**Seeing a Way Clear: Mirrors as Mimetic Devices and Liminal Spaces in**

**Tennyson's *The Lady of Shalott* and Walker Percy's *Lancelot***

Mirrors are a central medium of indirect engagement with the world in Alfred Lord Tennyson's lyric poem *The Lady of Shalott* (1842) and Walker Percy’s postmodern novel *Lancelot* (1977). Both Tennyson and Percy draw on the Arthurian tradition as a setting for philosophical treatments of alienation and a search for an authentic perception of Self in the greater world, but they play with that tradition and the mirror motif in different ways. While Tennyson’s allusion to Arthuriana is romantic and insistent about the pre-eminence of English traditional values, Percy’s take on the legend is self-consciously ironic and fraught with the existential, scientized, psychologized concerns of late 20th century America and the move away from traditional values. In the two works, mirrors serve mimetic and liminal purposes, as ways of seeing and as thresholds between the protagonist and the “outside” world, community and a higher truth. For Tennyson’s heroine, the mirror’s liminality serves as space of initiation that she crosses spiritually to be transformed and ascend to oneness with God. For Percy’s eponymous anti-hero, however, mirrors serve primarily a mimetic purpose: Lance fails to perceive them as liminal spaces to be traversed, and uses them instead as shields for warding off genuine human interactions and weapons for punishing others. Instead of achieving oneness with either people or God, Lance isolates himself, and Percy leaves his anti-hero alive, un-evolved and trapped in a reflexive purgatory.[[1]](#footnote-0) Despite their distinct treatments of the mirror motif, however, Tennyson and Percy are on the same philosophical team. The Lady of Shalott’s positive action to connect with the world outside cracks the mirror, giving her a way forward and propelling her toward spiritual insight and away from illusion. Percy, a self-converted Catholic, expresses the same idea inside-out: the proliferation of high-tech mirrors fills Lance’s postmodern world with sights, but leaves him trapped in a self-defeating narcissistic cycle, deprived of true insight. The different outcomes for the Lady of Shalott and Lancelot Lamar in their mirror-gazing adventures depend to some degree on what kind of specula they use and what they see in them; but the deciding factor is the spiritual gift each character has -- or lacks.

Isolated in her island bower, the eponymous heroine of Tennyson’s poem *The Lady of Shalott* perceives the outside world indirectly through a single mirror because of a mysterious “...curse [that] is on her if she stay / To look down to Camelot,”[[2]](#footnote-1) Similar to Odysseus's faithful wife Penelope, she weaves “by night and day”[[3]](#footnote-2) and stays in a similarly suspended state, integrating what she sees in the mirror into her tapestry but sharing her work with no one.

The mirror first appears in Part II of poem after a description of her beautiful but isolated setting on the Island of Shalott: “And moving thro' a mirror clear / That hangs before her all the year, / Shadows of the world appear.”[[4]](#footnote-3). Weavers in the middle ages used a mirror set in front of the loom to check their work against a “cartoon” that hung behind them and had been previously outlined onto the threads of the tapestry in progress[[5]](#footnote-4). But the Lady doesn’t look at a pre-made design like other weavers; instead, through her window she observes a reflection of the flow of living people and rural activities on the road and river byways that lead to Camelot. The reflections of life that she sees and copies into the weaving both delight and depress her:

But in her web she still delights

To weave the mirror's magic sights,

For often thro' the silent nights

A funeral, with plumes and lights

And music, went to Camelot:

Or when the moon was overhead,

Came two young lovers lately wed;

“I am half sick of shadows,” said

The Lady of Shalott.[[6]](#footnote-5)

The mirror's frame limits the scope of her view and shows her the world in reverse, and the mastery needed to do this difficult work “by night and day” lends her craft a dream-like, magical aspect. For whom, after all, does she weave? Who will see her work, and what is its value? No one will see it, and its value is only to herself, as a means to stave off the mysterious curse. She knows no one, nor is she known by others except indirectly by workers in the fields who sometimes hear her singing and whisper among themselves that she is a fairy. Her isolation from other people is complete:

But who hath seen her wave her hand?

Or at the casement seen her stand?

Or is she known in all the land,

The Lady of Shalott?[[7]](#footnote-6)

Appropriately, the Lady of Shalott is associated with the *nymphaeaceae* (water lilies) that grow in the stagnant glassy waters surrounding her island. She herself seems to be a nymph-like, being who, like water-lilies, is perennial and “self-fertilizing” (“She hath no loyal knight and true”). She is stuck in the mud, anchored to the place where she lives. Her curse, therefore, is in part this vegetative state itself and her inability to engage with the others in the community who are outside, always moving toward Camelot. Significant life events like funeral processions and weddings make the Lady more aware of the static quality of her own existence and the “shadows” to which she is limited. The flower of the water-lily is cup-like and faces upwards to the heavens, unlike the narcissus which bends to meet the water (as in the Greek myth of the self-obsessed Narcissus). Like the water-lily, , the Lady of Shalott never sees herself in her own mirror. Her nature tends toward heaven, and she strains to see beyond herself, but she is anchored to the "pool" of her mirror -- and she is “half-sick” about it.

Plato’s *Republic* and the Apostle Paul offer interesting ways to frame the mirror motif as a vehicle for sight and insight, and they provide a framework for discussing the importance of genuine human connections on the pilgrim's path to enlightenment. Plato’s allegory of the Cave from the Seventh Book of the *Republic* is one of the most emphasized of his treatments of the four levels of human perception. In the allegory, slaves sit at the bottom of a deep, narrow, descending cave facing a wall where they see only shadows of the objects and people who pass behind them projected upon the wall by the light of a bonfire that burns further up the dark, narrow passageway of the cave. Still further above the bonfire at the mouth of the cave is the sunlit outside world and, of course, above that of course the Sun itself. The prisoners looking at shadows on the wall at the bottom of the cave cannot comprehend either the fire, the outer world or the sun, and are convinced that the shadows are “reality”. “As an allegory the cave carries with it these implications and comparisons: the Cave-World, whose light is a Fire; the Visible World, whose light and source of both phenomena and perception of phenomena is the Sun; the Ideal World, whose light and source of both Being and Knowledge is the Form or Idea of the Good. These are the four stages of human apprehension of the world.”[[8]](#footnote-7) Where shall we place the Lady of Shalott in this scheme? She is as one of those prisoners, enclosed in her bower-grotto, and she makes do with shadows because the sunlit world of Camelot forbidden to her. Her sole occupation is the weaving, an imitation of the shadows she sees in the mirror (the cave wall) – that is, until Sir Lancelot bursts onto the scene, Sun-like, reflecting Good or God. The Lady, however, is unlike Plato’s cave-dwellers in that she possesses a grain of wisdom (*noesis)* that permits her to understand that her mimetic interpretation of the world is fundamentally lacking in Goodness. Plato's prisoners need a connection with someone from further up in the Cave if they are ever going to be lead to the light: for the Lady of Shalott, Lancelot is that all-important connection.

Paul’s First Epistle to the Corinthians, especially verses 12 and 13, also emphasizes the importance of community with others on the path to God, and Corinthians is a useful text to draw into the present discussion because both Tennyson and Percy consciously address Christian spiritual themes in their respective works. In verse 12, Paul creates an extended metaphor of the human body to discuss the community of believers and the different “gifts” of each individual, remarking specifically on the error of a metaphorical oculo-centrism: “If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling?” Paul’s point is that each member of the Christian community possesses a gift -- of prophecy, languages, miracles, or another skill -- and that no gift or person is more valuable than the others; rather, all are important members of the “body” of believers. Then in verse 13 he employs the mirror metaphor when he comments on the importance of being aware that we know only “in part” until “perfect” knowledge becomes available in the presence of the Lord. He says: “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face-to-face: now I know in part; but then I shall know even as I am known.” The ideas then are three: first, that each person has a God-given gift; second, that alienation of the individual from the community of believers is, by extension, alienation from God; and lastly, that while on Earth, believers should be aware that they see “through a glass darkly” (perceive reality imperfectly) until such time as they know and are known by their Redeemer in Heaven. The Lady of Shalott’s consciousness of the imperfection of her mirror-view, therefore, and her eventual pilgrimage to Camelot in order to know and be known joins her to this tradition. Lance’s dependence on sight, his faith in mirrors and devices, and his preference for remaining within himself rather than making the pilgrimage toward community make him antithetical to this tradition, despite his insistence on the sins and failure of everyone else.

In the anti-romantic postmodern novel *Lancelot* (1977), Walker Percy’s alienated anti-hero Lancelot Andrewes Lamar (“Lance”) engages with the many people around him through a complicated system of mirrors, both actual and symbolic. During a novel-length rant-cum-confession to his priest-psychiatrist-friend Percival, the New Orleans family scion describes himself as inhabiting two “bowers”: a prison psychiatric ward and the renovated, tower-shaped *pigeonniere* where his wife Margot has deposited him, presumably to get him out of the way. Percy blends and reverses gender roles in the novel (all the women with whom Lance he describes as having some “boyish” characteristics), and in Percy’s narrative it is the women rather than men who are physically and sexually free-range, “driven by as yet unnamed furies”,[[9]](#footnote-8) renovating both buildings and their men. But Lance is unlike the Lady of Shalott in other ways besides his gender. He has lots of people around him with whom he could interact directly if he wished -- his wife Margot, the four members of the film crew, his three retainers, his father-in-law Tex, his daughters Siobhan and Lucy, and a bisexual (and invisible) son living in a trailer behind the garage -- but he is irked by all of them and chooses isolation. Also, unlike the Lady, he is afflicted with no explicit curse, only the implicit one of the alienated modern man in an hostile post-modern world. Finally, while Lance may be “half-sick” in ways that are obvious to the reader, his sickness is not obvious to him. He is not sick of shadows: in fact, he demonstrates a clear preference for them, engaging with the world through mirrors and mirror-like devices eagerly and willingly. As the novel progresses, Lance becomes increasingly dependent on second-hand perceptions as a way of making sense of what, to him, is a broken world. Recounting to Percival his childhood disillusionment when he discovered a wad of bribe money in his father's sock drawer, he exhibits an exaggerated oculo-centrism:

What I can still remember is the sight of the money and the fact that my eyes could not get enough of it. There was a secret savoring of it as if the eye were exploring it with its tongue. When there is something to see, some thing, a new thing, there is no end to the seeing. Have you ever watched onlookers at the scene of violence, an accident, a killing, a dead or dying body in the street? Their eyes shift to and fro ever so slightly, scanning, trying to take it all in. There is no end to the feast.[[10]](#footnote-9)

For Lance, then, the eye can taste an image “with its tongue”, and sights are to be savored and consumed gluttonously like food. It’s an obscene image that shows that looking alone is a complete sensory experience for Lance: he is a big eye.

While the Lady of Shalott enshrines the people she sees through the mirror in her weaving and is weary of her mirror-eye view of the world, Lance -- whose collection of mirrors includes several actual mirrors, TV, video cameras with infrared technology, and even the “meta-mirror” of his psychological interaction with Percival[[11]](#footnote-10) -- uniformly deprecates the people he sees, and he is conflicted about the abundant specula in his life. Implicit in the present discussion is the acceptance of a broad definition of “mirror” to include current technology that still acts as a surface that reflects, sometimes including other intermediary actors such as the TV producer or the person who sets up the camera. Elaine Whitaker gives cause to believe this is a valid way of proceeding in her review essay of M.H. Abrams' *Doing Things With Texts*:

Just as thought is dependent on the properties of language, so is it dependent on objects furnished by technology. Specifically, our understanding of the tenor of a metaphor relies on our experience of its vehicle. Metaphors involving mirrors and lamps have a long and widely appreciated history. Paul spoke of seeing in a mirror dimly as a metaphor for inadequate knowledge. Jesus linked the presence of illumination to the foresight of wise virgins who had brought sufficient oil for their lamps…The very depth of this embedding is grounds for exhuming the assumptions implicit in these metaphors reexamining them in the light of technological change.[[12]](#footnote-11)

To not consider postmodern-style “mirrors” in this discussion, then, would be to miss Percy’s point completely.

Lance gripes about the detrimental effects of TV, to which he is addicted in the same way that he is to his evening cocktails: “At night we watched TV and drank brandies. After the ten o’clock news I had usually grown sleepy enough to go to bed,” says Lance of his dissipated state. He later remarks, “drinking and watching TV, working at play, playing at work -- what does it do to a man?” Nothing good, it's apparent even to him. Never, however, is Lance able to connect his observation about the spiritually deadening effects of habitual TV-watching with the destructive outcome of his overall specular addiction. The dependence on instruments to see is a characteristic “curse” of post-modern protagonists like Lance not only because of the proliferation of technology, but also because of the relationship between the alienated person in an antithetical society and his utter dependence on technology. Devices are part and parcel of a kind of religion, a “scientism”, about which Percy is highly critical[[13]](#footnote-12).

But although Lance's many mirrors reveal, they also conveys phony images and half-truths that serve less as a means for him to gain true insight than as a way to bolster up his carefully guarded personal mythologies, fears, anxieties, depressions and prejudices. Lance’s extensive use of mirrors testifies to his dominant narcissistic characteristic; and his chilling coolness as he recounts the things he sees in his mirrors and mirror-like devices, things that would upset an emotionally healthier person, emphasizes his inability to feel love for anyone, including his own child. Telling Percival why he leaves his daughter in the care of the Tex, the grandfather who Lance suspects may be a pedophile, he remarks: “Why didn't I do something about Siobhan earlier? Here's a confession, Father. Because I didn't really care, and that had nothing to do with her not being my daughter...We are supposed to 'love' our children. But what does that mean?”[[14]](#footnote-13). “Falling in love, “being in love”, and “sexual love” are themes to which Lance refers often, often admitting that he hasn't “quite sorted it out yet”[[15]](#footnote-14); but he cannot sort it out, even with Percival's help, because his narcissism prohibits direct and honest engagement with anyone.

Mirrors help Lance objectify people like Margot and her movie colleagues, or use them as instruments of his will, as he does to his black retainer Elgin. Unlike the Lady of Shalott, however, Lance demonstrates no awareness of the fallibility of the indirect images he collects, particularly when they seem to confirm his cynical beliefs about sin and the ugliness of life. He is dominated by picture-thinking (*eikasía,* in Platonic terminology), and he values any mirror or mirror-like device that aids him in his quest to confirm his deeply-held belief that all is “buggery once the door is closed.”[[16]](#footnote-15) Also, unlike the Lady of Shalott who is truly alone, Lance lives with family members with whom he might have genuine interactions if he chose but, lacking the gift of love or compassion, he prefers instead to become a shadow among them, spying on them rather than interacting face-to-face. Lance doesn’t grasp that the images in his mirrors are shadows; on the contrary, he sees them as scientific evidence of the malignant force he yearns to expose. Platonically speaking, he is an unredeemed Cave-man.

The Lady of Shalott crosses the liminal space of the mirror to be initiated into a higher spiritual state by allowing her latent nature -- characterized by Faith, Hope and Love -- to be activated by the sight of Lancelot. In her mirror, she observes shadows of a dynamic and changing view: the road to Camelot, the people who travel along it and work in the fields, and how “the river eddy whirls”. Both the road and the river have as their destination Camelot, but because of the “curse” she is forbidden to have a first-hand view of this golden place. The bustling activity on the thoroughfares lies in stark contrast to the stationary, stagnant life of the Lady herself on the island of Shalott where she is surrounded instead by still waters where water lilies grow. The people she sees in the mirror, “surly village-churls”, “market girls”, “damsels glad”, a “curly shepherd-lad”, a “long-haired page” and “knights riding two and two” constitute a coterie of characters that are useful to her as “types” to integrate into her artwork, but she cannot really know them as individuals because of the curse: her objectification of the people she sees in the mirror is not her choice. Then she sees the golden vision of Sir Lancelot who appears like a bolt of lightening in the frame of her mirror.

A bow-shot from her bower-eaves,

He rode between the barley sheaves,

The sun came dazzling thro' the leaves

And flamed upon the brazen greaves

Of bold Sir Lancelot.[[17]](#footnote-16)

He, like the churls and damsels, is on the road to Camelot, but unlike them he has a name. He is a fiery figure, all silver and gold, and his cheerful musicality penetrates the isolation of the Lady:

And from his blazon'd baldric slung

A mighty silver bugle hung,

And as a role his armour rung,

Beside remote Shalott.

All in the blue unclouded weather

Thick-jewell’d shone the saddle leather,

The helmet and the helmet feather

Burn’d like one burning flame together,

As he rode down to Camelot.[[18]](#footnote-17)

Sir Lancelot sings “tirra lirra, tirra lirra” as he “flash[es] into the crystal mirror”, penetrating the specular world of the Lady of Shalott.

As often thro' the purple night,

Below the starry clusters bright,

Some bearded meteor, trailing light,

Moves over still Shalott.[[19]](#footnote-18)

In addition to sound and light, Sir Lancelot brings movement to “still Shalott”. He is himself a mirror, reflecting the Sun in his armor which in turn reflects into her mirror, but he is a superior being because he is closer to the Sun (the Ideal of Goodness). Unlike Plato’s Cave prisoners who cannot appreciate or believe in the light of day, upon seeing Lancelot the Lady of Shalott experiences a moment of Zen-like *satori*, or flash of enlightenment. Instantaneously, she sees beyond form and into the true essence of herself and the world. Thus illuminated, she takes immediate and decisive action:

She left the web, she left the loom,

She made three paces thro' the room,

She saw the water-lily bloom,

She saw the helmet and the plume:

She look'd down to Camelot.[[20]](#footnote-19)

By leaving her loom, she abandons imitative appearances. Her three paces through the room allude to St. Paul's gifts of Faith, Hope and Love as described in I Corinthians 13.12: “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. And now abideth faith, hope, and love, these three; and the greatest of these is love.” Paul's emphasis is the formation of a community of believers in whose face-to-face meetings the ultimate encounter with the Redeemer is echoed and rehearsed. Without others, then, Truth is partial, or “through a glass, darkly.” The blooming water-lily, the Buddhist symbol for the enlightened mind, is a symbol of the Lady of Shalott’s enlightenment to the world and herself through her love for Sir Lancelot: she has achieved insight. She casts off fear and looks down on Camelot.

Out flew the web and floated wide;

The mirror crack'd from side to side;

“The curse is come upon me,” cried

The Lady of Shalott.[[21]](#footnote-20)

The mirror, a medieval symbol of virginal purity, has cracked because the Lady of Shalott loves. She, like Eve, has passed irrevocably into knowledge of herself as an individual in the world, a process at once creative and destructive, and so the “web” of her interior mythology as delivered to her by the mirror must unravel. As an authentic person, she no longer wishes to see the world “through a glass, darkly” or create poor imitations of life in her weaving. The vision of Sir Lancelot in the mirror inspires both love and an apocalyptic moment of *satori*, launching the previously inert Lady of Shalott on a river voyage that represents her ongoing spiritual journey. She paints her name on the prow of the boat that will ferry her earthly form to Camelot, thus declaring herself as one who wishes and needs to be known by other beings. Then, becoming in her own person a mirror with a “glassy countenance”, the Lady “loose[s] the chain”[[22]](#footnote-21) that attaches her to illusion and earthly existence, and floats down the river until her eyes are “darken’d wholly”[[23]](#footnote-22) signaling the flight of her spirit. Despite her name which she has painted on the boat, the nitwits at Camelot fear the white-robed figure and ironically ask “Who is this? and what is here?”[[24]](#footnote-23). She receives her reward, however, when Lancelot recognizes her beauty and goodness -- “She has a lovely face”[[25]](#footnote-24) -- and predicts her ascent to heaven, “God in his mercy lend her grace”[[26]](#footnote-25). The Lady of Shalott must die, but she will be reborn in Heaven. The poem is a statement about the pre-eminence of love over fear, and the superiority of direct engagement with the world (*pistis*) to picture-thinking (*eikasía*)*.* The Lady of Shalott dies, but she breaks the threshold of the mirror and her trajectory is both ascendent and victorious.

Lance's many engagements with the world through mirrors lead him not to love, self-knowledge or transcendence, but rather to emotional numbness and apocalypse. Percy embeds so many “mirrorings” in *Lancelot* that the narrative achieves a vertiginous reflexivity that parallels Lance’s own descent into homicidal madness. He seeks recourse to mirrors and mirror-like devices to protect his false personal mythology and deliberately keep a frosty emotional distance from others. The Lady of Shalott signifies: she uses her mirror to observe archetypal strangers (shepherd, churl, maid, knight) whom she then interprets “with colours gay”[[27]](#footnote-26) in her weaving, which is less decorative than it is a search for meaning and connection. Lance, however, objectifies: he uses his panoply of mirrors to spy on people with whom he is already in natural connection, entrap them and endow them with dark archetypal identities (whore, pimp, queer, sodomist, rapist), depriving them of Self and carefully filtering out any information that doesn't support his malignant, personal mythology.

After Lance discovers that his daughter with Margot, Siobhan has blood type O and cannot be his biological offspring, he spies on Margot, and the movie actors Raine, Troy Dana and Merlin through a mirror while hiding in the darkened parlor:

It was possible...to hear the diners and by moving from side to side to see their reflection in the dim pier mirror on the opposite wall. The images traveled some fifty feet, thirty feet from diner to mirror, twenty feet back to me...Two small events occurred. Margot leaned over Merlin to say something to Raine...her hair brushing past his face...He leaned back, absently, politely, to make room, but as her shoulder rose -- is her hand propped on his knee? he took a mock bite of the bare brown flesh at his mouth… “Okay,” said Merlin presently. “So we’ll use the *pigeonniere* for Raine and Dana’s fight…” “What about Rudy?” Dana asked… Rudy? Who is Rudy? Me? Why Rudy? Raine was humming a tune...Was the tune “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer?”...Did Dana say Rudy? Actually I do not really think he did.[[28]](#footnote-27)

Lance trusts his eyes more than his ears. The dim and distant image of the “mock bite” conveys to him an explicit sexual relationship between his wife and Merlin, but he carefully avoids understanding that the the actors are indeed referring to him by an unflattering insider code name. Lance should grasp immediately that as a drinker (red nose) and a cuckold (with antlers or horns), “Rudy” is indeed a reference to him, but because such mockery would damage his inaccurate perception of himself as a tragic hero, he filters out the insult and focuses instead on the evidence that incriminates them. He can stand Margot being an adulterer and himself a wronged cuckold, but he can’t bear to see himself as a complete fool.

Lance examines himself in mirrors, something the Lady of Shalott never does. Lurking in the shadows, just after spying on his wife and her friends, he shuts his eyes for a moment to get used to the darkness.

…[S]omething moved in the corner of my eyes. It was a man at the far end of the room. He was watching me. He did not look familiar. There was something wary and poised about the way he stood...His arms were long, one hanging lower and lemur-like...His head was cocked, turned enough so I could see the curve at the back. There was a sense about him of a vulnerability guarded against, an overcome gawkiness, a conquered frailty. Seeing such a man one thought first: Big-headed smart-boy type...He looked like a smart sissy rich boy who has devoted his life to getting over it.

Then I realized it was myself reflected in the dim pier mirror.[[29]](#footnote-28)

Lance is fascinated by by the slumped, monkey-like figure (a Cave man?) whom he spies in the pier mirror. Caught unaware, he unknowingly judges himself as harshly as he regularly judges others, until he realizes that he is indeed looking at himself. There in the darkened parlor, a metaphor for his dark state of mind, Lance decides to go to the *pigeonniere* and examine his body carefully, from his toes to the dandruffy roots of his hair.

...I took a good look at myself in the mirror, something I hadn’t done for a long time. It was as if I had been avoiding my own eye for the past few years.

Looking at oneself in a mirror is a self-canceling phenomenon. Eyes looking into eyes make a hole which spreads out and renders one invisible. I had seen more of myself in that single glimpse of a ghost image in the pier mirror, not knowing it was I. What did I see?...Do you remember the picture of Lancelot disgraced, discovered in adultery with the queen, banished, living in the woods…? But it’s a bad comparison…[I]t was not so much a case of my screwing the queen as the queen getting screwed by someone else.[[30]](#footnote-29)

Lance is close to a genuine insight here, but just as he fails to recognize himself in the mirror earlier, he fails to appreciate the irony of his remarks: Lance’s feeling of invisibility when he looks himself in the eyes, of being a “ghost” to himself, is at the root of his narcissistic disorder: the “hole which spreads out” is the “O” of his daughter's blood type, and the nothingness that he feels inside. Furthermore, while he may have been avoiding his own gaze, more importantly he has been avoiding coming “eye to eye” (face-to-face) with his wife and children, which is why they turn to others for comfort. The irony of Lance’s solipsistic self-examination in the mirror compounds yet further when he tells the Lancelot story incorrectly: Lancelot du Lac of the Arthurian tale was not mad and grieving in the forest because he was discovered in adultery with the queen, but rather because he was tricked into sleeping with Elaine de Corbenic and thus unknowingly betrayed the purity of his love for the queen. Throughout the novel, Lance’s perception of the Arthurian legend is askew, and he manipulates it to make points that support his tortured internal mythology. Lance’s misuse of myth grows more intense as the novel progresses and becomes like a web that winds ever tighter around himself and his victims, in direct contrast to the Lady of Shalott whose web breaks apart, liberating her to move on to a higher order of reality. Self-examination in mirrors does not help Lance see himself or his condition with greater clarity.

Lance's infra-red “video-camera mirror” brings him many sights, but no insights. Describing himself grandiosely as “The Knight of the Unholy Grail”, Lance employs Elgin to set up a sophisticated system of infrared video cameras in the “hidey hole” of Belle Isle to film the bedroom antics of his wife and daughter. This *cinema verité* project is itself a mirror image of the feature movie being made at Belle Isle, making Lance a copycat as well. In contracting Elgin to shoot the secret sex tape, Lance is utterly unconscious that he has become the pornographer for whom he elsewhere expresses righteous contempt. Elgin, an MIT student, is himself completely amoral and simply enjoys solving the technological challenges that Lance puts before him. By using a “second” to set up these video-mirrors, Lance effectively removes himself yet one more step from confronting reality head-on, and signals his steep descent into Plato's Cave, not out of it.

The chapter, “Friday Afternoon at the Movies: Double Feature” begins: “What I mainly remember of the tapes is not the tapes themselves but the day outside.” Lance sits down to watch them “gravely as I used to watch afternoon reruns of Gunsmoke”[[31]](#footnote-30), as hurricane Marie -- a.k.a., the Virgin Mary, another “woman” that menaces Lance -- approaches New Orleans and produces “a sense of urgency and a high commotion in the air.”[[32]](#footnote-31) Oddly, the hurricane spinning in the Gulf is more memorable to him than watching his wife having sexual intercourse with movie director Jacoby or his daughter Lucy in a sexual threesome with actors Dana and Raine. The first movie is shot in Margot’s room, and Lance finally notices that there is something wrong with the “reflection”: the figures are...

. . . reddish, like people in a film darkroom, and seemed to meet, merge, and flow through each other. Lights and darks were reversed like a negative, mouths opened on light. eyes were white sockets. The actors looked naked clothed, clothed naked. The figures seemed to be blown in an electronic wind. Bodies bent, pieces blew off. Hair danced atop heads like a candle flame. I stared. Didn’t Elgin say the figures were nothing but electrons?”[[33]](#footnote-32)

The infrared video-mirror shows people in negative, disfiguring them and making them look like writhing demons. Here, Percy seems to allude ironically to the fiery gold helmet and plume of Sir Lancelot that the Lady of Shalott’s sees in her mirror, the vision that inspires her with love[[34]](#footnote-33). Instead of love, however, Lance feels nothing: to him these people are “nothing but electrons”.

Far from “sick of shadows”, Lance is downright fascinated with them. Pausing in between the first and second “features” of his home movie, Lance walks calmly onto his patio to assess the approaching storm and view the triangle-shaped bonfires that mirror the human triangles that he is observing on the videotape: it's a brief stroll from the bottom of Plato's cave up to the bonfire level. Referring to the machine that the movie crew is using to simulate a hurricane, Lance again fails to make the connection between reality and the “shadows” of mirrors: “The hurricane machine cranks up. . . It is necessary to use the hurricane machine even though a real hurricane is coming, not just because the real hurricane is not here yet, but because even if it were it wouldn’t be as suitable for film purposes as an artificial hurricane.”[[35]](#footnote-34) Lance doesn’t comment on this, he just states it as an interesting fact. The idea that real things aren’t suitable for mirror images should offer him insight, but it doesn’t, and he returns to the “Cave” to watch his “Second Feature”. In the next video-mirror, Lance sees his daughter and the actors Raine and Dana forming a “rough swastikaed (sic) triangle” on her bed -- a triangle that mirrors the Lance-Margot-Merlin triangle, the Margot-Merlin-Jacoby triangle, and the triangle-shaped bonfires -- and he is inspired is to reminisce about a crow he once shot and remarks: “Still I had to watch the 5:30 news!”[[36]](#footnote-35) Lance feels no sorrow or compassion at the sight of his teenage daughter engaging in sexual acts with two adults, nor does he act to save her; instead, he turns his attention to the “TV-mirror” to monitor the weather.

The last mirror to which Lance seeks recourse appears briefly just before he murders Jacoby, his wife’s current lover, and just before Belle Isle explodes from the natural gas leak he himself has engineered. He has sent away his children, father-in-law, Merlin, and the three black retainers to seek safety during the hurricane, which is now at its screaming height. At last Lance is acting in a hands-on way, but only for destructive purposes. Having opened the “Christmas tree” to allow the natural gas to rise through the house, Lance creeps through the darkness, has emotionless sex with the drugged Raine, and then skulks to the master bedroom where Margot and Jacoby are having sex in the matrimonial bed. Lance creeps into dark foyer of the master bedroom, ever deeper into the Cave, and silently spies on the two through an old mirror.

Standing straight against the wall of the foyer, I calculated I could see the reflection of the foot of the bed in the mirror of the huge crotch mahogany armoire which stood against the inside wall of the bedroom. I waited perfectly still . . . when the lightning flashed, striping the room through the shutters, I could see two bedposts striped like barber poles in the mirror even though the mirror was fogged by age, its silvering moth-eaten.[[37]](#footnote-36)

The armoire mirror is old and moth-eaten, showing Lance little in the lightning-punctuated darkness: It is a final threshold that he does not wish to cross. Mere feet from the bed where his wife lies with another man, Lance continues to engage with the world indirectly, preferring to ponder old wounds and engage with the world through the “moth-eaten” mirror of his old way of thinking, and he admits that he cannot “see” them at all:

I didn’t see what I wanted to see after all. What did I want to see? The money in my father’s sock drawer? Why was it so important for me to see them, Margot and Jacoby? What new sweet-horrid revelation did I expect to gain from witnessing what I already knew? Was it a kind of voyeurism? Or was it a desire to feel the lance strike home to the heart of the abscess and let the puss (sic) out? I still didn’t know. I knew only that it was necessary to know, to know only as the eyes know. The eyes have to know.

But I did not see them after all. I felt them.[[38]](#footnote-37)

Lance, unaware of the irony and narcissism of his allusion to the legend, frames himself as a combination Parsifal (Percival) and Fisher King in one, asking himself series of questions that he never answers. By saying “the eyes have to know”, he shows again that he is not part of the greater “body” or community, but just a wandering eye that feels no need for the rest of the body. The feeling he remarks on (“I felt them”) is not a genuine human emotion, but rather the feeling of an animal stalking its prey. Only when Lance becomes intoxicated from the methane gas does he physically confront the duo, from behind and in the dark, ending in the murder of Jacoby.[[39]](#footnote-38) Belle Isle then explodes, killing everyone and destroying everything (including Lance's physical mirrors), but miraculously sparing him. It is as if the old mirror in armoire were ready to crack, but cannot because Lance will not take those three steps across the room like the Lady of Shalott to connect with others face-to-face. Lance is a solitary eye who refuses to join with the rest of the body, and he survives the apocalypse along with his “shadows” to repeat the same cycle, this time with Ann, his neighbor in the mental hospital. Though all of the mirrors in Belle Isle are blown to smithereens, wherever he goes Lance will find new ones that reflect his immutable vision of the evilness of mankind.

Every child looks into a mirror and wonders if that is indeed himself reflected there, and if the world he sees in the mirror is like Alice's Wonderland, a place where things are different –perhaps even better. The mirror provides a mimetic experience, imitative and illusory, but the reflection we see when we look is not an authentic Self. The mirror can also be a symbolic gateway to greater insight, and in that way to a different world, for those whose spiritual aspiration allows it: the mirror can be part of a process of awakening as if from a dream to a clearer perception of the world. For the Lady of Shalott, the threshold of the mirror represents the order she has been given, and casting off that order requires her to act: her willingness to make the pilgrimage, inspired and emboldened by her love of Lancelot, cracks the mirror, and brings her into communion with the court at Camelot and, more importantly, with her Maker. She aspires upward, away from appearances and towards an authentic Self in communion with God: though she dies in body, her journey is ultimately an affirmative one. Lance, on the other hand, survives the destruction of Belle Isle in body, but the fiery blaze destroys everything else except his weapon and his narcissistic delusions. Lance peers into mirrors, but he finds “...no 'secret' after all, no discovery, no flickering of interest, nothing at all, not even any evil,”[[40]](#footnote-39): all he can see in any reflection is the “hole which spreads out and renders [him] invisible”, that is, his own emptiness. Obsessed with sin, Lance aspires downward, deeper into the Cave and into himself. His array of mirrors and mirror-like devices do not bring him closer to insight and so he does not cross through it or move towards others or God; instead, he circles in ever diminishing spirals, only to start over again with a new woman and a new building but armed with his same old delusional mythology. Like the Lady of Shalott, Lance is cold at the end of his story, but his is an existential chill: “I feel so cold, Percival. Tell me the truth. Is everyone cold now or is it only I?” This is a cry from a postmodern world where there are so many mirrors that man, isolated from God, sees nothing at all.

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1. Critics disagree on this point. Mary Ann Sweeny comments that Lance may be open to the “good news” of his friend Percival’s “yes” at the end of the novel. However, the present author is more convinced that the “good news” of salvation exists independently of Lance who, after all the destruction he has wrought, shows himself sunk too low to avoid repeating the same self-defeating cycle with Ann, Bowie knife in hand and narcissistic mythology firmly in place. (Sweeny, p. 71) [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. “Lady”, 40-41 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. “Lady”, 37 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. “Lady”, 47-48 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Edmonds, p. 29 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. “Lady”, 64-72 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. “Lady”, 24-27 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. Morgan, p. 132 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. *Lancelot*, p. 121. Furies, vengeful Greek deities who pursued and punished evil-doers, are ironic here, considering that Lance is in fact the one pursuing and wreaking vengeance on others. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. *Lancelot*, p. 42 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. The present discussion confines itself to actual devices and leaves the discussion of Percival’s psychology “mirroring” with Lance for consideration elsewhere. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. Whitaker, p. 113 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
13. The most commonly cited quote of Percy's attitude about “scientism” and his conversion to Catholicism is the following: “I thought science explained the cosmos – until one day I read what Kierkegaard said about Hegelianism, the science of his day: that Hegel explained everything in the universe except what it is to be an individual, to be born, to live, and to die.” (Samway, p. 149) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
14. *Lancelot*, p. 55 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
15. *Lancelot*, p. 12 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
16. *Lancelot,*134 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
17. “Lady”, 73-77 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
18. “Lady”, 87-95 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
19. “Lady”, 96-99 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
20. “Lady”, 109-113 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
21. “Lady”, 114-117 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
22. “Lady”, 130-133 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
23. “Lady”, 148 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
24. “Lady”, 163 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
25. “Lady”, 169 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
26. “Lady”, 170 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
27. “Lady”, 38 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
28. *Lancelot,* p.51 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
29. *Lancelot*, p. 64 [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
30. *Lancelot*, p. 64 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
31. *Lancelot,* p. 185 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
32. *Lancelot*, p. 185 [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
33. *Lancelot,* p. 186 [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
34. “The helmet and the helmet feather / Burn'd like one burning flame together...”, “Lady”, 93-93 [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
35. *Lancelot,* p. 191 [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
36. *Lancelot,* p. 193 [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
37. *Lancelot,* p. 236 [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
38. *Lancelot*, p. 236 [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
39. The bedposts seen as barber poles is a darkly amusing allusion to the “shaving” that Jacoby is about to get. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
40. *Lancelot,* p. 253 [↑](#footnote-ref-39)