Angela Elliott, "The Word Comprehensive: Gnostic Light in *The Cantos*," *Paideuma*, 18, No. 3 (Winter 1989), pp. 7-31.
12. Ernest Fenollosa, *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, ed. Ezra Pound (London: City Lights Books, 1936), p. 35.
13. Ezra Pound, trans., *Confucius: The Great Digest, The Unwobbling Pivot, The Analects* (New York: New Directions, 1951), p. 20.
14. Pound, *Collected Early Poems*, p. 36.
15. Pound, *Collected Early Poems*, p. 37.
16. Pound, *Personae*, pp. 64-65.
17. Quoted in Frederic Goldin, *The Mirror of Narcissus in the Courtly Love Lyric* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), p. 10. Original in: *Soliloquia*, II. vi.
18. Ezra Pound, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound*, p. 797.
19. Joseph Mazzeo, *Structure and Thought in the Paradiso* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1957), p. 150.
20. Ezra Pound, *The Spirit of Romance* (New York: New Directions, 1968), p. 141.
21. Pound, *The Spirit of Romance*, p. 151.
22. Pound, *The Spirit of Romance*, p. 120.
23. Pound, *The Spirit of Romance*, p. 161.
24. Pound, *The Spirit of Romance*, p. 168.
25. Pound, *The Spirit of Romance*, p. 142.
26. Pound, *The Spirit of Romance*, p. 153.
27. Ezra Pound, *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T.S. Eliot (New York: New Directions, 1968), p. 160.
28. Etienne Gilson, *Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, trans. L. E. M. Lynch (New York: Random House, 1960), p. 210-211.
29. Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Paradise*, trans. Dorothy Sayers and Barbara

- Reynolds (Middlesex: Penguin, 1962), p. 346, *Canto XXXIII*, lines 115-120.
30. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Truth*, trans. James McGlynn (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1953) II, pp. 135-136.
  31. James L. Miller, "Three Mirrors of Dante's *Paradiso*," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 46 (1977), p. 278.
  32. Pound, *The Spirit of Romance*, p. 110.
  33. Pound, *Personae*, p. 53.
  34. Hugh Witemeyer, *The Poetry of Ezra Pound: Forms and Renewal 1908-1920* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), p. 99.
  35. Harold Bloom, *The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971).
  36. Abrams, pp. 52 & 60.
  37. Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 217.
  38. Murray Krieger, *A Window to Criticism: Shakespeare's Sonnets and Modern Poetics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1964), p. 3.
  39. Krieger, p. 4.
  40. Krieger, p. 4.
  41. Krieger, p. 4.
  42. Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), pp. 155-168.
  43. Culler, p. 156.
  44. David Perkins, *English Romantic Writers* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1967), p. 437.
  45. Culler, p. 168.
  46. Culler, pp. 155-157.
  47. Culler, pp. 167-168.
  48. Culler, p. 164.
  49. Culler, p. 166.

## Bibliography

- Abrams, M. H. *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1953.
- Aquinas, St. Thomas. *Faith*. Trans. James McGlynn. Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1953.
- Bloom, Harold. *The Visionary Company: A Reader of English Romantic Poetry*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971.
- Culler, Jonathan. *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981.
- Dante, Alighieri. *The Divine Comedy: Paradise*. Trans. Dorothy Sayers and Barbara Reynolds. Middlesex: Penguin, 1962.
- Derrida, Jacques. "Economimesis." *Diacritics*, 11, No. 2 (1981), pp. 3-24.
- Fenollosa, Ernest. *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*. Ed. Ezra

- Pound. London: City Lights Books, 1936.
- Gilson, Etienne. *Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*. Trans. L. E. M. Lynch. New York: Random House, 1960.
- Goldin, Frederick. *The Mirror of Narcissus in the Courtly Love Lyric*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967.
- Krieger, Murray. *A Window to Criticism: Shakespeare's Sonnets and Modern Poetics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1964.
- Lentricchia, Frank. *After the New Criticism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.
- Mazzeo, Joseph A. *Structure and Thought in The Paradiso*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1957.
- Miller, James L. "Three Mirrors of Dante's *Paradiso*." *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 46 (1977), pp. 263-279.
- Perkins, David. *English Romantic Writers*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1967.
- Plato. *The Republic of Plato*. Trans. Benjamin Jowett. New York: Colonial Press, 1901.
- Pound, Ezra. *The Cantos of Ezra Pound*. New York: New Directions, 1972.
- . *Collected Early Poems of Ezra Pound*. Ed. Michael John King. New York: New Directions, 1976.
- , trans. *Confucius: The Great Digest, Unwobbling Pivot, The Analects*. London: Peter Owen, 1951.
- . *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*. Ed. T. S. Eliot. New York: New Directions, 1968.
- . *The Spirit of Romance*. New York: New Directions, 1968.
- . *Personae: Collected Shorter Poems of Ezra Pound*. London: Faber & Faber, 1952.
- Witemeyer, Hugh. *The Poetry of Ezra Pound: Forms and Renewal 1908-1920*. Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969.

