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The Semantics of the Gaze: Fazio's Mistress in Fazio Degli Uberti's and Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Representations

Abstract

The intention of this paper is to discuss the act of (not) looking with respect to the fourteenth-century Italian poem *His Portrait of His Lady, Angiola of Verona* written by Fazio Degli Uberti, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti's painting *Fazio's Mistress (Aurelia)*. The works chosen for this analysis seem to represent social conventions and expectations related to gender and sexuality. Both in the case of the painting and the poem, the gaze is a medium of becoming a "surveyor" and "surveyed", a means of typecasting, but also a reservoir of changing meanings. In the following discussion, the author approaches Uberti's and Rossetti's works in attempt to see how (and if) they renounce traditional views on domination and submission.

Keywords

gaze, Fazio Degli Uberti, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Fazio's Mistress, Aurelia

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The motif of the gaze predominates in art and visual culture. *Girl with the Pearl Earring* by Johannes Vermeer, *Las Meninas* by Diego Velazquez, *The Portrait of Antoine-Laurent Lavoisier and his Wife* by Jacques-Louis David or Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Fazio's Mistress, Lady Lilith* and *Venus Verticordia* are some examples in which the gaze becomes the medium of artistic interpretation. We can distinguish different types of gazes: the gaze of the spectator and the painter, the gaze as the means for self-differentiation or the gaze as an expression of power. Jacques Lacan's theory of "The Mirror Stage" supports the view that when a child starts recognizing himself in the mirror, there begins the process of his identification and the transition from the imaginary *me* into the real *me*. The child learns "that there can be a viewpoint taken on him" and, in effect, this reasoning may ignite his narcissistic traits (Merleau-Ponty 136). The mirror becomes a construct of ego, which is a "system of perception and consciousness which allows the individual to adjust to the world" (Crossley 192). The mirror can also be interpreted as a symbol of vanity when a child, captivated by its own mirror image, starts showing narcissistic features and taking himself as his object of love. This behavior refers to Sigmund Freud's theory of narcissism, which defines narcissism as the fascination with one's own body that becomes the object of sexual desire (3). This is a normal phenomenon in the phase of the child's development (primary narcissism), yet, it is considered a disorder in the later stages of life. Thus, on the basis of Freud's theory, it may be assumed that a woman who is socially and stereotypically perceived as constantly accompanied by her own image, should have characteristics close to the disorder of narcissism invested with libido.

In his discussion on the gaze, John Berger censures the man, who takes delight in the female sight and enjoys her sensual beauty. Berger refers to Memling's painting *Vanity* saying: "You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, you put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting *Vanity*, thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure" (51). Feminist discourse considers the male gaze as pervasive and intruding into the female's privacy. The nakedness, as Berger suggests, is not the woman's choice or "an expression of her own feelings; it is a sign of her submission to the owner's feelings or demands" (52). By looking at the naked woman, the man objectifies her for his own pleasure. He is the "surveyor" and the woman, as his "object of vision", is the one who is "surveyed" (Berger 52). The distinction between being the subject and being the object of the gaze determines the relationship between the man and the woman who struggle for power. The one who casts

a glance is in the position of the subject and the one who is looked at always turns into the object. It appears that social conventions have set the woman in the role of being watched and the man in the role of the gaze beholder.

> In the average European oil painting of the nude the principal protagonist is never painted. He is the spectator in front of the picture and he is presumed to be a man. Everything is addressed to him. Everything must appear to be the result of his being there. It is for him that the figures have assumed their nudity. But he, by definition, is a stranger — with his clothes on (Berger 54).

In this paper, I approach the works of Fazio Degli Uberti and Dante Gabriel Rossetti who, through poetry and painting, respectively, represent the same woman. Thus, my subject of investigation is the verbal and visual representation of Fazio's mistress with the focus on the heroine's and the Other's gazes. Frequently Uberti's and Rosetti's works are interpreted merely from the perspective of an observer and little consideration is given to the gaze of the mistress. I find it important to highlight two viewpoints (onlooker's and heroine's) to show that the mistress, contrary to what may seem, is not only a passive object of male admiration but also an active participant in the process of looking/not-looking. This alternate perspective is aimed at presenting more effective reception of the poem and the painting.

His Portrait of His Lady, Angiola of Verona by Fazio Degli Uberti refers to the issue of gaze and, related to it, positions of an observer and the one who is observed. This fourteenth century Italian poem is believed to be a description of Uberti's youthful love — a Veronese lady named Angiola. The speaker of the poem, ensnared by the charms of his beloved, praises her looks:

> I look at the crisp golden-threaded hair
> Whereof, to thrall my heart, Love twists a net,
> Using at times a string of pearls for bait,
> I look into her eyes which unaware
> Through mine own eyes to my heart penetrate;
> Their splendour, that is excellently great,
> To the sun's radiance seeming near akin,
> Yet from herself a sweeter light to win.
> So that I, gazing on that lovely one,
> Discourse in this wise with my secret thought: —
> "Woe's me! why am I not,
> Even as my wish, alone with her alone, —
> That hair of hers, so heavily uplaid,
> To shed down braid by braid,
> And make myself two mirrors of her eyes
> Within whose light all other glory dies?"

I look at the amorous beautiful mouth,
The spacious forehead which her locks enclose,
The small white teeth, the straight and sharply nose,
And the clear brows of a sweet penciling. (...)
I look at her white easy neck, so well,
From shoulders and from bosom lifted out;
And at her round cleft chin, which beyond doubt
No fancy in the world could have design'd. (...)
I look at the large arms, so lithe and round, –
At the hands, which are white and rosy too,
At the long fingers, clasped and woven through,
Bright with the ring which one of them doth wear.

(*His Portrait of His Lady, Angiola of Verona*,
qtd. in D.G. Rossetti *Dante and His* 276-77)

Although the poem is recognized by its distinguished style and poetic aspects, some scholars have received it as a manifestation of the woman's eroticization and objectification. For instance, Brian Donnelley suggests that "Uberti's canzone is highly sexual and presents the woman as a desirable unattainable mistress while using explicit physical references to arouse the male reader" (114), while J. B. Bullen states that in "His Portrait of His Lady, Angiola of Verona", "male voyeuristic pleasure is stimulated by similar elements of sexual incitement" (129). Donnelley's and Bullen's arguments may come from the fact that the poem is an act of looking. Uberti repeats the words "I look", which means that the verbal adopts visual characteristics and shows the tendency towards outer judgements. Saying "So that I, gazing on that lovely one / Discourse in this wise with my secret thought" (lines 10–11), the narrator plainly states that the woman is subjected to his gazing. Fazio's sight pierces the lady's eyes, which arouses his emotions: "I look into her eyes which unaware / Through mine own eyes to my heart penetrate" (lines 5–6). Examples of the speaker's acts of looking imply that the verbal composition embraces the male perspective on the woman. Donnelley says that "His Portrait of His Lady, Angiola of Verona" is the "visual portrait, offering the narrator, acting as a surrogate viewer, the distance afforded to the voyeur" (114).

One can put forward the view that if the mistress is not positioned face-to-face with the man, she is denied the subjectivity, which could be discovered through the (gaze) encounter with the Other. Furthermore, the pronoun "his" before the word "lady" in the title of the poem emphasizes male's possessiveness over the woman. The result is, firstly, the objectification of the woman and, secondly, "the assumptions of sexual power and ownership inherent to the act of voyeurism" (Donnelley 114). Even if the lady faces the narrator and reciprocates his

gaze, she remains silent which also implies the typical subservient role of the woman in medieval society. However, the theory about the lady's objectification does not seem to be fully justified and accurate. We must remember that the act of looking brings positive connotations as well. It expresses feelings of awe, recognition or love which means that it is pleasant also for the person who is observed. Uberti's poem should not be read only from the perspective of the male narrator. When we analyze it from the point of view of the praised lady, the accusations of her objectification are irrelevant. Moreover, almost all art is based on the act of looking and in its history we can find numbers of artworks representing female or male nudes. Thus, Uberti's description of his lady's should not be treated as an objectification of her body but as an admiration for her beauty.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Fazio's Mistress* (*Aurelia),* 1863–73

The visual for Uberti's poem is Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Fazio's Mistress* (*Aurelia)*. In October 1863, the Pre-Raphaelite was at work on his "piece of color", as he called the painting in his letter to Ellen Heaton (D.G. Rossetti, *The Correspondence* 5: 83). In 1869, six years after painting the picture, Rossetti decided to remove Uberti's text initially inscribed on the frame of the painting and he re-named the artwork from *Fazio's Mistress* into *Aurelia*. As the painter explains: "It was always an absurd misnomer in a hurry, & the thing is much too full of queer details to embody the poem which is a 13th century production.

(...) 'Aurelia' would do very well for the golden hair" (D.G. Rossetti, *The Correspondence* 5: 241). The viewer of Rossetti's painting, as the reader of Uberti's poem, is put in the position of an observer who, being at a comfortable distance, is not to disturb the woman but to take delight in looking at her. Some critics accuse Rossetti's representation of showing the masculine point of view. For example, Yildiz Kilic claims that in *Fazio's Mistress* the woman is a "body geared to visual and physical sensual pleasures" (261). We should however pay attention to the fact that the mistress in Rossetti's painting does not reciprocate the look of the viewer but enjoys her own mirror reflection.[1] Her demeanour, in my view, is an indication of her pride and inaccessibility. The validity of this assumption does not, however, emerge from the verbal representation which does not mention the mistress looking at her own reflection. The mirror, which is directly connected with the act of looking is the crucial difference between the painting and the poem. With Aurelia looking at the mirror and not at the viewer, Rossetti depicts the self-absorbed woman who is uninterested in her admirers. As Donnelley claims, the act of not looking "signals [woman's] awareness that she is in fact being looked at" and it conveys her attempts at rejecting the male's gaze (117). This point of view suggests the mistress's emancipation and her independence, which refutes theories about her subordination to the male gaze.

Rossetti paints the mistress in the room decorated with warm colors that elicit the sensuality of the scene. Undoubtedly, sensuality is the significant feature of the painting; Alastair Grieve is of the opinion that the painting is to show "that life should be given to sensual pleasures of the moment rather than the search for worldly fame or hope of a future paradise" (29). The image of Aurelia, whose rendition resembles the verbal description, is most sumptuous. Rossetti paints the lady of voluptuous figure, long hair, full red lips, and "the long fingers, clasped and woven through, bright with the ring" (line 54). The painting conforms to Uberti's description of the robust woman with the "spacious forehead" (line 19), "bosom lifted out" (line 36), and "large arms" (line 52). However, while the poet restricts himself to the commentary on the beloved's appearance, the painter adds accessories such as jewels, brush, perfume and mirror. These objects suggest her sensuality, but they also convey her strength and self-confidence. "Rossetti's women",

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[1] Brian Donnelly propounds the view that the mistress does not look at the mirror but straight ahead (117). In consequence, the spectator does not know where she directs her gaze and through "the act of not looking at either the viewer or herself, she deflects the eroticizing gaze" (Donnelley 117).

and among them Aurelia, "display symbols of the World, the Flesh and quite possibly the Devil: jewels, bottles, mirrors, brushes, textiles, and, above all, hair" (qtd. in Kilic 262).

As Elizabeth Prettejohn assumes, the mistress's demeanor recalls "a sense of encounter with a sexualized human presence" (218). The erotic image of the woman which Rossetti provides in *Aurelia* refers to the subject of prostitution. It is interesting to note that in his works, Rossetti uses two different modes of representations of the fallen woman. The first rendition shows the woman who is on the margins of society while the second represents the sexualized woman. The latter is inscribed in "the mode which is less linear, more allusive, and less referable to prevailing orthodoxies about crime and retribution" (Bullen 51). Although Fazio's mistress is depicted as a sexual "object of fascination and curiosity", she cannot be "categorized simply as 'fallen woman'" (Bullen 52). Surrounded by jewels and flowers, Aurelia represents an idealized image of prostitution disengaged from fear.

It is important to highlight that the model for *Aurelia* was Fanny Cornforth whose "occupation as a prostitute was not merely incidental to her role as a model, but played an active part" (Marsh 142). Probably it was Conforth's life experience that set her in a re-emerging theme of the fallen woman. Rossetti believed that *Aurelia* was "most like Fanny" (Marsh 212). Both women, though prostitutes, are not fallen. In their grossness, they show enormous power and detachment from the male dominance "so that they growingly revert to intimidating femme fatale" (Kilic 278). Rossetti's letter to Cornforth, sent in 1873 after the retouching, manifests the importance of her identity in the painting. The artist writes:

> I have got an old picture of you here which I painted many years ago. It is the one where you are seated doing your hair before a glass. Rae, to whom it belongs, has sent it me as it wants some glazing, but *I am not working at all on the head*, which is exactly like the funny old elephant, as like as any I ever did.
>
> (*The Correspondence* 6: 281)

In the painting Cornforth reflects the physical features of the Veronese lady from the sonnet. With "the golden-threaded hair" (line 1), "the straight and shapely nose" (line 20) and "the clear brows" (line 21), the model epitomizes an attractive object of masculine fantasy. Even though her image in *Aurelia* differs from the one presented in *Found*[2]

[2] Rossetti started his works on the painting Found in 1853 and it remained unfinished until his death in 1882. The painting, which embraces the subject of prostitution, became an important response to the Victorian debate on the issue of the prostitute's relationship to society, and the

where she was depicted for the first time, it seems that she was never quite able to shake off the tag of the prostitute. The shift of her social position may be compared to the one occurring between *Found* and *Aurelia* — metaphorically speaking — from the prostitute, Cornforth became the courtesan. It did not, however, change the fact that she was typecast as the lower-class woman who offered her body as the highest commodity. Even though Rossetti tried to purify the theme of prostitution, Cornforth remained the symbol of men's urges. She was controlled by the masculine gaze and Rossetti only strengthened her position of a sinful woman by casting her in the role of Fazio's mistress. "Through the powerful presence of her body and the insular turn of her mind", Cornforth became a sexual entity "capable only of presenting her voluptuous body" (Kilic 262).

Human gaze seems troublesome: its aim is not unequivocal and it can express various attitudes. In the circles of Renaissance and Victorian society, Uberti's and Rossetti's representations conformed traditional views on femininity, which lustful and volumptuous, were associated with courtesans. However, we need to remember that the gaze is not confined to one perspective but gives rise to different trajectories of interpretation and reception. Beyond doubt, the gaze is a powerful tool which allows one to enter into the sphere of somebody else's privacy. Uberti's and Rossetti's artworks are an *exemplum* of simultaneous acts of looking and not looking. Both instances may be interpreted as an expression of control as well as of subservience. While we do not know anything about the gaze of the mistress from Uberti's poem, Rossetti's Aurelia avoids the viewer's gaze. Women's silence and unreciprocated gaze do not, however, have to mean their diffidence. They can express either Aurelia's indifference or her contentment. Similarly the gaze of an observer may be interpreted twofold: as actual sexualization of the heroine or as pure admiration with no intention to objectify her. Thus, the act of male's or female's (not) looking should not be categorized as uninhibited and transgressive, but also as sublime.

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