



Eye to eye with myself, I lay in bliss: The phenomenology of narcissism in Kate Grenville's *Dark Places*

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Kate Grenville's 1994 novel *Dark Places* is a study in Australian colonial misogyny and the phenomenology of narcissism. Its narrator, the odious Albion Singer, offers an extended account of his obsession with the look of the other. This article explores Singer's relationship with himself and others through Sartrean psychoanalysis. Singer attempts to hide his 'real self' – an absence, or lack – from the look of the other by constructing an elaborate shell through conscious performativity, while simultaneously owning the other's freedom. When this fails, he seeks to destroy the subjectivity of the other in order to escape the shame he experiences at their look and to reject his objectness to them. This exercise must fail, though, for Singer has internalised the look, and he finally sees himself, and his nothingness, and he disintegrates to death.

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Kate Grenville is reputed to be a postcolonial writer critiquing British colonialism in Australia and its pervasive presence in social, historical, and gender constructs (Ashcroft 2010; Bastin 2005; Deane 2014). Her first published novel, *Lilian's Story* (1985), is the tale of Lilian Singer, a Shakespeare-touting Sydney-sider, raped and institutionalized by her father, trying to be the main character in her own story. "Grenville takes a narrative about the patriarchal oppression of women from the Victorian era and skillfully weaves it throughout a narrative closely resembling those of postcolonial oppression, exemplifying many struggles deemed that of the settler and/or the postcolonial subject" (Denison 2015, 26). *Dark Places* (1994), published in the United States as *Albion's Story*, is the prequel and bookend to *Lilian's Story*,

and has “received relatively little critical attention, despite its power. Perhaps this is because neither women nor men wish to see misogyny in such close-up terms” (Sheridan 2010,13). Lilian’s father, the odious Albion Singer, narrates his thoughts in a narcissistic monologue as he encounters himself and others. It is a study in misogyny and in the phenomenology of narcissism, as the monologue offers an extended account of Singer’s obsession with the look. The novel fixates through Singer, some might say *ad nauseum*, on eyes, mirrors, sight, and seeing, and for this reason lends itself to a Sartrean psychoanalysis fueled by *le regard*, the look, describable alternatively as purposed “to reveal the existence of other persons (the ‘other’) precisely as free subjects” (Catalano 1974, 159), as “a social war of mutual objectification” (Murphy 1987, 115), and as the “first phobia of the neurotic” (De Lacoste 2004, 44).

Sartrean psychoanalysis is presented in a far from systematic manner throughout Jean-Paul Sartre’s massive oeuvre. The purpose of Sartrean psychoanalysis is to “grasp an individual’s *fundamental project of being*,” with this project being “an original gut-level bodily-lived conscious *choice* of a way of being in the world” (Cannon 2013, 94). In *Search for a Method* Sartre (1968, 106) states that “a life develops in spirals; it passes again and again by the same points but at different levels of integration and complexity.” Sartrean phenomenology eliminates a ‘real self’ or a ‘solidified ego,’ as “once the world and empirical subjectivity have been excluded through the *epoché* [bracketing], there is no such residual ego to be found” (Onof 2013, 45). Self therefore is a “fundamental lack of being (nothingness or *no thingness*),” and the project of being, “what I make myself to be in choosing the person I am in what I do” (Crittendon 2013, 152), “is motivated by the desire to fill the fundamental lack. It is the desire to use objects and other people to create a substantialized self” (Cannon 2013, 81).

Sartre’s principle finding is that “I get my most vivid and compelling sense of myself when I see myself reflected in the eyes of another” (Detmer 2008, 92). The object seen by me can be replaced by a subject who sees me. “‘Being-seen-by-the-Other’ is the *truth* of ‘seeing-the-Other’” (Sartre 1993, 257). In looking, we become aware of our own objectivity, our consciousness being both “a pure point of view on the world” and “also an object within it” (Detmer 2008, 92). With the appearance of the other I “pass judgment on myself as an object” and “I become a new being, a being for others” (Sartre 1993, 222). The look is inescapable, and the other limits our freedom, but we also need the other to realize our own being. Sartre calls this being seen by the other ‘shame,’ and shame can in turn induce several possible responses, with two extremes: I “either try to be the only subject while making the other a mere object or I try to be a certain kind of object in the eyes of the other — or I alternate between the two” (Cannon 2009, 196-197). Any position which ‘solidifies’ the ego “serves the purpose of giving me at least a sense of identity. It allows me to imagine that I am *something* and to avoid the *nothingness* that I actually am” (Cannon 2013, 86). Overemphasizing facticity like this, “trying to make myself into a solid something,” could lead to depression or narcissism, while the opposite, denying any solidity and pretending to be “absolutely free” could lead to mania or psychosis (Cannon 2013, 87).

Singer’s story is, possibly, a description of one such distortion. His

fundamental project is driven by his original choice. He chooses to believe he is the lack his father's look tells him he is, and he chooses to believe he is the performance with which he cloaks that lack. He constructs an elaborate shell through conscious performativity, while simultaneously attempting to own the other's freedom. When this fails, as it does in a repeating spiral throughout his life, he destroys the subjectivity of the other in order to escape the shame he experiences at their look and to reject his objectness to them. Singer's project must fail, though, for he has internalized the look, and at the end of his life, with no-one left to look at him but himself, Singer integrates a moment of pure reflection, seeing the nothingness at the heart of being, and he disintegrates to death.

The Original Choice and the Fundamental Project of Being

Singer's original choice is to accept that he really is the "ant-like" disappointment, the lack, his father experiences him as. Just as Sartre suggests in his psychobiography of Jean Genet, when called a thief as a child, Genet made the choice to undertake "the project of *being* an outlaw" (Detmer 2008, 175), so too Singer undertakes the project of being the absence between presence and appearance. Singer knows he is fat. He feels his fat rolls in the bath (Grenville 1994, 1). When, contrary to facticity, his father says he is all muscle, Singer learns that he is fundamentally a lack. He is not what he is, and he is to be what he is not, and he becomes the division between a 'self' and its carapace. Though the novel does not describe an event in which Singer's father tells him outright 'You are nothing,' as with the statement which moved Flaubert from "prereflective enjoyment of play-acting to see himself as one who might come to be defined as an actor," it is easier to believe it was said than it wasn't (Barnes 1981, 101). His first lesson is in deception of self and other, and Singer's fundamental project, to be a deceptive performer, springs immediately from his original choice. Like Flaubert in Sartre's *Family Idiot*, in the make-believe Singer "will seek to find himself by passing from the painful intuition, 'I am nothing but the roles which I play,' to the proud cry, 'I am a person whose real mission is to play roles' (1:785). He will *be* a 'producer of images'" (Barnes 1981, 102). Singer *is* a lack, and he *is* a role-player.

Singer is partnered in his project by a world of mirrors. Mirrors are of two types, the actual and the human, and they split his narcissistic self-assessment across flat and human objects in an 'accessory reflection,' the "attempt to reflect on the self in order to fix myself as a certain kind of object" (Cannon 2009, 198). 'Actual' mirrors serve as practice grounds for his shell. As a child he "did a lot of watching of [him]self," he tells himself who he is, and models himself on the boys and men in his environment who possess traits suited to social survival (Grenville 1994, 7-8, 20, 54, for example). He rehearses the claim that he is a family man in front of the mirror and, he says, "in the end I came to believe" (Grenville 1994, 197). He believes his performance of gentleman, son, husband and father, and he believes he is his performance. "That person in the mirror has been so many solid things," he says. "He has been all these things with exceptional completeness, and has convinced the world, and himself" (Grenville 1994, 1-2). In a telling scene at the brothel he visits, Singer approves the self he has constructed.

I was a giant among men, and afterwards I stared into the tiny

mirrors stitched onto the silk of Agnes' wrapper, each one smaller than my own eyeball, and saw a dark glooming shape I knew must be the reflection of my own eye. Eye to eye with myself, I lay in bliss with Agnes. (Grenville 1994, 159)

In contrast to the self-constructing mirrors, every human object Singer sees is a potentially free subject who can look back and see his lack. The eyes of others are always "avid on my face," "watching me tiresomely" (Grenville 1994, 368). Men "watch you like hawks at the Club, and I had felt recently that everyone there . . . was scrutinising me as I ate my steak-and-kidney or read my newspaper" (Grenville 1994, 359). This intense awareness of being-looked-at is traceable to his father's advice to him as a boy: "'you must never forget that God is watching you. You are never unobserved'" (Grenville 1994, 5). Singer Senior's God is the look. "[T]he Other is present everywhere, below me, above me, in the neighboring rooms, and I continue to feel profoundly my being-for-others . . . if each creak announces to me a look, this is because I am already in the state of being-looked-at" (Sartre 1993, 277).

The look is not tied to physical eyes. It can be a snapped twig, a window, a creak on the stairs (Sartre 1993, 364). For Singer the look is often laughter, of a kookaburra or of women (Grenville 1994, 371, 243), who are always, even if they aren't, laughing at him. When he returns home randomly, as is his practice, to ensure the women in his household are behaving, he stands in the hall, and the feeling of a house full of women made him "vividly aware of the animal maleness of me tucked away beneath my clothes" (Grenville 1994, 230). Singer is engrossed in the feel of himself as the only male organ in the house of women. A "sudden loud burst of female laughter" comes from behind him, he sees himself in the mirror and trips over. "And of course it was just a trick of the acoustics in this hall: there was no one behind me, watching and laughing to see me in disarray" (Grenville 1994, 230). When another "gust of mocking laughter" comes from the women, Singer admits that there "was something about standing here in this gleaming draughty place, hearing laughter on the other side of a closed door, I did not like: I had to resist the impulse to check my fly-button" (Grenville 1994, 231).

These accounts of being watched are a projection of Singer's self-look, as is his ability to 'mind read' others' thoughts of him and of those who are a narcissistic extension of him. His puny son is an outward sign of the lack which Singer tries to hide. "I saw men look at me and look at John, and when they smiled at John it seemed to be there was something patronising there for me: *Poor old Singer, he seems right enough, but you only have to look at the boy to see the real story*" (Grenville 1994, 200). When John is born, his small penis and shriveled form causes Singer concern, for others will look at him with pity, wondering "what my own organ of generation was like, to have produced what was on display before us" (Grenville 1994, 139). Lilian's humungous physicality, including her large breasts and forthright behaviour, make her an embarrassing spectacle for Singer (Grenville 1994, 246, 257). Even after he has her committed, he feels the men at his Club "scrutinising" him. "*His daughter is in the madhouse, you know, I knew they were telling each other*" (Grenville 1994, 359). Prior to this he stops taking Lilian to his Club because he imagines the men are saying, "*Did you get an eyeful of Singer's daughter . . . Did you get*

a look at the chest on her? . . . It's a scientific fact . . . Big tits mean they love it" (Grenville 1994, 236). At a company picnic Singer watches Lilian "drawing attention to her chest in an unfortunate way" and knows "I was not the only male watching her over-eager efforts" (Grenville 1994, 251, 256). The observations Singer makes about Lilian serve two purposes. One is to suture his own incestuous gaze into the subjectivity of other men, so that it appears it is other men, and not Singer, who sexualize Lilian (see Heath 1981, 13 on suturing). The other purpose is that of the narcissist protesting at the criticism he attracts through the extensions of his person, his children. John's and Lilian's putative failures expose Singer to the look, where the look of the other is Singer's self-look 'exposing' his original lack.

Singer tries to skirt this ever-present look in several ways. He cultivates shallow interpersonal relations seeking to replicate the experience of looking at himself in a mirror, and he remains constantly guarded. Women, especially, are flattened reflective surfaces. He can feel women "watching my fine manly back" (Grenville 1994, 334). At a party a clever woman tries to entice him, and gazes into his eyes. Singer says, "With clever sparkling kinds of women like this one, I knew I would always be anxious" (Grenville 1994, 84). Though Singer thinks he "had never looked as deep or as long into anyone's eyes" as he does when he merges with his closest friend Ogilvie (Grenville 1994, 183), Ogilvie too receives a performance of masculine friendship, and Singer uses him, whom he deems to have no hollow parts, to further construct an ideal masculinity, even copying the sounds he makes in the brothel (Grenville 1994, 183). He must be in control of all situations and dreads, for example, anything out of the planned way happening at his wedding: "I would simply be exposed. Everyone would know that I was just a husk that had learned a few tricks" (Grenville 1994, 95).

Singer's defensive strategy is coupled with an effective offense. He also subjects the other to his scrutiny. By observing and critiquing everyone around him, Singer is able to retain his position as the primary subject. His family are never free from his scrutiny, and he even sneaks into and around the house to observe them unobserved (Grenville 1994, 228). Singer's fixation on facts buttresses his objectification of the other. He envies those who lived before him, "who seemed to know almost nothing, and who could therefore easily digest the entire store of facts in existence" (Grenville 1994, 7). The world is only as large as the facts by which it is made up. In order for a person to be reducible to an object, Singer must resist 'transphenomenality,' the idea that "things infinitely overflow our descriptions of them" (Detmer 2009, 52). Facts are certain (Grenville 1994, 7), and if a fact is a solid object, and a person is only a collection of facts, a person is an object, and Singer's solidified ego is certain too.

Singer wishes to be admired but not seen, and he creates himself to hide himself. He needs the other to reflect the carefully constructed son, father, and husband, the pillar of the community, and the business man, but when the ideal mirror relationship fails, as it must, the relationship becomes conflictual and he seeks to destroy the subjectivity of the other so that he cannot be an object to them. There are three primary relational mirrors in the novel, all of whom are destroyed by Singer when he can no longer control their reflection: Norah, his

wife; Lilian, his daughter; and, finally, Albion himself.

Norah

Women are grotesque. Their bodies bulge and ooze, and even Singer's female baby has a great swollen cleft, and shudders and groans as she defecates (Grenville 1994, 132, 135-136). Women are beastly, their feminine trappings merely shaping the underlying beast, and a true man is one who can dominate "dogs, horses and women" (Grenville 1994, 140). While Singer reduces women to their animal fleshiness throughout the novel, slabs of meat and mooing, or to their synecdochal nipples, it is the motif of the hole or void that recurs most noticeably, and for Singer as for Sartre, "the obscenity of the feminine sex is that of everything which 'gapes open'" (Sartre 1993, 613).

'Tell me, Norah, how is a woman to be made happy? How is she to be made whole, or rather how is she to be made no longer hole?' I had to laugh at my joke, and being so witty made me feel gentle toward those warm knees, which I knew to be dimpled and white, and connected to other dimple and white lengths of soft flesh culminating in the whole of my wife's hole. (Grenville 1994, 113)

Singer retains his schoolboy squeamishness of the "gaping slit like a mouth . . . a gap, a hole where any proper normal person had a thing you could hold in your hand" (Grenville 1994, 17). From his wife to the women in the street to his own mother, a woman is an animal wrapped around her hollow cavity (Grenville 1994, 234). He reduces two female acquaintances in the street to their body parts – thighs, mouths, breasts, "and between those four thighs were two womanly clefts, moist and attentive, waiting" (Grenville 1994, 334-335). He sees the tongue in the mouth as a lewd invitation. "After the mouth had finished with the words it did not quite close over the teeth and that fleshy tongue, and between those thighs, hot under mauve silk, another mouth was also ajar" (Grenville 1994, 335). He imagines Lilian sucking her friend Duncan into the "void between her thighs" (Grenville 1994, 316).

The 'void' between a woman's legs is linked to the greater void within, one which echoes the void within Singer, but which, unlike his own void, is fillable. Men can fill a woman's hole. Singer can himself fill them with his magnificent male organ, or his seed, or his homunculi (Grenville 1994, 96, 169, 151). Norah also fills her hole with hobbies, painting, embroidery, and time-keeping. Singer's hole in contrast is unfillable. His wife "looked within herself and saw a living being; I looked within myself and saw nothing" (Grenville 1994, 150). As a child, his mother "brought comfort to my hollowness, filling it slyly every night" with sweets (Grenville 1994, 8). As an adult, "herding" facts into his brain shrank the "void at the heart of things," but no matter how many facts he collects he "could never be filled" (Grenville 1994, 282, 151).

Norah's hollowness swallows Singer on their wedding night, and his hollowness, even hollower than usual, becomes visible to her. After ejaculating into Norah's "receptacle" he is at his hollowest and weeps at his emptiness (Grenville 1994, 97). He tells Norah he is nothing, an empty shell, and "[a]round me and in my head the voids were beginning to spin and hum and I was full of nothing but fear: my being was whirling in great blasts of the wind of

nothingness” (Grenville 1994, 97). He clutches at Norah to stop his soul “sinking into blackness” (Grenville 1994, 98). Here is a moment of pure reflection, “as the simple presence of the consciousness reflecting to the consciousness reflected on” (Cannon 1991, 150).

Purifying reflection may lead to what Sartre refers to as the “psychological instant”— which he describes as a moment of “double nothingness” in which self and world change together (Sartre, 1943, p.600). I find that I am no longer what I was, and that I am no longer in the process of becoming what I was about to become. I take a different perspective on both past and future. It is as though I am suspended over an abyss, grasping in order to let go and letting go in order to grasp a new way of being in the world. (Cannon 2009, 198)

The psychological instant is however not integrated, for Singer tangles the insights of pure reflection with his original choice, and consequently flees from the no-thing which would allow him to “grasp a new way of being.” Norah does not want to have sex again and pushes Singer away, causing Singer to loathe himself “for [his] weakness, that she had seen and rejected,” and he is overwhelmed by fear, and rapes Norah (Grenville 1994, 98). Pushing the fear and self-loathing back onto Norah halves the fear he feels, and when he feels Norah’s “fear greasy under my palms on her skin and I could reject her then...and I felt no fear now myself” (Grenville 1994, 99).

Fearing he has been stripped back and exposed as a lack, he rapes his wife to draw her gaze away from his self-revelatory actions and words, and to reclaim his position as primary-subject by robbing her of her freedom. When encountering the other-mirror as a subject offering uncontrollable reflection, Singer must destroy the mirror’s subjectivity, returning it again to an object reflecting his preferred performance. This is an experience he will spiral back to at the end of his life, and also when his preferred mirror, his daughter Lilian, reaches adulthood. That experience also leads to sexual violence, but as Singer has groomed Lilian for ‘masculine’ solidity built on facts, and views her most fully of all the people in his life as a narcissistic extension of himself, the outcome of that rape is Singer’s self-birth.

Lilian

Lilian is large like Singer, and uncaring of the performance of femininity (Denison 2015, 29). She appears to him to have been born “with unbreakable will: it was not something she needed to learn” (Grenville 1994, 241). Lilian appears to his eyes unsuited to the role of woman, and having deemed femininity inferior to masculinity, he chooses to train Lilian in the ways and words of men, and specifically to treat her as he would a son worthy of the position. Lilian is “a chip off the old block,” the only female in his life who is not the “mysterious other,” and “[e]mbedded within that gross casing of flesh, blurred but unmistakable, were my own features” (Grenville 1994, 203). He sees himself in Lilian and believes she sees her own mirror image in her father, adores him, and offers him “the ferocity of love” (Grenville 1994, 201, 204). Lilian is the person to whom Singer looks to understand his subjectivity, the mirror who holds the secret of who he is. No one could “begin to imagine the way we felt ourselves slide in and out of each other’s beings, gazing into the distorting mirror of each other” (Grenville 1994, 204).

Singer assumes it is a relationship of complicity, that Lilian looks also to him as her mirror, and when it becomes clear that she does not the relationship of ‘complicity’ devolves into one of conflict. “Ah, Lilian,” he thinks to himself, “my daughter, you glanced at my head at the end of the table, so substantial with facts and its own magnificence, and you did not find me beloved, although you did not fear me either. Perhaps, worst of all, you found me only ridiculous” (Grenville 1994, 286). In her blank staring eyes Singer is an ant, something he has known himself to be from his earliest years, and she will not even do her father the honor of using him as her mirror (Grenville 1994, 6, 303). When he notices that Lilian develops a glint in her eye that says, “*I am finer of spirit than you,*” Singer states ominously, “I was going to crush that glint” (Grenville 1994, 289).

Singer takes to spying on Lilian and escapes detection by making himself invisible (Grenville 1994, 306, 307, 309), but after he sees that Lilian is her own transcendent subject, it is not Singer who makes himself invisible any more.

If I had spoken – *Look over here, Lilian, here I am*– and she had turned, I felt with a chill that she would not have recognised me. Once, in fact, as she glanced back at Duncan, it seemed to me that her eyes met mine, but the awareness of me was pushed away like a bit of flotsam, and her eyes skidded over me. She looked, but she did not see. (Grenville 1994, 325)

Duncan and Lilian are the “most convincing elements” in that pastoral scene, in contrast to Singer who has “become transparent . . . scooped hollow by invisibility and silence . . . of no account, simply a husk waiting for decay” (Grenville 1994, 327). In that moment he has as much potential for subjectivity as does “a few molecules clinging to the bark of a tree” (Grenville 1994, 326).

As with Norah on their wedding night, it is this moment of objectness which leads Singer to reclaim his subjectivity through sexual violence. The rape however does not come ‘out of the blue.’ Singer has long sexualized Lilian. He believes she flirts with him as a one year old (Grenville 1994, 136), and since he first noticed that she was filled with herself in contrast with his empty interior, that covert incest has been threaded through with the threat of sexual violence. The “intriguing fact” he reveals about the organ of the male pig, for example, is violently incestuous.

‘The organ of generation of the male pig is curved, and as sharp as a knife. What he does is to more or less slice his way into his sow.’ . . . Her own flesh was safe at this moment pressed against, in the first instance, Mark Foy’s best pure silk cami-knickers . . . But behind her stony face she must be imagining how it might feel to have a man cut her open. (Grenville 1994, 293)

Grenville also positions Lilian’s rape as parallel to and presaged by Norah’s. The kinship designator “flesh of my flesh” is used four times in the novel: once of Singer’s sister Kristabel; twice of Norah; and once of Lilian (Grenville 1994, 94, 99, 253, 323). Norah is named “flesh of my flesh” prior to and after she is raped, and Lilian is named “flesh of my flesh” the day before Singer rapes her. Norah’s and Lilian’s rapes differ however in that Lilian is an even greater threat to Singer’s subjectivity and is potentially the ‘ultimate object’ through which Singer can regain his position as primary subject.

The sexually violent nadir of their failed mirror relationship begins with a scene similar to that of the peeping tom in *Being and Nothingness*, “one of the greatest philosophical myths” (Barnes 1981, 22). Singer watches Lilian in the bathroom through a gap where the door is not completely closed (Grenville 1994, 337). He is “nothing but silent cells moving over each other” (Grenville 1994, 338). In Sartrean terms, “there is no self to inhabit [his] consciousness” (Sartre 1993, 259) as he watches Lilian watch herself in three mirrors. Lilian too is wholly engrossed in her own image reflected in the three mirrors before her, and she engages in the same self-construction her father once did. With six breasts and rolls upon rolls of fat, Lilian is presented to us as a fecund goddess. She winks at herself “as if at a lover . . . Oh, she loved herself!” (Grenville 1994, 339). He watches her try to see inside her vagina – “the girl was actually trying to see in!” he exclaims, and “she was actually tasting her own slime! It was enough to make anyone sick” (Grenville 1994, 340-341). Both are engrossed in acts of pure subjectivity until Lilian, possibly because Singer’s “disgust crackled with audible sparks,” sees her father watching her, and both Lilian and Singer are now caught in the look, “eye-to-eye” in the mirror (Grenville 1994, 341). Singer pushes through the door and enters, accusing, “You are vile and degenerate” (Grenville 1994, 341). He refuses to feel the shame of the look, instead projecting it onto the subject whose look threatens him.

Singer attacks Lilian and renders her an ‘it,’ her eyes, “the eyes,” no longer human (Grenville 1994, 342-343). His daughter who withstood his beatings and “would never be hollow” had “turned out to be hollow, and it had only taken a single touch to burst her bubble” (Grenville 1994, 218, 352). Lilian is the subject destroyed, no longer even a human mirror and potential subject, but as much a blank reflective surface as the mirrors on the wall that Singer prefers to the clever eyes of clever women. He destroys her Willendorf self-look and colonizes it with his own. In contrast to their eye-to-eye contact prior to the act, eye-to-eye after the rape “all I could see was more of myself, two tiny versions of Albion Gidley Singer looking back at me” (Grenville 1994, 343). His vision of himself, Albion Gidley Singer, in the Lilian object’s mirrors is repeated in the bathroom mirrors, symbolizing his master over her gaze: “I looked fearlessly into the mirror, and it was myself looking out from the eyeball-sockets I saw there. It seemed that Albion Gidley Singer and myself had undergone some type of fusion” (Grenville 1994, 344).

Raping Lilian has momentarily, though perhaps illusorily, closed the gap between the product of his accessory reflection and the original choice which drives it. Singer believes he gives birth to himself through the act of rape. By destroying his daughter, he believes he creates himself anew. Sheridan states that the rape “is a classic male fantasy of self-creation, achieved by annihilating the actual woman to claim life-creating power for himself” (Sheridan 2010, 13). With Lilian now an empty body, Singer’s “inner man” could come out, his performed shell could leave, and “leave in charge of this situation the nameless secret speck of being who lived within” (Grenville 1994, 343). It would seem that during Lilian’s rape, Singer retreats from his organising ego, that collection of self-beliefs applied to prereflective consciousness, or which according to Lacan is the repository of the learned behaviours and thoughts between the unconscious and the world, and recognizes, for a moment, that he is not in fact his performativity. Through Singer’s peak moment of raping Lilian he is able to

replace the father's look with his own. He is no longer the ant-like disappointment his father thought him, but "a being who did not need words, or a past, or a future, or any kind of stories spun around himself" (Grenville 1994, 343).

Albion

Betty Cannon states that the purpose of psychoanalysis is to induce just such a moment of self-awareness, where the subject comes to know through pure reflection that they are not in fact their original choice or their fundamental project, leading to a radical conversion (Cannon 2009, 197). Singer's mystical experience, his "epiphany of flesh" (Grenville 1994, 344), is not integrated and no such conversion is attained. Post-epiphany Singer continues to perform, gentlemanliness, grief at Norah's death, the absence of grief at his mother's, family bonhomie for anyone who might be listening at the madhouse door. He worries about others seeing him, for example the men at his Club scrutinizing him as he reads and eats, or the local residents bringing him stories of Lilian's escapades (Grenville 1994, 346, 349-350, 359). But he also claims he is authoritative and recognized, lusted after and solid (Grenville 1994, 351-355). Singer has failed to redo his fundamental project of being, and even after Lilian is committed, people have left and died, and finally Singer is alone in his house but for a deaf servant who provides no echo to testify to his being, when Singer claims he is "free at last" to be his "true self" (Grenville 1994, 369, 368), he continues with a performance of Man in place of his prior performance of Family Man.

"Something," though, "had happened to facts while I had my back turned being a *family man*" (Grenville 1994, 361). There are no things, but the absence of things, and things are "in fact composed of millions of tiny particles of absolutely nothing at all" (Grenville 1994, 361). His family are "breaking down into their constituent parts of their nothingness" (Grenville 1994, 361). Even his 'true self,' the Man, seems to be disintegrating, and he sometimes "drops off" from being Albion Gidley Singer (Grenville 1994, 369). Without his family around him, who have either died or been driven away, there are no women or weakling men through which to reclaim his sense of primary subject, and no human mirrors to reflect his being, and Singer feels he is shrinking to nothingness (Grenville 1994, 372). The walls, the things in his house, start to seethe and teem. Singer's experience is that of Roquentin in Sartre's *Nausea*, who loses his "sense of things, and now the world appears to him as utterly unstable" (Hough 2012, 99). He suffers consequently with nausea, a "pathological intuition of the way things are" (Rolls and Rechniewski 2006, 2).

This state of 'nausea' is caused by an ontological intuition that gradually dawns on Roquentin: in a climactic moment he realizes that the self, as well as the world through which that 'self' moves, lacks a substantial nature, essence or fixed features, and that his attempts to label and categorize himself, and the world, merely covers up this reality. (Hough 2012, 99)

For a man like Singer who has spent his life owning things through facts, this insight into the transphenomenality of things is especially debilitating.

Singer is unable to construct himself through his reflection. At first it

simply brings him no comfort (Grenville 1994, 373), then it is another person, different than him, “the man in the mirror” whose brown shoe advances toward him (Grenville 1994, 374). Looking into “what could only be my own face in the mirror,”

I was melting away into the void that surrounded me, that hissing whiteness that had always lain at the centre of all things, where there were no voices, no eyes, no reflections: just the void at the heart of self. Loss rose in me like nausea. (Grenville 1994, 374)

Singer’s death scene parallels Norah’s rape scene. On his wedding night he says, “Around me and in my head the voids were beginning to spin and hum and I was full of nothing but fear: my being was whirling in great blasts of the wind of nothingness” (Grenville 1994, 97). Nothingness can only be revealed to purifying reflection (Sartre 1943, 273), and on both of these occasions of pure reflection Singer encounters his self-as-nothingness. He comes to understand that, like the very walls of his house, he lacks an essential nature.

On his wedding night, when he confuses the nothingness of the self with the defect his father saw in him, and he fears Norah sees it and deems it a weakness, he is able to project his shame onto Norah and reclaim his preferred, constructed subjectivity by making her an object. In the moments before he rapes Lilian he projects the shame of the look onto her, and destroys her subjectivity as he did Norah’s, through sexual violence. As he rapes Lilian he experiences a moment of pure reflection, becomes aware that he does not need all the fictions and performances of self, but he is unable to integrate that insight. On this final night of his life Norah is dead, everyone is gone, and Singer is alone with his eyes. Without another person to objectify, and to create himself through, Singer cannot avoid “the void at the heart of self.”

He has spiraled through pure reflection three times, each time through a human mirror, Norah, Lilian, and himself, but it is only this last time which ‘takes.’ The “transparency I had become” is aware of someone else’s eyes watching from the mirror. It is the solid Albion Gidley Singer, he of the “splendid head . . . son, brother, father, husband, pillar of the community, leading man of business” (Grenville 1994, 376). The person developed through accessory reflection is necessarily an object, an “it.” What is left after separating the product of accessory reflection who used to go by the name Albion Singer recognizes that Albion Singer is not just a collocation of parts played, a choice to play parts, but that he had made of himself an object. What is left of Albion Singer is caught in the self-look through the mirror and directs its consciousness toward itself, sees the nothingness at the heart of everything, and disintegrates to death.

Conclusion

Singer constructs his self through the human and actual mirrors around him. As befits the paradox of narcissism, the quality of the look of the other is both inflating and deflating. Singer’s performativity is toward the impossible project of escaping the look of the other, and stems from his original choice, which is to accept that he is the lack his father thinks he is. He also destroys the subjectivity of the other in a failed attempt to escape their look, and Singer’s most serious cases of sexual violence occur in response to the shame he feels

when he thinks he is seen. He finally captures himself in the look and, with no way to break free of this look in which he realises his void, this is the moment of his death.

Grenville uses the character to critique Victorian colonialism, and to show that colonization is not only geopolitical but also inter- and intrapersonal. There is no doubt that Singer is a comedic villain. He is not intended to be a sympathetic figure, but an exercise in conjecture about what could possibly lead a man to rape his daughter, a problem set up in *Lilian's Story*, published almost a decade prior to *Dark Places*. *Dark Places* suggests that the logic of the male fantasy of totalizing fullness, a fantasy which can never be satisfied, culminates in rape (Marion May Campbell, Personal communication to author, July 7, 2016).

It is difficult to tell therefore whether *Dark Places* offers a fertile reading through Sartrean psychoanalysis because Sartrean phenomenology and psychoanalysis is well placed to deconstruct colonizing relationship, or because the ontology and interpersonal relations which are at the core of Sartrean phenomenology, and consequently of Sartrean psychoanalysis, are the very things Grenville is critiquing. How is it possible to differentiate narcissism and non-narcissism if all being is the fundamental project of constructing the self through the look of the other, and how is it possible to differentiate 'ordinary' and 'extra-ordinary' relationship if all relationship is a cold war? When approached through Sartrean perspectives on relationships with self and other, Singer might be less a conflicted narcissistic than the fictionalization of the ordinary struggles of ordinary people, only evidencing more self-awareness than most.

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