

Dog in the mirror stage

*An imaginary dialogue between Jacques Lacan and Charles Bukowski*

Charles sat down on someone else's chair, in someone else's kitchen, reached for the carton of beer, removed a bottle with an expert twist of the wrist.

"But the beer is my own, Hank. When I turn up at someone's place, I bring my own beer", he said to someone else's dog.

Hank's ears darted up and he turned his head to the side at the sound of the pop as the lid came away from the bottle.

"It's just too white in this kitchen, Hank, I don't know how you stand it."

The chair scraped across the lino as Charles got up, lumbered into the living room.

"You can come right in," he called, seeing the dog hesitate behind him in the reflection of the floor-to-ceiling mirror. The floor-to-ceiling-mirror covered the entire back wall of the living room.

With his feathered tail held high, Hank entered on light, white paws.

"Look at you, just wonderfully confident; wonderfully ignorant about how the world really is," said Charles, admiring the dog. He flopped with a grunt into the armchair.

Hank trotted up the mirror and came to a halt in front of it. He stood there with his ears pricked forwards, his tail waving.

"You seen another dog that you think you might like?" asked Charles with a chuckle. "Why don't you go right on up and see how he smells? Go on, go right up there and sniff his bum!"

Hank's ears rotated towards the sound of Charles' voice behind him.

Charles continued to urge Hank to greet and sniff his reflection.

Hank sat down where he was, gazing at his image.

"Goodness gracious! What is this! Narcissism revisited?"

Hank raised his eyes and met Charles' eyes in the mirror.

"Well, I'll be damned!" said Charles in amazement.

Hank's attention fell back on the image of the dog in the mirror. He flickered his long, feathered tail around himself, and watched himself flick his long, feathered tail around himself.

Jacques entered the living room wearing a green, Alpine Austrian hat, from under which a mass of black curls spilled out and danced wildly as he moved. A small woman with big, dark eyes, and long, dark hair moved in after him, dangling her shoes by their slender leather straps off one of her fingers.

“Charles, good evening to you, and to you too sir”, said Jacques, nodding at the dog who had trotted up to greet him.

“-Hank,” said Charles.

“Charles - and Hank - this is Helen; Helen, this is my dear, sometimes intelligent friend, Charles.”

Charles nodded and gestured towards them both with his beer bottle. “You look like a dark-haired version of Odysseus,” he said.

“Who me, or Chaque?” said Helen

“You my dear, are definitely Helen. I mean Chaque.”

Helen flushed red.

“Go on, sit down! The couch is grand!” said Charles.

Helen curtsied, sat, and gratefully turned her attention towards Hank who had pushed his head gently into her lap, his tail waving.

“Think of me more like Bacchus,” said Jacques, depositing two bottles of red wine on the mantelpiece.

Charles grimaced and then smiled.

“So, whose place are we in this evening, Charles?” said Jacques turning around from the mantelpiece and running his hands up and down his torso and looking around the room.

“A friend of mine’s,” said Charles belligerently.

“Oh, and what is he like?” said Jacques, moving towards the glass cabinet. He carefully selected a large wine glass and flicked his finger against it - “Crystal: nice.”

“He’s nice... look at his dog... I always say you can tell a man by his dog.”

Jacques selected three large wine glasses and made his way back to the mantelpiece. “Hmm....” said Jacques, setting the glasses down on the mantelpiece. “What, then, should I think about a man who has no dog - of his own? ”

“What is this? Who are you to come in here insulting me like that!”

Hank pulled his head out of Helen’s hands” and looked around fearfully.

“Look, you’ve upset Hank!” complained Charles. “He’s quite a dog, is Hank: he knows himself in the mirror.”

“Nonsense!” said Jacques over his shoulder as he bent over and delivered a glass into Helen’s hands, raised his eyebrows at her, which made the dimples in her cheeks form. He stood up and very seriously poured the wine into her glass, holding the bottle high above. Helen gasped as the long, slender line of red wine crashed expertly into the crystal bowl of her glass. Jacques strode back to the mantelpiece, selected a second glass, and moved towards Charles.

“Just the wine, please, no performance,” growled Charles.

“A dog cannot recognize itself in the mirror!” pronounced Jacques.

“This one can.”

“Are you saying that Hank looks into the mirror and conceives of himself?”

“I’m saying that the dog sees his image, and recognizes that it is he!”

“Hank has no concept of self,” said Jacques, meeting Charles’ gaze and withholding the wine.

“Pour, Bacchus, pour!” urged Charles.

Jacques poured the wine and said, “How can a dog have a concept of self if the dog doesn’t have the means to define categories?”

Charles thrust his glass up towards the bottle, as if chasing the flow of the wine to source would increase the quantity he could capture in his glass.

“Hank has no symbols, Charles, no language,” said Jacques, keeping the bottle firmly upright and leading the way back to the mantle piece with it.

“That’s your problem, Charles; symbols, symbols, symbols: so many symbols that you never get to the damn subject!” shouted Charles at Jacques and the retreating bottle.

Hank, for whatever reason, ran out of the room. They heard him exit through the dog-door into the yard.

“You see, if you two would just leave him be - he’d relax and return to the mirror!”

“Maybe he’s self-conscious to look at himself in the mirror while we’re all here,” ventured Helen.

“Oh, my dear, beautiful Helen, do you really think that Hank is self-conscious?” asked Jacques with a flourish.

Helen sat with her enormous dark eyes hovering over the wine glass, her little hands spread beneath the bowl of the glass, as if the whole contraption was too heavy to support by the stem alone. She chewed her lip and pondered this dazzling man with growing ambivalence; “Well, he is conscious... Isn’t he?”

“What do you think, Charles; is Hank conscious?” asked Jacques. He was standing in the middle of the room, pivoting on his feet between the two speakers. He held the stem of his wine glass out from his torso, his little finger and the one next to it fanned out.

“He’s conscious. Of course, he’s conscious!” growled Charles. “Poor thing.”

Charles sat and looked at his wine glass, and noticed that it was empty. Jacques, sensing Helen’s ambivalence, settled on the couch next to her and flashed her a dazzling smile. He sat back in the corner of the couch, his legs crossed, his arms spread across the back of the couch, still holding the wine glass. “Ah my dear, Charles, the dog is authentic and real, is he not?”

“Chaque, are you asking me if Hank is real?”

“What would you rather I ask you?”

“If I’d like some more wine.”

Jacques got to his feet and served Charles more wine.

Helen, it turned out, had an unerring ability to imitate the voices of other women. “My lover and my admirer spent the night together in jail “ she said, stumbling over her words, and sounding like Linda.

For a moment, even Charles focused on something other than himself. Hank slipped back into the room unnoticed and settled in front of the mirror.

“You make me want to break out of my hiding place and pull off my clothes,” said Charles, and one couldn’t tell if he was happy or if he was tortured. Suddenly Charles rounded on Jacques. “What kind of deception is this?” he demanded. “You know Chaque, I might be cruel with my words, but I am kind-hearted. With you, I can’t tell.”

Hank, who was growing accustomed to the raised voices and offended tones, was sitting, gazing at his image in the mirror. He stood up, watching his image carefully as he did, and maneuvered his body so that could see his flank. He did the same so that he could view the other side of his body, before sitting back down again.

“I tell you, Hank is enjoying his own image,” said Charles.

“Oh, I think he is admiring himself!” exclaimed Helen.

Jacques sat frowning, watching the dog.

Suddenly, something green emerged at the side of Hank’s collar.

“Oh!” gasped Helen.

A bright, green tree frog climbed up and sat beside Hank’s left ear.

Charles exclaimed in amazement. “Gosh, we are drinking, not smoking, aren’t we?”

Hank’s ears pricked up and he stared intently at his reflection.

“He’s looking at the frog in the mirror,” breathed Jacques.

Hank raised his hind-quarters and stood up, he lowered his head, the frog moved, and Hank shook his head vigorously.

“You see!” roared Charles, “you see! He saw it in the mirror, and he shook himself!”

The frog, thrown from its perch behind the dog’s left ear, fell with a plop to floor.

“Wait, everybody wait!” hissed Jacques.

Everyone was breathless, as Hank, who’d shaken himself so hard that he’d lost his footing on the tiled surface, righted himself. When he returned his eyes to the mirror image, he could not fail to see the frog, suddenly appearing, sitting - breathing - on the tiled floor beside him. His head jerked up and he was pointedly looking to the left of himself in the mirror, looking at the image of the frog. Suddenly, he looked away from the mirror, and looked to the floor to his left, looking directly at the frog.

“You see! You see!” exclaimed Charles.

Hank, being a carnivore with an instinct to chase small animals, lunged at the frog. Being a domestic dog, however, he retained only part of the instinct. The hunt was a comedy of the species as the frog scrambled for the shelter of Charles’ couch, and the dog barked and leapt and flopped behind it, losing his footings on the tiles, until he ploughed head-first into the couch he couldn’t fit under. Charles pulled his feet up onto the couch to avoid collision.

Hank sat back on his haunches, his ears flat against his skull, his eyes blinking.

“No, I don’t think he is self-conscious,” said Helen.

“What we need is more beer,” said Charles.

Claire Baxter