

# MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE WALL, TELL ME...

## Finding the Positum Through the Missing and the Reflections



### Gergana Bencheva

Certified Positive Psychotherapist  
Private practice (Plovdiv, Bulgaria)  
Email: [gerybencheva@gmail.com](mailto:gerybencheva@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

This paper explores the process of reflection and its influence on personality formation. The importance of this issue for people throughout the ages is evidenced by fairy tales, parables, and also their predecessors - myths. The article discusses some of them, in which the symbol of the mirror and reflection makes it possible to know and assign qualities and abilities.

**Keywords:** Positive psychotherapy, positum, reflection, contact, differentiation

### Introduction

The founder of Positive and Transcultural Psychotherapy, Nossrat Peseschkian, sees fairy tales as "expressive vehicles through which conceptions of values, moral beliefs, and patterns of behavior have been transmitted and anchored in the human mind. They have proved to be appropriate primarily because of their entertainment value. They were the spoonful of sugar that sweetened the most bitter lesson and made it interesting. Fairy tales satisfied an essential need for information and identification and helped in solving life's problems. They are pictures in language that lead to an understanding of things and develop the ability to empathize." (Peseschkian, 2008). These abilities make them a great means of bypassing mental defenses. Parables, fairy tales, anecdotes, and myths also act as a mirror in which the client sees his or her behavior reflected.

The most famous tale in Western literature in which the mirror plays a significant role is the tale of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. Snow White's fate depends on the answer the mirror gives to the evil

stepmother. The plot of the tale depends on it, although it nevertheless seems to remain outside the attention of the reader, who is mainly interested in the experiences of the main characters.

Many superstitions and secrets are associated with the mirror. It has a mystical aura. According to primitive beliefs, the reflection in the mirror is the soul. Thus, the mirror is endowed with supernatural qualities and is surrounded by superstitious prohibitions the violation of which foretells bad. In other words, the mirror is a threshold, a portal to other worlds, parallel realities. Alice enters the mirror and falls into another world, the world of the unconscious.

It is also said that "the eyes are the mirror of the soul" "Vultus est index animi" - this phrase is associated with Shakespeare and Leo Tolstoy. Its origin is believed to be "Imago animi vultus est" (literally: "the face is the mirror of the soul"), which was supposedly first uttered by Marcus Tullius Cicero. There is a widespread belief that only humans are reflected in a mirror, and non-humans or super-humans are outside the human world, i.e. wizards, sorcerers. And so have no reflection<sup>1</sup>).

## Methodology

This article is influenced by the idea of the transcultural approach and the overall positive attitude that Nossrat Peseschkian has put into his method of Positive and Transcultural Psychotherapy. Famous and significant tales are used in which the principle of reflection and its role in encouraging self-knowledge is introduced with the help of the mirror. Various means of supporting reflection from antiquity to the present day are considered. The emphasis is on the inclusion of imagination, positive attitude and support, through which the clients can more easily and painlessly accept their previously unconscious traits. As Nossrat Peseschkian writes in his book "Positive Psychotherapy of Everyday Life" - "Stories help the patient to free himself from the concrete world of his own experiences and from his resistance to discovering his conflicts and weaknesses. .... (so I took) the decision to include the imagination, and hence mythological stories and fables as an aid to understanding the therapeutic process. " (Peseschkian, 1998)

Like Nossrat Peseschkian, Jeanne Francisca van Delden pays due attention to fairy tales, parables, anecdotes and myths. She writes: "The tale lives not in the material, but in the spiritual and in it everything is possible. The story affects the subconscious, which in turn leads to the expansion of consciousness, thus leading to a happy outcome ... " (Delden, 2019).

A lot of Marie-Louise von Franz's works are devoted to fairy tales, and in "The Individuation in Fairy Tales" she also pays attention to the mirror, saying that if we want to look at it symbolically, the mirror leads to self-knowledge, to man seeing himself in his objective form. (Franz, 2001)

The work of Donald Winnicott in the field of child development also contributes to the article. Particular attention is paid to the first relationship (with the mother) and the earliest relationships of the child, which are key to the formation of human perception.

## Discussion

In Russian folk literature there is a fairy tale, "Elena the wise and Ivan-mediocre" in which Ivan, an ordinary man, wants to marry the queen, Elena, ruler of the whole fairy tale world. But in order to get this right, there is one condition - he must first manage to hide from Elena the Wise. However, she has a helper. In some versions it is a magic book, in others - a magic mirror in which everything is seen. Only when Ivan

managed to hide himself so that Elena the Wise could not see him in the mirror could he marry her. For to become worthy of the queen, he must acquire new abilities from being an ordinary man to becoming a wizard, i.e. not to be seen in the mirror.

Like this fairy tale, perhaps Snow White becomes worthy of the evil queen only after she first dies to the world. The trials that the queen stepmother puts her through are necessary for Snow White to transform from an ordinary girl into a queen, to acquire the skill of hiding from the "all-seeing eye" of the mirror. This can also be applied to our ability as adults to guard ourselves from unkind reflection.

What do we know about the stepmother, what is she like? Let us turn to the fairy tale and see what the magic mirror that never lies says:

- You, my queen, are the first in beauty in the world.

- You, my queen, are endowed with extraordinary beauty.

What is the stepmother looking for in her magic mirror? What is it that she is striving for? What does she miss? For her, the most important question is whether she is the most beautiful on earth. Maybe, "ONLY IF I'm the most beautiful on Earth, then they will.... love me, appreciate me, respect me,...". The list can be supplemented, and for each person this list is different, but usually includes primary actual capabilities. The stepmother is looking for confirmation of her self-confidence and an irrefutable external reason for her self-esteem. Thus, under the plus of the extraordinary beauty, the minus of her insecurity and her fear of losing her position can be seen.

If you had a magic mirror, what would you ask it? What questions would you ask it, what answers would you look for?

A person's attitude towards mirrors is a reflection of his attitude towards himself.

How often does he look in the mirror, what emotions possess him - satisfaction, pride, affection? Is it the same emotion every time or only when he has taken care of his appearance and feels beautiful enough - outside and inside?

Or does he glance in the mirror in passing, just to see if his collar is straightened or his shirt buttons are buttoned crooked? Is there a fear of mirrors, perhaps even a dislike, in an attempt to avoid contact with oneself?

Reflection can bring both positive and negative experiences. On the one hand, the positive is the ability

to look at and discern what has not been obvious because it has been veiled by defence mechanisms. In a supportive environment, as the self is gradually strengthened, it becomes easier and more accessible to peer gently into the mirror and lift the veil so as to open up space for seeking solutions.

From my practice I will quote one client, a middle-aged woman, who after some time in therapy, passionately said, "I envy them, I really envy them! I didn't assume it before, and I couldn't imagine saying such a thing, but now I confess that I envy them for everything they have." By this point, she had pushed away the feeling of envy and was expending tremendous energy to maintain this delusion within herself. Up until then, the client had not allowed herself to feel envious, lest she feel bad. The self wants to be good, so it pushes out the envy. It is only through the security of the relationship that the opportunity is created to say it so fervently in front of the mirror that is the therapist.

Our unconscious processes are always trying to make their way to our consciousness and will inevitably manifest themselves in "signs" from the outside world, trying to be noticed. For example, in the form of certain circumstances that "infuriate" us, details we "suddenly" pay attention to and people whose behaviour impresses us.

When we carefully observe and do not rush to reject these signals, but on the contrary - try to process and accept them, we are approaching the construction of the positum, the wholeness of the personality.

*"Don't blame the mirror if your face is crooked."*

- proverb

It often happens that someone's action, gesture, word, makes a bad impression on us. If we distance ourselves and take on the role of observer, we could allow our curiosity to manifest itself and question ourselves:

- What annoyed me in this situation?
- What do I not accept?
- What do I hate about others?

The answers to these questions outline the area of our self-development, because we actually have all the listed qualities, regardless of which end of the axis they are: for example, squeezed - wasted on the axis of frugality or lazy - ambitious on the axis of activity/diligence. What we don't like about other people is our projection on them. We do not like in others what is in ourselves, but we do not accept it in ourselves for various reasons - we shy away, we are ashamed, we struggle with it, we try to get rid of it. But we suppress it so much within ourselves that aggression pours out. This practice is good to apply with a lot of honesty and at the same time very gently, with love and compassion for ourselves.

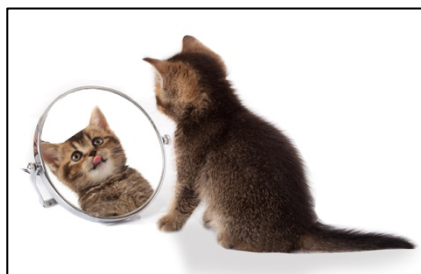
After some practice, we will easily notice that our parents and children are our most powerful "mirrors" that reflect us most fully, also our Loved ones. Let us not forget our friends, relatives and acquaintances. When we carefully observe what we do not like in others, we identify the quality or manner of behaviour that we do not accept in ourselves and that causes rejection. We ask ourselves questions: what exactly triggers unpleasant emotions in me, we clarify - how does this quality manifest in me, in what situations can I act in the same way? Or maybe I never allow myself to act that way and it frustrates me?

Depending on which actual abilities have been supported by the environment in which the self was formed, and which have been rejected, the corresponding qualities are manifested or suppressed. For example, if politeness was on a pedestal, open expression of personal opinion was likely to have been unacceptable. Thus, openness is pushed down and gradually dropped from the list of possible reactions.

#### The Three Mirrors



/fig. 1/



/fig. 2/



/fig. 3/

Personality is formed through its relationship with the Other. The baby's first contact is with the mother, in the womb, where through her and her perception of the world it forms an opinion about what lies ahead. Whether outwardly it will be eagerly and joyfully awaited or on the contrary, it will appear in an inhospitable world in which he will struggle for his survival ...

As Winnicott writes, his mother's face is a mirror in which the baby seeks and recognizes himself.

"In individual emotional development the precursor of the mirror is the mother's face." (Winnicott, 1999)

Later, the father, the siblings and the other members of the extended family gradually come into his field of vision. Through his contact with them, the child forms his image.

First the mother and then his relatives become for him a mirror that reflects him, in which he looks around and gradually acquires an idea of his qualities, abilities, characteristics.

Will he see in the mirror a courageous tiger who is ready to conquer the world, a cowardly mouse who does not dare to show himself, or just the kitten that he is, with his personal potential?

The tiger in the mirror exudes power, strength, success, but maybe also tension, a little fear (I'm not as strong, I can't be like him), envy (I want to be like him), doubt (can I be a tiger) or ridicule (haha, pretend to be a tiger). /fig. 1/

At the sight of the shrunken mouse, there is fear, pity, envy of other kitties, shame (that I am not like others). /fig. 3/

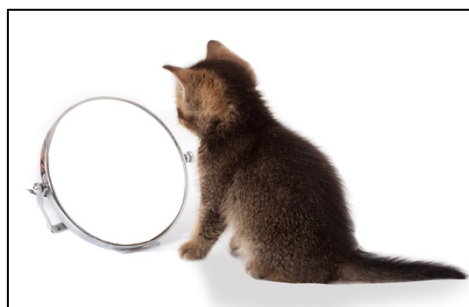
When the kitten sees exactly its image in the mirror, it feels most comfortable, feels joy, peace, hope. /fig. 2/

If we go back to the fairytale now, we will see that when the stepmother looks in the mirror and sees her image there, she is satisfied and at peace. However, when the mirror does not show her, but the image of Snow White, the queen becomes angry and begins to look for ways to restore the status quo, to have her image reappear in the mirror.

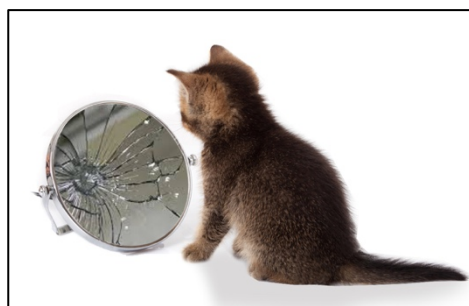
Although the image of the tiger in the mirror is very attractive and tempting, and it is just as harmful to the child as the image of the mouse. It usually leads to inflation of the Ego and, in the mildest case, to ridiculous situations such as we have witnessed, for example, in TV shows in which people without the necessary singing talent apply to be singers.

Both of these reflections prevent the child from forming an adequate image of himself, of his abilities and possibilities, and also of its limitations. In the first case, he moves above the level of his abilities and this makes him constantly force himself and give the last of his resources. In the second case, he is afraid to do anything because he does not know his abilities, he has no faith in himself and his abilities, he feels unworthy.

There are also two other options for reflection - when the mirror is empty /fig. 4/ and when the mirror is broken /fig. 5/...



/fig. 4/



/fig. 5/

Often, when a child is institutionalized, there is a lack of a daily, full-blooded relationship with another human being. Then the mirror remains empty, it doesn't work.

There are also cases when the parent or caregiver of the child, is seriously ill and is unable to reflect in a normal way on the child, the feeling is like the reflection of a broken mirror.

The type of functioning is formed in childhood, but continues to operate by inertia into adulthood. Accustomed once to define ourselves accordingly, we don't think about

*"What would I be if I could be what I want to be?"*

If you, like Snow White, take the path into the woods and follow it all the way back to your childhood, can you remember what your mirrors were? Did you have a real mirror? Who reflected you in the best light? And maybe some of you have met a not-so-welcoming mirror?

Perhaps those who have already become parents have sensed that being a mirror is not easy. At any given moment, parents are giving the best they are capable of and doing the best according to their beliefs. Some of us remember the maxim, "a child only kisses while he sleeps," so prevalent in our society years ago and providing a directive for the "proper" raising of generations of children. Parents believed that if they were strict enough, did not show their feelings, left their children alone to handle even impossible tasks, they would better prepare them for life and ensure they not only survived but thrived in the future. Our parents did not have the time to educate themselves on how to raise their children, nor was there such an abundance of literature as there is now.

Today, even parents are pressed against the wall of the requirement of society for their children to meet certain criteria – to be polite, to be obedient, to be successful. At the same time, the mechanisms for achieving this seem to have been taken away from them. Parents strive to be their children's friends; they seem to be expected to treat their children as equals. Whereas years ago children lived alongside adults and their lives were subordinate to their rhythms, now children are placed on a pedestal and their desires often set the agenda in the family. Often it goes to the other extreme, leading to a worldwide problem. Modern children seem to have no boundaries, lack security, and swing from one end to the other, from one mirror to the other mirror, and sometimes accidentally manage to stay in the good mirror.

Each person can be a mirror to others. What mirror are we ourselves? What are we reflecting, what are we absorbing? Probably everyone has heard that black-colored objects absorb all the light directed at them. And the other colors are obtained by filtering the light - absorbing part of the spectrum and reflecting the remaining waves.

What is your filter?

What is it that you "swallow", what is what you "return back" to the other?

What you reflect is up to you.

#### *Parable of the King*

*Once upon a time there was a kingdom. Wouldn't you know, one day its king fell ill. Whoever they called to cure him, no one succeeded. They called for a healer from another kingdom. He immediately responded,*

*coming as quickly as he could. He examined the king carefully and prescribed an enema.*

*- 'Enema?!', the King was indignant, and he cried, 'To me, King?! How could you suggest it? I'll have your head cut off!'*

*- 'Oh, no, your majesty,' said the healer, seeing where things were going, - 'Obviously I have not expressed correctly. The enema is for me, not for you!'*

Just as the healer senses the king's inability to see his illness and accept what would cure it, the therapist has a sensitivity to the client's willingness to let down his defences. When that moment has not yet arrived, the therapist must contain his own emotions and the emotions of his client. To be able to remain calm when a storm is raging, to recognize his feelings, to accept them and to process them so that he can find that point where there is balance, and which enables him to look at the other person's feelings as well, to help him work through them and also to calm down.

The human is the only being who has the ability to observe himself and come to some conclusions from this. Theatrical performances, film screenings, exhibitions, books or other art forms that we touch, attract our attention and excite us, evoke different feelings in us. And what we react to reflects some aspects of our inner nature and allows us to see them. Hamlet says: "... the essence of acting, whose main task has always been and remains to this day, to hold as if a mirror of nature: to show in virtue her true face, to refute her unadorned image and for every time in history his true imprint." (Shakespeare, 2004)

Such a function of reflection is also performed by parables, fairy tales. In the book "Positive Psychiatry, Psychotherapy and Psychology" a special chapter is devoted to parables and fairy tales as they are an important part of positive and transcultural psychotherapy. There it is noted that "The content of the parable becomes the mirror that reflects the inner world of the person, thus facilitating identification with him." (Lytvynenko et al., 2020).

As method founder Nossrat Peseschkian notes in his book "The Merchant and the Parrot. Oriental Stories in Positive Psychotherapy", "By removing emotional stress, the stories help the client to see their problems from the side. So he can define his attitude to the usual possibilities of conflict resolution" (Peseschkian, 2008).

The predecessors of fairy tales or the tales of our ancestors are the myths. In some of them the mirror is

given a special role. For example, the mirror shield that Athena, the goddess of wisdom, gives to Perseus to defeat Medusa Gorgon.

Medusa Gorgon had once been one of the most beautiful girls in ancient Greece, captivating many men and even gods. She was the most famous of the three sisters, daughters of the sea gods Phorcys and Ceto. Even the goddesses envied the beautiful, proud girl with golden long curls.

Unfortunately, fate puts her to a test she is unable to resist. Fascinated by Medusa, the god Poseidon pursues her to the temple of Athena, where she hides in the hope that she is safe. But that did not stop the god and he desecrated the altar of Athena. The enraged goddess took revenge on Medusa for her haughty beauty and pride, turning the unhappy, disgraced girl into a terrifying monster. Her new image is of a terrifying woman with sharp teeth and with living venomous snakes in place of hair, and with a murderous gaze. Thus, Athena deprives Medusa of the ability to seduce other men.

The altered Medusa is so terrifying that whoever looks at her turns to stone. Psychologically this can be seen as facing the terror of one's own demons, from which there is salvation only through further change and development. This is what Perseus has done, but armed with a shining, mirror-like shield that prevents him from meeting her gaze directly. Thanks to Athena's mirrored shield, Perseus is able to decapitate Medusa before her gaze petrifies him.

When Medusa Gorgon's head falls off, her blood gives birth to her children, the beautiful giant Chrysaor and the famous Pegasus, the winged snow-white horse, the embodiment of knowledge, power and inspiration. In mythology, horses are a symbol of bravery, devotion, integrity, courage and heroic spirit. It is as if the cutting off of Medusa Gorgon's terrifying head resulted in the transformation of the negative energy it contained into a positive, creative force.

From the hoof of Pegasus later gushed the fountain of Hippocrene, which was sacred to the Muses and a source of musical and poetic inspiration. Thus, art originated with Pegasus, but its original source was actually Medusa, since she was the mother of Pegasus.

There is another version of the appearance of Pegasus. Once Perseus cuts off Medusa's head, a few drops of her blood fall and mix with the sea foam as Perseus passes over the sea.

And when the Gorgon's blood fell on the land of Libya, it gave birth to monsters and hydras that tormented the people there, forcing them to disperse, and so that area became a desert.

There are other records of the power of the blood of Medusa Gorgon. Athena collected it in two separate vessels. The sea maiden's blood can be both poison and medicine. We have a positum again.

Another very famous myth in whose center is the reflection is the myth of Narcissus. His story shows us how dangerous the mirror can be. According to the legend, Tiresias said, "Narcissus will live a long life if he is never seen" - that is, provided he never looks in the mirror. But Narcissus sees his reflection in the lake and his life is cut short.

Jeremy Holmes describes this well in his article "Narcissism": "Narcissus seeks his object in the mirror, but is doomed to disappointment - the mirror's surface is cold and lifeless and cannot save him from loneliness. A therapist attuned to the patient's wave can transform narcissism by means of reflection - playful, warm and responsive reflection." (Holmes,2001)

The destiny of Narcissus is like a warning about the danger of seeing prematurely - before there is an opportunity to assimilate what is seen. Therefore, the relationship between therapist and patient is so significant because it allows a safe, gradual release from narcissism through self-knowledge. Through reflection, one comes to know his inner world and, in addition, understands how it affects others with whom one interacts.

## Conclusion

To better understand oneself and one's needs, it is necessary to look at the "minus." In this way, one often discovers that beyond it lies the "plus". Exploring this new, different world gives us greater flexibility and increases the potential of the individual, who now has a richer arsenal of abilities available to use in different life situations. Assuming the reflection of the mirror and resign that it is also part of us, we put an end to our efforts to hide this part of our image. This releases a powerful psychic energy that passes on to the Self. Thus the intended positum becomes our foundation and source from which we can draw strength.

Schopenhauer, who is often referred to as the father of depth psychology, also spoke in psychological terms of the ability to distance and withdraw into observation to enable new knowledge. The aspiration is to achieve

objectivity in a safe environment, away from raging emotions.

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