The Man at the Mirror
(Dialogue with Oneself)

Dmitri Nikulin

Abstract: The article provides a close hermeneutical reading and philosophical interpretation of a short text by Mikhail Bakhtin from 1943, quoted and translated in the beginning. Contra the modern Cartesian interpretation of the subject as always open to itself in an act of self-reflection, it is argued that one’s self is not immediately accessible and fully transparent to itself. Looking at oneself in the mirror stands for an attempt of self-cognition, in which one both recognizes and misses oneself, seeing oneself as another with no “seamy side.” Thinking oneself, then, constitutes a constant dialogue with oneself, in which one is always involved in a process of non-finalizable explanation of oneself to oneself as one’s own other.

“Falsity and lie, which inevitably show up in the relation with oneself. The outer image of thought, of feeling, the outer image of soul. It is not I who is looking from inside with my own eyes at the world, but I am looking at myself with the eyes of the world, with the other’s eyes; I am possessed by the other. Here there is no naïve wholeness of the outer and the inner. To spot one’s own image at one remove. The naïveté of any fusion of oneself with the other in the mirror image. The surplus of the other. I do not have a perspective on myself from outside, I do not have an approach to my own inner image. Gazing out from my eyes are others’ eyes.”

1 “Фальшь и ложь, неизбежно проглядывающие во взаимоотношении с самим собою. Внешний образ мысли, чувства, внешний образ души. Не я смотрю изнутри своими глазами на мир, а я смотрю на себя глазами мира, чужими глазами; я одержим другим. Здесь нет наивной цельности внешнего и внутреннего. Подсмотреть свой заочный образ. Наивность слияния себя и другого в зеркальном образе. Избыток другого. У меня нет точки зрения на себя извне, у меня нет подхода к своему собственному внутреннему образу. Из моих глаз глядят чужие глаза”
A man stands by a mirror and is looking into it. Somebody’s eyes are looking at him. Is it himself, or somebody else? Something seems missing from the picture out there; the other transforms the self beyond recognizability. It is 1943. It is winter. It is cold outside. It is quite cold inside too, there being not enough firewood. The man feels hungry, though he is not at the brink of starvation; potatoes save him. It is also strangely quiet out there, though the war is in full swing. This last year there were two major battles, Stalingrad and Kursk. Yet the war is still very much undecided, and the Allies have still not yet opened the “second front.” Hopefully, they will do so next year. In the meantime, people keep fighting out there, doing their job, still dying in hope and desperation by the millions. But now it is winter, and cold. So the war lingers for a while, perhaps until spring. Yet Leningrad, the city where the man has spent many years, is still being besieged; soon it will be 900 days of the blockade. Rumors are that people die there of starvation by the thousands. The most awful siege in human history, it seems. La Rochelle? No, this one is definitely worse. The big black radio “plate” on the wall, which cannot be disconnected, whose voice cannot be fully extinguished, does not tell about the stacks of frozen bodies which lay frozen out in the streets of the city. Well, it is better not to ask, not to discuss it with anybody. The radio on the wall tactfully suggests that it is not to be spoken of either, implying as much with its very tone, self-confident and solemn. It is better even not to ask one’s own image in the mirror: who knows, it may betray you. Don’t trust, don’t fear, don’t plead. The man does not want to go back to the dull, now frozen steppes of Northern Kazakhstan, where you can only see the same woodless flatness all around, and where nothing changes as you move, so that you always stay in the middle of a great circle, no matter whether you move or stand still. This stillness kills all hope and is worse than any confinement. It crippled Dostoevsky when he was in exile in this vast place. It is no great consolation to realize that the two shared the same distressed place, though not the same time; or maybe even the time as well? Nothing seems to have changed much. No change in time can be perceived in this house of the dead.

So it is better not to speak, not to ask; the other staring out at you is a liar, perhaps a traitor. There is something wrong with the image in the mirror. This other is alien, a stranger. He does not seem to reflect or share your memory – or does he? He looks out at you with hostility. Perhaps this is the man’s own fault and failure; maybe the mirrored other does not want to look the way the man makes him look.

Not only the “when” but the “where” is not reflected in the mirror either. Yet it is Savelovo, a town on Volga, and across the river is the old town of
Kimry. There is nothing particularly remarkable about this forlorn place, except that it is more than one hundred kilometers away from the capital, north of Moscow. This is a magic number: all socially suspicious “elements” are to be kept beyond the circle of one hundred kilometers in radius with the center in the Kremlin. Everybody is carefully watched and wisely taken care of from the center of this circle, even now. When the man is not teaching at school, sometimes he goes to Moscow. But even this is not altogether safe for a former outlaw. There is no way he can legally remain or live or get any job there. In the end, the capital is meant to be a city only for impeccable people, to whom the man does not belong. So he can only stay for a little while, in the hopes of getting access to the books which his friends have secured for him. Each day, he comes to stay with another friend, bringing all of his belongings – omnia mea mecum porto. Each night, a friend makes an improvised bed by placing chairs together when there is no extra sofa – and mostly, there isn’t, for the friend lives in one room of an apartment consisting of a number of other rooms that are also shared by many families. So they all stay together in one room for this night. Tomorrow morning, there will be again a queue to the bathroom and gloomy looks from other inhabitants of the big apartment. The man does not want to be a nuisance. Besides, he does not feel altogether safe staying in the same place for another night, so he moves on to another friend, until all of them are visited. Then he takes a local train at Savelovsky station and goes back to his town.

There was a time when he would become an acclaimed philosopher, now, he is a school teacher. Solitary thinking before himself in front of the mirror does not bring philosophy back; he needs others to continue talking and disagreeing with him. The only escape from the present appears to be in fiction, so reading and teaching literature keeps him afloat. Remarkably, they still teach German at schools as a foreign language, even now, in the middle of the war. The man himself teaches German. In his past life, he read Kant, Schelling, Natorp, Hermann Cohen, Cassirer and Shpet. Now, these books are not around. He thus has to revisit his own written excerpts from the books he once read; he has to go over them, memorize them, make them his own and copy them verbatim. Anyway, there is almost no hope of publishing anything anymore. In the past, he wrote a number of brilliant books, some under the pseudonyms of his friends. But that was in the past. The past is not real, and the present is elusive when it attempts to mirror the past, as if in a reverse perspective. It is a wonder he is still alive, but this could end at any time. The past is not innocent, the future is opaque. The other in the mirror remains silent about it.

Three years ago he finished a work on laughter in which tragic laughter came to coincide with comic and obscene laughter. This perverse laughter...
can only be properly heard during times when everything is turned upside down, and when such laughter seems to be the only remedy against desperation. Turning everything upside down, when the decorations, the language and the usual appearances change radically, is liberating for a short while, but it is such only when the topsy-turvy world lasts several days. When it lasts forever, it becomes self-destructive and the laughter turns into a lament. Yet the man wants to grasp the desperate comedy of life, at least in writing.

At the moment, the man does not write much. Writing does not make sense any more. Why write? For whom should he write? Only occasionally does he write – it is hard to abandon the habit – a few lines concerning what he still cannot stop thinking about. The man came to this godforsaken small provincial town five years ago, because he wanted to move closer to the capital in the futile hope of being once again part of intellectual life. But that was in 1937, the year of great purges, so the life of the mind quickly and prudently came to a halt. Now, in the middle of uncertainty, there is hardly any hope for the resumption of such a life, at least one that would include him. The year after he came to this obscure place, the man’s leg was amputated because of a disease that was causing him pain for long time. But the other in the mirror seems not to see it. There is something troubling and wrong about the relation with this other.

So there is no hope now, not even fear, of which the man is simply tired. He has only a deaf non-existence, which in its desperation is almost liberating. But not quite. In his past life, the man was only guilty of attempting to think, perhaps awkwardly. At that time he was not yet afraid of openly discussing Freud, Marx and Saussure. Yet the level of desperation over that now long-gone past, as well as over his current life, is such that not even being a Stoic would help. He tried. Only bitter laughter – and thinking about laughter – about that which cannot be changed, seems to be able to liberate him for a while from this weary life.

At the moment, it is strangely quiet and calm, only the dogs bark at night. At the war front, there is “nichts Neues.” The man is fortunate to be alive. Yet these days his being alive may be dangerous for those close to him, who have to share all the hardships of the many years of his protracted exile. His closest other who is always there is his wife, Elena Alexandrovna, who accompanies him wherever he goes, or, rather, is made to go. Already long ago he lost any contact with his older brother, a professor in England, an unorthodox Leftist, a friend of Wittgenstein, who is far too suspicious a figure for the authorities. Two of the man’s closest friends, brilliant philosophers and philologists, Matvei Kagan and Lev Pumpyanskiy, died several years ago. Right now, none of his significant others are reflected in the mirror, just himself and this other – not the real other of a dear friend, with whom he might continue talking and disagreeing, but the other of his own self in the mirror.
What does this image in the mirror know about the man’s significant others, and what does this mirrored other not want to know about the quiet and terrifying work of war going on out there beyond the front line, right in the middle of this deceptively calm winter of 1943? Does the other in the mirror know of all this? Does he know anything else? Does he know that the man has just finished reading a book on Jonathan Swift? It’s hard to tell. Time, place and biography – a seemingly random collection of events in one’s life – perhaps inscribed into one’s invisible and elusive self – are left out of the picture. The mirror image does not catch them. The image is mute and voiceless and cannot respond to one’s mourning about undeserved suffering. The other out there is just looking; he does not speak.

2.

1. The short text “Man at the Mirror,” quoted at the opening of the section above, belongs to the few surviving written pieces by Bakhtin from his Savelovo period of the mid 1940s. It consists of eleven lines: nine short sentences, some of which do not have predicates and look more like theses. The text was written quickly with a pencil in a gray-bluish notebook, and is perhaps a set of notes for a future article. Thematically and terminologically, it follows (in the same notebook) another text from the same time period, “[Rhetoric, to the extent of its mendacity...],”2 which thus might be of help in unfolding the mirror notes.

The major theme of the “Man at the Mirror” is the relationship of the self and the other, or with the self and the other.3 Bakhtin begins with this theme early on in his life and, in a sense, never abandons it; or rather, the theme of the other never leaves Bakhtin, reappearing in his considerations of dialogue and the dialogical other. Now, as the man is standing by the mirror, it is the self, and the other of the self in the self, qua other self, that appear to interact and ask for an explanation.

The case seems to be clear: oneself – one’s self – is looking at its mirrored image and is trying to understand itself to the extent that this image is defined by that other mirrored self. Looking into a mirror, the self already appears to be in a relation to its mirrored other. Yet the immediacy of such relation

2 Id., “[Ritorika, v meru svoey lzhivosti...],” in Id., Sobranie sochineniy, vol. 5, pp. 63–70. Another closely related set of notes, which will be referred to throughout the text, is Id., “K voprosam samosoznaniya i samoootsenki... [Towards the questions of self-consciousness and self-evaluation...],” from a period between 1943 and 1949, Ibid., pp. 72–79.

might be deceptive: the other, out there, might not be so immediate. The man’s suspicion is that the Cartesian “cogito ergo sum”\textsuperscript{4} is not an expression of the immediacy of either thinking attending to being, or of being as a pre-condition for the thinking of “am.” Not even the Augustinian “fallor, ergo sum”\textsuperscript{5} seems to represent the other in his immediacy and relationship to one’s self, because the “I am mistaken” is a product of deliberation, conclusion, and an implied suspicion, rather than being an immediate distrust.

The lack of immediacy in relation to the self is immediately recognizable precisely because it is paradoxical. Immediacy thus cannot be but a mistake, although not in the Augustinian sense, but rather as a performative contradiction: the sense of immediacy with my self as other is mediated by that other’s looking at me through the mirror image. Therefore, the relationship to one’s self as the other begins not with a truth of the “cogito,” but with a lie and mendacity. The deception begins with the mirrored self posing as a real other of another person. The other in the mirror seems to depend on one’s self, and one’s self also seems to depend on the other, insofar as we – I – reflect each other. And yet, the “real” other of another person, even if mirrored, appears to be quite different from this mirrored other, because the other’s other is not immediately mirrored by, and is independent of, my self. Thus, there is “falsity and lie, which inevitably show up in the relation with oneself.”\textsuperscript{6}

2. The falsity that comes from the deceptive immediacy of one’s other mirrored self, which is mediated by the self that is mediated by the other – mirrored – self, calls for rhetoric to overcome the illusory ambiguity. Only rhetoric seems capable of breaking the suspicious circle of infinite mutual reflection of oneself in the mirror of one’s own gaze. But the rhetorical solution is dialectical; it is the one that can disprove, through an exchange with the other, any thesis, and thus justify its opposite, which in turn can also be disproved. Hence rhetoric is mendacious, and as such instills both fear and hope.\textsuperscript{7}

Fear and hope are two mutually connected “modes,” rather than psychological perceptions, of the self. Fear appears to be the mode of perception of an illusion including an illusory mirrored image of one’s self. The fear of illusion is the fear of nothing. The nothingness causes fear and provokes the hope of overcoming the frightening nihil. These two non-psychological “feel-

---


\textsuperscript{5} Augustine, \textit{De civitate Dei}, I, 26.

\textsuperscript{6} Bakhtin, “Chelovek u zerkala.”

“ings” are appealed to not by rhetoric alone, but in a different way, also by religion (in an attempt to overcome death), by social motivation (in an urge to become a socially significant and recognized as “something”), by creativity (in an endeavor to produce something lasting and memorable), and by love (in an effort to last in the beloved, and possibly in a new and different physical other self).

But fear and hope draw a circle that already brings closure to any attempt at understanding oneself even before any such attempt takes place, thereby finalizing even the most simple unreflected and unreflective gaze out there in the mirror, and without, as yet, any recognition of the image. For Bakhtin, the circle of fear and hope can only be broken by art and cognition. Only art and cognition (which, as self-knowledge, is not only – and even not so much as – a reflection, but rather a refraction and a deflection), by involving the real other who is rigid and stubborn, who disagrees but at least does not lie, may come as a liberation from the constant Unbehagen of an unaccountable fear and the futile hope of overcoming it. The lie of one’s mirrored other comes in as a certain mystery of the other’s look, which is one’s own. Yet mystery itself is often violence, insofar as mystery promises a release from fear and the fulfillment of hope behind an image, without, however, delivering that promise.

Violence is thus always “proportionate” to lying. If, furthermore, lying is to be overcome in cognition, which in this case means “to know oneself” and to know “what is the case” with oneself in self-cognition as assisted by the other, then the lie and falsity of the rhetorical substitute consists in finalizing and objectifying the image of that which has yet to be known. Indeed, that which is to be known, in this case, of and about oneself, is not yet known, and thus at this present moment of an unreflective and naïve staring into the mirror, it is quite undetermined. The self might be able to say something about itself, and thus connect with itself as another self, but perhaps one must also undergo a painful yet potentially liberating process of self-cognition, of dialogical negotiating with oneself as another. At this moment the self is simply not yet – and perhaps never will be – finalized into a clearly defined and finite image. The finalization of one’s self – who then becomes the subject of cognition – is a violence to oneself, a deadening of oneself as another that presents the other as finalized and not free, i.e. as the one who fully coincides with himself in his appearance, and who is thus incapable of being seen or approached differently.

Such a finalized other is an objectified self; it is oneself turned into a well-defined object, like a target that one always misses, and which is turned into an

---

8 Bakhtin, “[Ritorika, v meru svoey lzhivosti…],” p. 63.
9 Ibid., p. 65.
object of use and consumption. One’s inexhaustibility in relation to oneself as the other does not yet mean that such an other is utterly vague. Rather, the other of oneself is always new and unexpected; it is the one with whom one can communicate, talk, and inquire about oneself. Only thus can one speak to oneself not in one’s absence, but in one’s full yet never completely thematizable presence.

3. Oneself, as one who is fully finalized and seemingly defined before any act of definition, can take place in the self as the other who is defined in the mirror and who is present in the image, the “outer image of thought, of feeling, outer image of soul.”

If one cannot see himself directly and perceive himself immediately (the physical parallel would be the capacity to see only the parts of one’s body), then one has to see oneself as a mirrored other, namely, as the other who is equally also a self looking at itself. But one’s self, looking at itself as at another, is thus already not oneself; rather, it is oneself as one’s other, who does not see himself “naturally” and immediately. The mirrored other who represents the self in the way that it is not and never appears to itself, is thus an awkward other.

The proper self, the eye, cannot look at itself without the other self, the other eye. The eye sees itself in and through the mirrored eye. Yet the mirrored eye, the eye’s own other, only sees what the eye allows it to see, and does so only because of the eye of the self. One’s other as the mirrored self is thus mediated by the self, which is itself mediated by, and is reacting to, the other of the self.

But who sees whom? It seems that both the man and the man in the mirror see each other. And who defines whom? The self realizes itself through the mirrored other, yet that other is always the one whom the self makes to be, i.e. to be mirrored, because this other is the other of the self when the self startlingly watches itself in its own image.

4. Hence, the eye looks at itself through its reflected other and is possessed by this other, the mirrored image of the eye, which is now its other eye. “I am not looking from inside with my own eyes at the world, but I am looking at myself with the eyes of the world, with the other’s eyes; I am possessed by the other.”

The eye and the other of the eye meet at a certain point, a sui generis focus of mutual reflection and careful suspicious observation, whereby each other follows the other, pretending to be the first, and yet constantly ceding this primacy to its other to the point of being completely unable to act any more.

The eye and its mirrored other are thus both joined and disrupted in the focal image of the mirror. But what is this mirror? The mirror appears to be that

---

10 Ibid., p. 66.
11 Id., “Chelovek u zerkala.”
12 Id., “Chelovek u zerkala.”
shifting surface upon which the gaze and the image are momentarily focused, only to be moved next moment either closer to the eye, or closer to the mirrored eye, thus losing its focus in an attempt to gain it. The mirror, then, seems to exist only with and at the moment of mirroring, and not before.\textsuperscript{13}

5. Therefore, the man looking into the mirror, on the one hand, depends on his image (on “the other’s eyes”), which copies and follows the movements of the original. On the other hand, the original — the man looking at himself — is hypnotically fascinated with the other who obeys every one of his slightest intentions and gestures, so that the man is dragged along by the precise and inescapably necessary imitations of the mirror image into performing such movements, whose only purpose is to be copied in the mirror. The original thus becomes dependent on its mirrored other and almost falls into a cataleptic state, striving to reproduce itself for the sake of his image, for the sake of being precisely reflected and followed.

The fascination with, and even possession by, the absolute precision of copying one’s — never fully accessible — body in and by its mirror image when the purpose of the original suddenly appears to become present and acts or moves in order to be copied and mirrored — this leads to a rather awkward relation to one’s image in the mirror. Possessed by the other, one cannot get rid of him.

6. Yet, the looking eye is not identical with the mirrored eye looking back at it. Even if the other, mirrored eye is the “same” as the eye, it is also always already different, precisely because it is mirrored. Thus, despite a naïve — perhaps desired — perception of the fusion of one’s self with its represented other, the self is still different from its other. The other by whom the self is mirrored is an anonymous other self, which is therefore not the self proper. Indeed, the self does not feel the mirrored other’s pain, does not perceive the other’s perception, and the self feels only its own. The self exercises its own look, which is perceived by itself in an astonishingly different manner than is the other’s stern and stiff look in and out of the mirror, even if such self-perception is not an immediate Cartesian self-awareness, but is rather the result of an interaction with one’s other. Even while intensely looking at each other, even in a desire to merge, the two remain stubbornly distinct, mutually strange, and alien. Because of this, “here there is no naïve wholeness of the outer and the inner.”\textsuperscript{14}

7. In what sense is the mirror image other to the eye looking at it? First of all, the mirror image of the self is other to the self simply in the sense that an image is different from its prototype, to which the image may or may not (if

\textsuperscript{13} See Nicholas of Cusa, \textit{De docta ignorantia}, II, 2.

\textsuperscript{14} Bakhtin, “Chelovek u zerkala.”
the mirror is distorting) be isomorphic. The image is also other to the imaged numerically, for they are already two (or more, and even up to infinity in a complex system of mirrors). Moreover, the image is other to the original in that it is symmetrically mirrored, whereby left and right do resemble each other, but never coincide, as with a pair of Kantian gloves.

The most important difference between the man and his image, however, is that the other – the image – does not exist as an independent person. Rather, the image is possessed by the man standing at the mirror. A possession, the image also possesses him of whom it is the image, thereby making the man dependent on the image and making him struggle with the image, liberate himself from the image and fit into a new imagined one. There is no person in the image, but rather only an imitation of one. The mirrored other can thus repeat and copy the man, and the self in him, only syntactically, not semantically; the image only reproduces the order of reflections and movements (whereby one might assign the primacy of movement to either of them, i.e. to the original or the image), and not the meanings, of that which is expressed or shown.

Yet the mirrored other is also different from the real other of another person. Even if it is difficult to establish argumentatively the “objective reality” of the other person in her irreducible difference to one’s “subjective” other, still such difference is already there in the very attitude towards these two others. Indeed, one’s other, mirrored self is to be taken as insufficient for itself – but the other person is always considered good for me. Since the mirrored other of the self is not good for itself, it is never (yet) the other proper. The other’s self as it is reflected in the mirror is painful and shameful, for it is an ever insufficient self. Hence, the commandment that the self issues to itself is to “love oneself as one’s other (neighbor).”

8. Still, the self does not appear directly accessible to itself, because, first, it is not a particular well-defined thing. And second, since the other self is not yet clearly established with regard to the self as the mirrored other, the reflexivity of self-awareness is not at all immediate, as Descartes takes it to be in the act of the cogito, but is yet a task to be accomplished, and it is to be established in one’s relation to the self as other and to the other as self. The self knows the other as other, i.e. as the other self, or as the not-self; the other knows the self as self; and the self knows that the other knows the self; and the other knows that the self knows that the other knows the self. Reflexivity comes then as a complex process of mutual recognition, negotiation and “othering,” whereby

---

15 On the motive of hatred of and toward oneself in one’s mirror image in Dostoevsky’s “underground man,” see the commentary of S. G. Bocharov in Bakhtin, Sobranie sochineniy, vol. 5, p. 465.
the perspective of the self is never definitively established with absolute certainty. This is why “I do not have a perspective on myself from outside, I do not have an approach to my own inner image.”

9. So the self and the not-self meet “half way through” in an image. The image is the image of the self, which, properly, is neither the self, nor the other of the self.

The image of the self as the other, mirrored self, then, always misrepresented the self, of which, strictly speaking, no image is possible as ultimate and definitive. Any image is a definite image, and as such it closes, it screens and shields that of which it is the image; both the self and its other are seen in the mirrored image. The image prevents the self from being other, it makes the other coincide with itself, and brings it to a “desperation of the finalized and of the ready.” The image hides and veils (and exaggerates) the self to itself in the presence of its other. Thus, the image is an (inescapable and necessary) lie.

And yet, the self can only approach itself, and can only be approached, through an image, though not as an image. To be – the old theme in philosophy – is to be without an image. And yet, no being can escape images and imaging, especially once it attempts to revert to itself, i.e. to be or become reflexive.

10. Hence, when the self is speaking to itself, the image is silent and tacit, but it is only through the image that the self can address itself in its mirrored “othering” and in producing a (self)-observing image. In this respect, the image is similar to the written speech as it is criticized by Alcidamas and later again by Plato: such speech is similar to a painted bronze statue that imitates a living person but that can neither speak, nor answer, nor defend itself.

11. The self and the not-self, then, do not clearly see each other; they always miss each other in and through the mirrored image of the self which constantly moves, always tending to lose its focus and certainty. Rather, the self and not-self call each other in and through the image. Each one has a voice, but their voices are different: the mirrored self has a finalized voice that presents the other self in the way that the mirrored self appears, i.e. as rounded up and finalized. The voice of the self is, on the contrary, indefinite and thus “unfinalizable,” as Bakhtin terms it, because it can always be new and other, due to which, furthermore, the other self is also constantly renewed and “othered.” The two voices sincerely attempt to reach out for each other, but because the one is not finalizable, whereas the other is finalized (and

---

16 Id., “Chelovek u zerkala.”
17 Id., “[Ritorika, v meru svoey lzhivosti…],” p. 67.
18 See Alcidamas, Peri Sophistôn, §27-33 and Plato, Phaedrus 275 d-e.
thus appears as a fully defined subject $S$ with definite predicates $P$’s), thus they never coincide – rather, they struggle and maintain a tension with each other.\textsuperscript{20} The other’s voice is a silenced cry, one that is always only partially heard because of its finalization, and hence its inability to respond properly to the call of one’s voice. The two voices appear to address each other in and through the image. Yet the mirrored other does not reply, the other is looking at himself through the image which hides each one’s other in a desperate attempt to reveal that other. The image which is in between the two, namely between the self and the not-self, is “small;”\textsuperscript{21} it is as though it were always in the process of being refocused, renegotiated, changed, accepted, and rejected.

The voices of the self and of the mirrored, other self, are not symmetrical and neither coincide nor really meet in the image of the self.\textsuperscript{22} Rather, they negotiate and talk to each other – in different, asymmetrical voices. Once the man dares to come to the mirror, to reflect himself for himself and to look into his own eyes, he lets himself out. Mirroring himself, he invites the mirrored other to appear. Together, by looking at each other, they produce their – one’s – “own” image. The man produces the image for the other and in the other. It is hard to say the same about the self’s other, because this other is finalized, and as such it does not have a free voice and \textit{Willkür}.

Thus, the self and the other of the self are other to each other; they are never ultimately brought together into a wholeness and completeness of fusion or identity. The two are different and mutually irreducible, even if both affect each other. The “naïveté of fusion of oneself with the other in the mirror image,”\textsuperscript{23} is such that an aspired “return” to oneself remains a futile hope.

12. Because of this, the other self, which is supposed to help one’s self reflect upon and somehow come to an understanding of that self, fully moves into the “world.”\textsuperscript{24} The “world” then looks at me in my own eyes, but it is neither a given nor a complete whole. In fact, the world as the other – in this case, \textit{my} other – remains hidden “behind” the image. This point of view, namely the view of oneself as self, is thus the meeting point of what is often an obscure speech, a babbling of the self and the other’s mirrored self in the image of the self. In this sense, the eye of the other, which is one’s own reflected eye, is a muddled look that is unable to return one’s glance properly. The image, which is often unfocused, is not yet – and never fully is – defined; it is a meeting “point,” or rather, it is an open “neighborhood,” precisely

\textsuperscript{20} Bakhtin, “[Ritorika, v meru svoey lzhivosti…],” p. 64.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., p. 68.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., p. 67.
\textsuperscript{23} Id., “Chelovek u zerkala.”
\textsuperscript{24} Id., “K voprosam samosoznaniya i samootsenki,” p. 73.
because it is not focused, consisting of two points of view, of two “regards.” The two “looks” that always miss each other, the one being unfinalizable while the other is (all too) well defined, thus establish the sense of the “inner” and the “outer,” in contradistinction to the Cartesian “inner” of the res cogitans and the “outer” of the res extensa.

For Descartes, _ubi cogito, ibi sum_, where I think, there I am, i.e. I am fully there where I think myself as well-defined, whereby I am fully accessible to myself and I am clearly thought by myself. Unlike the Cartesian _ego_, however, the Bakhtinian self in the mirror of self-reflection is never univocally located as being focused in the mirrored image: rather, _ubi cogito, ibi non sum_.

13. Therefore, in any image of oneself there are points of view from both the “inside” and the “outside,” namely those of the self and the not-self of the “world.” Yet, as was said above, the two are not equivalent and they are not symmetrical: the “outside” voice is complete, the look of the other’s eyes always coincides with itself, and it is what it is at this moment, although it can, and probably will, be different in the future, just as it was in the past. The “inside” voice or look, however, because it is always indefinite without the response or echo of the other’s voice, i.e. without a look in return, is deaf without the other’s voice and blind without the mirrored other outside of the self-image; thus it is never complete and never fully thematized. One’s own “inner” point of view, one’s own voice, therefore always has a capacity toward being other without abandoning itself as its self or one’s voice. Even if it is not yet apprehended by itself, the self is not yet finalized; it is never turned into a clearly and univocally known and cognizable object. The capacity of being differently defined while still remaining the same looking eye, the same speaking voice, “explodes” the image, unfocuses and refocuses the image. And yet only in the image does the self meet its other, each time hopelessly renewing its attempt at thematizing and “knowing itself.”

Because of the inescapable partiality of the representation of oneself to oneself in the mirror image, one never fully coincides with oneself in one’s self. In other words, the self cannot be defined, cannot define itself, in finite terms. In particular, this means that in thinking about oneself, any attempt to restore oneself by a rational reflective procedure of reconstruction is partial in the sense of being discursive, when one is never fully and momentarily accessible to oneself as a _cogito_ that is immediately aware of itself. The reflexivity of the self, then, is speculative. Even etymologically, mirror, _speculum_, comes from _speculari_, among whose meanings are “to look around,” “to watch,” and “to spy.” Speculation, which accompanies discursive thinking, implies, due to

---

its reflexivity, that one is watching for oneself, while at the same time always realizing that one does something improper and can never fit itself into an adequately representative image.

14. The self can thus be characterized as unfinalizable; and the other, mirrored self— as rounded up and finalized. If the image is the point or the “neighborhood” where the self meets itself through its own other, thereby always missing itself, then what can be said about the image? The man in the mirror sees his image, which he recognizes as his own because the image seems to obey his intentions of moving and, broadly speaking, his intention to change. Yet, the image is also stubborn and reflects what the man does not intend—and perhaps does not even want—to be reflected. Moreover, as was stated earlier, the image not only discloses one’s self to itself, but it equally also hides it from itself. The live presence of oneself in the act of mirroring both of and with oneself as the other, who is vaguely perceived by the self as actual and alive, is deadened and stiffened because of the incongruence of the self with one’s other self in the mirror image. Being objective and destitute of any “inner,” the image acts “at a remove” or “in one’s absence,” even when one is present to it.26

The image that is in front of one’s eye is in and of one’s eye; it veils the eye from oneself and thus places the reflected eye “behind and outside one’s eyes and one’s gaze” as something that one cannot see in one’s own presence. In a sense, then, the image is nothing, for it only connects the self to the mirrored other, thereby inevitably hiding and disconnecting the one from the other. Being “at a remove,” one’s image is therefore altogether and fully “out” there and lacks any “inside.” But the self wants itself to be somehow known to itself on the “inside,” both as reflected and at ease with itself. Yet what it has, what it sees, is the mirror image “at a remove.” It is not that the image lies—for it tells and shows what it tells. Rather, the image forces one to fit into it by shrinking or extending. The image makes one dependent on the mirrored other,27 which it does by defining the “inner” from the “outside” by connecting the self with the other of the self, which or who is finalized and is

26 In Bakhtin’s terms, the image is “at a remove” (zauchny). Id., Sobranie sochineniy, vol. 5, pp. 66–67 and 69. Caryl Emerson, who made a number of valuable comments to this paper, notes that “‘being at a remove’ [zauchnost’, ‘at a distance,’ literally, behind one’s eyes and thus unseen] is the opposite of being on-hand, available, ready, present as a consciousness and a body that one can touch, interact with, see and respond to without intermediaries [nalichnost’, ‘being on-hand,’ literally, being in front of one’s face, which also translates Hegel’s Dasein as ‘being-there’]. The relevance to the ‘Man at the Mirror…’ is that the categories are subtly, brilliantly interlaced: we look in the mirror hoping to mimic ‘how we look to others,’ but since it is only a single-consciousness-loop, me looking at myself and not me looking at my reflection in the pupils of your eyes, it is both a false being-on-hand and a false being at a remove. Since genuine being on-hand requires you to make me cohere, with borders and edges” (from a personal letter of 25 March, 2004).

27 Bakhtin, “K voprosam samosoznaniya i samootsenki,” p. 73.
thus not really adequate to the self in any sense. By making that which is not
finalizable, namely the self, finalized by the other reflected and mirrored self,
the image thereby always exercises violence. In an attempt to trace himself,
and in fact, to liberate himself from his own preset representation in and by
the other, the man wants “to spot one’s own image at a remove.”

15. If the “inside” meets the “outside,” then both meet and are reflected in
the mirror image in which they never coincide, i.e. the self is never what it is
reflected in and as the image. When the self and the other self meet, they miss
each other in an unfocused neighborhood of the mirror surface. And since
one can never fully fit into one’s own image which is mutually produced by
the self and by its finalized other, then one can never be fully in the world.
The self, then, perceives itself at a tangent to the world, because it is only as
if it touches the world, is into, but never fully in the world. One is thus always
as though at the edge of the world. An attempt to move into the world brings
one to one’s mirror image. It is from an “edge” of, or at a “tangent” to the
world, where one moves toward oneself as reflected in the world. In doing so,
one’s self looks at one’s other touching the other in and through the image.

16. Being at the “edge,” one cannot see one’s own “back,” which is not
immediately perceivable. One needs to reflect, and to be reflected, in order to
realize how one looks, not only from the “front” of the eye, but also from the
“back of the head.” The image of the “back of the head” can only be seen as
objective, and hence as already finalized – only thus can it fit a scientific picture
of the world, which is never complete, but which is definite at any moment.

One’s mirrored or reflected image is always on the surface; it is a thin
film with nothing behind it, with no back and no depth. As such, the mir-
rored image both separates and unites the self and its other, who, in turn, has
neither self-reliance nor independence. The image both reveals the self and
hides the self, because the self is always shown as finalized, as a “this” and as
a fixed thing.

Hence, there is no back to be seen in the mirror, which is why the other
of the self is present as a look of and into one’s eye. Not having a “back,” a
“seamy side,” the image does not have an “inside.” It is all “flat” and on the
“outside,” which coincides with its surface.

Even if adding another mirror and thus arranging a complex system of
reflections might demonstrate one’s “back of the head,” it will still be the

28 Id., “[Ritorika, v meru svoey lzhivosti...],” p. 69.
29 Id., “Chelovek u zerkala.”
31 Id., “[Ritorika, v meru svoey lzhivosti...],” pp. 67-68.
32 “Independence” here renders “Selbstständigkeit,” “nezavisimost.”
same leveled and finalized image with no “back.” Once mirrored, the back of the head in turn acquires its own inaccessible back of the head. When two mirrors are arranged to reflect the “back of the head” and to mirror each other, the image proliferates to infinity by being indefinitely multiplied and still remaining a sheer surface with no depth, with its “dark side” still remaining forever invisible.

17. Being seen and seeing itself through the other in the mirror image, the self perceives itself as associated with a body, which is implied in and by the finalized image. The peculiarity of the “human condition” consists in being embodied, i.e. in being always present to a particular body and mirrored in it (the reason for the association with this particular body as mine remains forever hidden). This body can move in the mirror, but properly speaking, it does not appear to be the man’s body, because, first, his image is fully on the surface (of the mirror) and, second, the image is always partial and fragmented. The body, one’s “outside,” like the world, has no “back of the head;” it is never given to the self in its entirety, as a whole, in any possible act of experience. Yet from the “inside,” one does not perceive oneself as a whole either, but rather only through a fragmented partial reconstruction. The self is thus as if clad in the body that is projected onto the outside mirror image. The contact with the outside body as presented in the mirror is visual, and it is established once the self projects itself as if onto a stage and sees itself acting on that stage, i.e. sees itself as the other who puts himself in the position of the other, like an actor following the directions of a director, who in turn is therefore no different from the actor.

18. The man who sees his body in the mirror wants to see it the way it is, and yet always sees only parts and fragments, and also never sees its “back.” The attempt to see one’s body as an objective image also equally fails, because the image is not free from the self, just as it is not free from the other self. The image is an always moving and renegotiable focus for the meeting of the two, which are thus one without being one.

Looking at one’s image is almost like peeping at one’s own appearance. Watching oneself as if furtively in the mirror thus results in seeing an embarrassing image that one does not want to see, because that which is seen never coincides with the vaguely imagined “inner” image. Spotting “one’s own image at a remove,”33 removing oneself from a narcissistic self-identification, is often a painful experience. The utter strangeness and painfulness of looking at oneself in the mirror makes such an act intimate, and it prohibits the public showing of one’s image, which is often traumatic and humiliating. A student reflected in mirrors during ballet class can only see his inevitable non-coincidence with

33 Id., “Chelovek u zerkala.”
Man at the Mirror (Dialogue with Oneself)

a prescribed image. He thus has to reconstruct his appearance, his own is of a partial, flat image, into a normative other, a required ought of the appearance, which is furthermore supposed to become himself as an even stranger other to his initially reflected other. This makes such a double, or second and imposed other, even more inaccessible, hidden, and alienated from the mirrored other of his body, which is otherwise already fractional and incomplete.

The objectified, standardized and publicly accepted body, as it is hailed and sanctified through common fashion, is thus imposed on one’s own appearance, and onto the mirrored body which is finalized in its every fragment. The reflected body of one’s image is inescapably individual, and hence it can never properly fit the Procrustean bed and requirements of the publicly approved image.

19. When the man decides to stand desperately in front of the mirror and dares to look into it, he puts himself on the stage of the world, as it were, at the same time still attending to himself and being unable to abandon and get lost in his image. A “simple formula” defines one’s attitude towards oneself: “I am looking at myself by and through the eyes of the other, I am evaluating myself from the point of view of the other.”

Since, however, the other self looks at oneself through the image which has neither back nor depth, therefore this other does not possess the fullness of one’s life. But at least the other in one’s mirror image is out there, in the world as a finalized and defined part of the world, i.e. of that which is “objective.” Yet, as was said above, one’s self is at a “tangent” to the world, it moves into the world but is never fully in the world. Because of this, one cannot altogether leave the world. Therefore, one cannot get rid of one’s image, either. Thus, the image of the self, where the never fully definable and finalizable self meets its finalized, definite and defined other, is “out there,” i.e. is “outside.”

The “outsideness” of the image means its utter completion and petrification into a photographic image that will forever stay the same, and while it may, perhaps, be differently interpreted, still it is never able to reveal the unique and personal touch of the photographed person. The “outsideness” of an image signifies its full finalization. The “outsideness” of the self’s image means that it is fully out there and never becomes part of one’s self, even if it affects one’s own perception of oneself and one’s “identity.” In other words, even if one internalizes one’s own mirror image, still that image is never a part of the self, which

---

34 Id., “K voprosam samosoznaniya i samootsenki,” p. 72.
35 Ibid.
is neither fully definable nor ultimately accessible to itself. On the contrary, the outsideness of the real other, i.e. of another person, and the outsideness which is defined by the other’s spatial expression and location, can help one gain an always fresh and new perspective on oneself. The outsideness of the image thus means that the image hides and prevents the imaged – the self – from being newly and differently present to itself through the other.

20. In the last instance, the view of the other’s self concerning oneself comes to one’s image from the self when one dares to become mirrored, and thus to send out his other. Since, as was said above, the image is a sui generis neighborhood where such a view is being constantly refocused, the image always testifies to its non-coincidence with one’s finalized other, who, in turn, is like a target that is always missed by the unfinalizable self. In this sense, the image may be considered as alien and strange, as coming from elsewhere, from “outside,” or from a “nowhere” “behind” the mirror.

If the self is always unfinalized, then any prereflexive “inner” perspective on, or awareness of, oneself, whatever it might be, is too vague and thus cannot be established with any (Cartesian) certainty, which is postreflexive and determined by the completed other of the self. In the reflective and reflected look at oneself, the “inner” look becomes the “outer” in the mirror. Because of its “outside” location, such an “outside” view of the mirror self seems to have a certain “surplus” over an “inner” view of oneself concerning oneself, i.e. to have the privileged position of an observer who can gaze at oneself from different perspectives and points of view.

Because of the other’s “outsideness,” the “surplus of the other” seems inevitable. “From without,” the other self seems to be capable of having another perspective on itself, of seeing what one cannot immediately see. But the surplus is not that of a real other, for the mirrored other cannot

---

37 Id., “[Ritorika, v meru svoey lzhivosti…],” p. 67; see Id., Estetika slovesnogo tvorchestva, Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1979, p. 334.
38 Id., “Chelovek u zerkala.”
39 Id., “[Ritorika, v meru svoey lzhivosti…],” p. 64.
40 Id., “… Chelovek u zerkala.”
41 Id., “[Ritorika, v meru svoey lzhivosti…],” p. 68.
42 The surplus of the mirrored other’s point of view is not even that of the author in a novel, unless one’s self is considered to be its own product and production, where the self is both
assume just any position in order to observe one’s self. The mirror self is positioned by the self in front of itself, for the eye looks straight at itself in an attempt to see and reflect on itself. This eye is one’s own eye, and yet, as mirrored, it is at the same time the other’s eye: “other eyes are gazing from my eyes.”43 And because the other is finalized, the surplus of the mirrored other’s point of view is always and already finalizing, insofar as it fits oneself into a mirror image, which is an image that is still and silent in its “outsideness,” having a finalizing grip on the self, and which, flat and strained, reveals as much as it veils the other of the self.

Dmitri Nikulin
New School for Social Research
nikulind@newschool.edu

the author and the character, and where the two constantly rewrite and redefine each other. This, however, cannot be the case if the other self (the character) is finalized and completed and the self (the author) is not finalized, for in the novel the two are supposed to be equal in their capacity to determine the course of the plot. See Id., “Dostoevsky. 1961,” in Id., Sobranie sochineniy, vol. 5, p. 367.

43 Id., “Chelovek u zerkala.”