

THE RESTRICTED ABYSS

Nine Problems in the Theory of *Mise en Abyme**

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I

This is a theoretical essay in descriptive poetics. By "theoretical," I mean that I shall not offer very extensive illustration by concrete examples of the principles under discussion. By "descriptive" I mean that, in examining the concept of *mise en abyme*, my aim is to help make it both a sharper and more flexible tool for the description of narrative texts. To succeed in this task I shall have to do my best to stay clear of the headier philosophical and poetic implications of the abysmal metaphor. Such implications inform the large body of the experimental or postmodern or *nouveau* or *nouveau nouveau* novel which has posed such a massive challenge to traditional narrative and representational conventions especially in the last few decades. In this essay, however, I am chiefly (but not exclusively) interested in the possible use of *mise en abyme* as a term denoting a specific figure in narrative fiction which I would characterize very broadly as mimetic. What I mean by this is fiction which ostensibly respects our most prevalent beliefs about empirical reality, especially those concerning temporality and the conditions of human knowledge. Conventional respect for such beliefs is reflected in narrative texts by a concern to keep their diegetic levels distinguishable. The best general account of the structure and functioning of the narrative text is still Gérard Genette's (with the emendations of able followers such as Mieke Bal and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan). It is in the overall framework of such a theory that I would like to inscribe my comments on *mise en abyme*.

This expression, whose application to literature and visual art was first suggested by André Gide in a diary entry from 1893, has enjoyed

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enormous popularity in French writing, especially during the last two decades. The French phrase, properly italicized, is now bandied about with increasing frequency in English and American criticism. Linda Hutcheon, for instance, who considers *mise en abyme* "one of the major modes of textual narcissism" (p. 4), notes parenthetically that it is "a term for which there is no convenient English equivalent" (53). As we shall see, this term does in fact have a rather precise English equivalent, although it is not likely to be considered attractive or convenient enough to displace the borrowed term already established. I have no desire to promote the illusion that theoretical metalanguage can be purged of all metaphoricity but I do believe that the persuasive force of metalinguistic terminology has much to do with the user's awareness of figurative implications which help capture the specificity of a concept and those which do not. A more prosaic, secondary aim of this essay, therefore, is to sketch a history and provide some background information accessible hitherto only in French. I hope that this will serve to elucidate some of the implications of the term *mise en abyme* (as well as other terms used in defining it) so that we can continue to use it successfully and, as far as possible, *en pleine connaissance de cause*.

Lucien Dällenbach's *Le Récit spéculaire* (1977), is the only full-scale study of *mise en abyme* to date and an indispensable starting-point for any further discussion. Dällenbach's point of departure was Gide's journal entry (reproduced here in the published English translation):

In a work of art I rather like to find transposed, on the scale of the characters, the very subject of that work. Nothing throws a clearer light upon it or more surely establishes the proportions of the whole. Thus, in certain paintings of Memling or Quentin Metzys a small convex and dark mirror reflects the interior of the room in which the scene of the painting is taking place. Likewise in Velázquez's painting of the *Meninas* (but somewhat differently). Finally, in literature, in the play scene in *Hamlet*, and elsewhere in many other plays. In *Wilhelm Meister* the scenes of the puppets or the celebration at the castle. In "The Fall of the House of Usher" the story that is read to Roderick, etc. None of these examples is altogether exact. What would be much more so, and would explain much better what I strove for in my *Cahiers*, in my *Narcisse*, and in the *Tentative*, is a comparison with the device of heraldry that consists in setting in the escutcheon a smaller one "*en abyme*", at the heart-point (30-31).

Dällenbach records four observations, which I translate and supplement with my own commentary.

1. "As an organ of the work turning upon itself, *mise en abyme* appears as a modality of *reflection*" (Dällenbach 1977:16). While repetition and self-reference certainly seem to be the gist of the matter, it is important to note that, of the two analogues offered by Gide, only one—"the small convex and dark mirror" in certain paintings—involves *reflection*, strictly speaking. One might read the passage as tentatively juggling two comparisons or as groping toward one, final, satisfactory metaphor:

the heraldic figure of an escutcheon placed "*en abyme*." This involves repetition on a smaller scale but *not* reflection. I shall discuss the implications of this metaphor in more detail later.

2. "Its essential property [*propriété essentielle*] consists of bringing out the intelligibility or the formal structure of the work" (Dällenbach 1977:16). Perhaps I am quibbling over the proper use of the phrase "*propriété essentielle*," but it seems difficult to see in Gide's formulation a property *inherent* in the work itself. Rather what he seems to have in mind is the special contribution this figure can make to the communicative function of the work: It is *supposed* to clarify the whole or is *capable* of doing so; is designed for this purpose by the author or has this effect on the reader. But what if it *fails*? And is there a reason (other than the objective reality of a particular painting) why Gide chooses to characterize the painted mirror as "dark"?

3. "Evoked by examples taken from different areas, it constitutes a structural fact [*une réalité structurelle*] which is exclusive neither to literary narrative nor to literature alone" (Dällenbach 1977:16). Bibliographical items on drama and lyrical poetry are adduced by Dällenbach to support the first part of this contention; items on film and painting clinch the other. As for the latter, this is hardly surprising. But what does need explanation is the application of the specifically *visual* figures of the mirror and the coat of arms, not to painting or film, but to the spaceless, linear, time-bound verbal art of literature.

In her review article "*Mise en abyme et iconicité*," Mieke Bal (1978) proposes important revisions in Dällenbach's theory. Taking her cue specifically from the first sentence of our excerpt, she notes the ambiguity of the word *sujet*, which may designate *either* the subject-matter (taken, as the Russian Formalists did in lifting the French word into their poetics, as the embodiment of a theme) *or* the creative, grammatical, narrating subject or both. "Now," says Bal, "Gide was interested primarily in the power of the narrating subject, a power which seems to increase when the subject doubles itself" (117).¹ This, as both Dällenbach and Bal concur, amounts to requiring (1) the presence of at least two narratorial instances, marked by a clear-cut diegetic downshift from one to the other; and (2) a relation of homology between the relation of the higher narrator to his narrative and the character-narrator's to his. If this Gidean principle were generalized, it would exclude familiar cases construed as *mise en abyme*, where the reflexive relation concerns the story alone rather than a relation to a dramatized narrator. The question then is whether a multi-layered structure of diegetic instances is a *sine qua non* for literary *mise en abyme*.

It seems to me that it is at least as important to emphasize the other,

1. Dällenbach, after a discussion of several works by Gide, notably *La Tentative amoureuse* which is closely connected to this journal entry, comes to a similar conclusion about "Gidean *mise en abyme*" (cf. p. 30).

apparently easier, sense of Gide's ambiguous *sujet*. For Gide talks about transposing the *sujet* (in the sense of the structured thematic whole) "on the *scale of the characters*." In this reading, nothing excludes the possibility of the entire *mise en abyme* relation occurring within the story (intra-diegetically, in Genette's terminology). But the first lesson to be drawn is that *there must be a "scale of the characters"* (that is, a story, a diegesis) for the subject to be transposed onto. This is a far more important condition than that of diegetic multi-layering, which I do not believe to be essential. (I will have more to say on one consequence of this principle later.)

Dällenbach's fourth observation on Gide's text is subdivided into three:

"a. The word *abyme* here is a *terminus technicus*. One would therefore avoid speculating on its rich associative power (...) preferring to turn to a treatise on heraldry where one can read: '*Abime*.—This is the heart of the escutcheon. One says that a charge [*figure*] is *en abyme* when it is with other charges in the middle of the escutcheon, but without touching any of these charges'" (1977:17. Dällenbach quotes from A. de Foras, *Le Blason, dictionnaire et remarques* [Grenoble, 1883]).

Since so much of the English vocabulary of heraldry is borrowed from the French, it is not surprising that the very same term that Dällenbach found in de Foras also figures in some English dictionaries. The *OED* quotes the *Chambers Cyclopaedia Supplement* (1753): "Abyss is also used in heraldry, to denote the centre of an escutcheon." Charles Norton Elvin's *Dictionary of Heraldry* (London, 1889) gives the same definition for "abyss," but also lists "Abisme.—When the charge, which is between others, is depicted as small, so as not to appear as the principal bearing." But the term preferred by British heraldists is simply "escutcheon" or, to distinguish it from the whole escutcheon on which it is borne as a charge, "inescutcheon." The same source defines this as "a small escutcheon borne as a charge, or on the center of a shield but much smaller than what is termed an escutcheon of Pretence."²

"b. Although he does no more than allude, one understands forthwith what Gide has in mind: what captivates him cannot but be *the image of an escutcheon bearing, at its center, a miniaturized replica of itself*" (Dällenbach 1977:17). Here it is important to note that the miniaturization concerns only the contours or frame of the respective escutcheons and not the symbolic charges they bear. The possibility of the kind of infinite regress we used to see on Quaker Oats packages does not occur in heraldry.

"c. Rather than worry anxiously about whether such a figure occurs in heraldry or is merely a product of Gide's imagination, one is to take

2. An "escutcheon of Pretence" is borne by the husband of an heiress but is removed when she dies "because the representation of [her] family passes to the children of the marriage" (Boutell 1966:141).

the analogy for what it is, an attempt to approximate a structure of which it is possible to give the following definition: *mise en abyme* is any enclave entertaining a relation of similarity with the work which contains it" (Dällenbach 1977:17). The terms of this definition open the possibility of fresh questioning: how functional are the territorial implications of the word "enclave" (whose use here seems to echo its casual use by Ricardou [1967:173])? Would any enclave qualify whatever its size or proportions? What exactly is a "relation of similarity"? What is meant by "the work"? Does the word "contain" imply a container/contained relation between whole and part?

An examination of Gide's literary practice and an account of the critical heritage (a rather carping account, notably of C.-E. Magny and P. Lafille) lead Dällenbach to assert the interchangeability of the *mise en abyme* and the mirror images. He concludes that they may be run together and, including a classification of the possible "figures," he offers what he terms a "pluralistic" definition: "*mise en abyme* is any internal mirror reflecting the narrative [récit] as a whole by simple, repeated or specious [spécieuse] duplication" (52). Complexity is not the main liability of this revised definition. By "specious duplication," he means "a fragment supposed to include the work which includes it"; elsewhere he calls this "aporetic duplication" (51)—a rather odd paraphrase, since it is hard to see what can be "specious" in a work which makes no serious claim of not being fictional. Equally puzzling is the introduction, as though it had a self-evident literal sense in the description of literary as opposed to pictorial works, of the term "mirror." "Similarity" is replaced by mirror reflection, a mechanical type of literal, optical duplication. "The narrative as a whole," here substituted for "the work," makes the need for totalization explicit.

Reflecting further on the notion of reflection, Dällenbach seems to interpret it as a relation of *reference*: "a reflection is a message [énoncé] which refers [renvoie] to the message, the utterance [énonciation] or the code of the narrative" (62). This attempt to apply Jakobson's scheme generates a tripartite typology of elementary types: "fictional," "narrative" (i.e., pertaining to narration) and "of the code" (which later proliferates into "textual," "metatextual" and "transcendental"; cf., p. 141). Bal notes that, whereas Dällenbach's first typology concerned the *nature* of the reflection relation, this concerns its *object*. But since the object reflected in *mise en abyme* is "the work" or "the narrative as a whole," Bal can use Dällenbach's second typology to introduce some additional precision:

Placed *en abyme* is any sign having for referent a pertinent and continuous aspect of the text, of the narration [récit] or of the story [histoire] which it signifies, by means of resemblance, once or several times (123).

Taking it perhaps for granted, this definition fails to specify that the sign in question must be *part of the work*, a pertinent and continuous aspect of whose text, narration or story it refers to and signifies by resem-

blance once or several times. Bal's most important revision is the retreat from Dällenbach's implicit demand for totality. This retreat is sounded by the inclusion of a reconstructed version of Dällenbach's second typology in the definition itself but, in particular, by the inclusion of the adjective "pertinent." In the word "sign," Bal seems to insist strongly on the separate identity of the reflecting component but in functional, rather than territorial, terms. The friendliest understanding of the use of "having for referent" and "signifies" would see the former as designating *what* the sign does (it refers) and the latter as designating *how* it does it (by resemblance). It is not clear how many of the philosophical vicissitudes of "reference" and "referring" are to be thought relevant to the use made here of "referent." Strawson and the speech-act theorists, for instance, regard referring as the activity of a subject. Others emphasize its ostensive or selective function. If this is relevant here, it would go against the grain of Bal's clear stance against authors' intentions as a criterion for identifying *mise en abyme*. The general aim of Bal's article is to show that *mise en abyme* is a particular form of iconicity. There can be no doubt, she argues, that not every icon is a *mise en abyme* but that every *mise en abyme* is an icon. In the latter part of her article, Bal inaugurates an attempt to apply a classification of icons by types of iconic semiosis to the typology of *mise en abyme*. While this is interesting and promising, I believe that the originality and specificity of *mise en abyme* as an icon do not lie in any special type of iconic semiosis but rather in the peculiar habitat of this iconic relation in the narrative text and the relative position and importance of its sign and interpretant (to use Peirce's terminology) within it.

II

To grasp the complex specificity of this figure requires decisions in several areas of theoretical indeterminacy.

I will discuss nine problems, most of which have been touched upon in the foregoing inconclusive survey. Six concern the very definition of the figure and the other three deal with its mode of literary functioning.

1. *Totality*. The requirement that what is reflected in *mise en abyme* should in some sense be "the work as a whole" is surely essential to a definition of this figure. Yet what could this "whole" be and what must it be to be reflected by something not only considerably *smaller* than itself but also a *part* of itself? According to the deconstructionists, no text ever satisfies the ideal requirements of totalization rigorously and exhaustively. Dällenbach's "specious" or aporetic duplication indicates one way texts can play with this proposition. But, while trying to avoid a metaphysical stance, we must recognize that some effect of closure and

totality must come into play for any impression of *mise en abyme* (even of the aporetic variety) to assert itself.

Yet what could be the adequate referent of an expression like "the narrative as a whole" [*l'ensemble du récit*] in Dällenbach's revised definition? If this expression simply means the complete set of words and sentences constituting the narrative text, surely no part of this set can be said to reflect or duplicate it in its totality. A member of the set of signs which make up a text could name it, mention it or refer to it. Even the identity of a name does not guarantee—and in fact does no more than vaguely suggest—a reference to the total extension of the narrative. Thus the fact that Edouard's novel bears the same title as Gide's, while suggesting some equivalence between them, does not in itself extend this equivalence to the totality of Gide's novel. To lend more conviction to the extension of the *mise en abyme* to the whole of the narrative, the global suggestiveness of homonymy of title will have to be supplemented by further similarity of detail. The fact that Edouard's novel includes a novelist writing a novel is far more effective in establishing the desired impression. Yet Edouard's novel, like Philip Quarles's novel in Huxley's *Point Counter Point*, is not similar to the novel which includes it at *all* points, certainly omitting a number of thematic concerns. Paradoxically, it is the very presence in Gide's text of excerpts from Edouard's text that dramatizes the *partial* extension of the doubling.

To express this paradox another way, one of Dällenbach's three "essential figures" or "species" of *mise en abyme*, the one characterized by a "simple" or "single" instance of duplication, is, by its very definition, barred from reflecting the narrative which includes it in its totality. In this form, the fact that the reflected whole includes a reflecting part cannot be reflected or we will have moved to Dällenbach's second species involving repeated duplication. Thus, for example, the play-within-the-play in *Hamlet* does not include a play. Essential components are missing from *The Murder of Gonzago* as compared to *Hamlet*—a character like Hamlet himself, for instance.

Clearly, we are submitting the kind of icon which is *mise en abyme* to the test of repleteness. Exhaustive fullness of detail is neither possible nor necessarily desirable in any kind of representation. In the case of the figure we are discussing, it is ruled out not only empirically (by the inability to specify *all* possible details) but also logically (by the part-to-whole relation). There is a sense in which repleteness of representation is eminently possible when the object of representation is a text: Pierre Menard would have achieved it if he had ever lived to complete his project of re-creating *Don Quixote* word for word. But this option is *not* available to the kind of representing relation specific to *mise en abyme*.

What might be considered an adequately replete duplication of the narration [*récit*] aspect of the narrative? Totalization in this respect is as

hard to envision as total *mise en abyme* of text. If, on the other hand, we take the mere relation of voice to diegesis governed by it as adequate ground for the comparison, we confuse *mise en abyme* with any relation between narrative levels. Anything in between will not exhaust all the factors that might be involved in the narration aspect.

The situation seems a little better when we consider *mise en abyme* of story. Here structural narratology has put us in a better position to describe wholes in terms other than those of replete completeness. The tradition going back to Propp has developed procedures for abstracting from the mass of the text and from the sum total of the events which might figure in it a set of "functions" essential to the story as the kind of story it is. Bremond, Barthes and Chatman, among others, have insisted on the distinction between events which introduce significant alternatives into the story and are thus an essential component of its causal structure (*noyaux*, kernels) and events which may be omitted without breaking the causal or teleological chain (*catalyses*, satellites). Such distinctions enable us to isolate a finite number of elements and, in principle, this could be repeated in summary form, on a smaller scale, without omission. Even in this case, however, it is customary to accept relations involving much less than the totality of functional or causal articulations of the plot as *mise en abyme* of the story. For example, let us examine one of the least controversial instances of our figure, the correspondence between the *Mad Trist* of Sir Launcelot Canning and Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" in which it occurs, as spelled out for the reader's convenience by Usher himself: "the breaking of the hermit's door, and the death-cry of the dragon, and the clangor of the shield;—say, rather, the rending of her coffin, and the grating of the iron hinges of her prison, and her struggles within the coppered archway of the vault!" (Poe 1938:245). Not only does *The Mad Trist* (or at least as much of it as went into Poe's story) not include any equivalent of certain events crucial to the plot of Poe's story—e.g., nothing equivalent to Madeline's illness and entombment—but the correspondence as stated by Roderick Usher is based on superficial sensory similarities and is not really an equivalence between two plots or a plot and its summary, complete or partial. So the demand for a quantitative criterion for adequate repleteness is manifestly absurd. But we must also recognize that qualitative criteria, even when possible in principle, are not in fact strictly enforced in making judgments about *mise en abyme*. The word "judgment" is crucial here, as the word "pertinent" added by Bal in her revised definition. The aspect reflected, she insists, "cannot be of minor interest in the narrative as a whole" (125). Minor and major are points on a continuum and a matter for judgment. Bal's "pertinent and continuous aspect of the text, the narration or the story" is therefore decidedly *not* "the work as a whole" or even, say, "the story as a whole," without residue. It is, in practice, almost any staking out of a claim in this direction, any pattern at an intradiegetic level capable of

suggesting a generalization about the work. If you already know what is major and what is minor, what is pertinent and what is not, you will also know what diegetic material can count as *mise en abyme*. But how to determine pertinence is something that a theory of *mise en abyme* cannot and should not claim to teach you.

2. *Reflection*. What exactly is the semantic relation that must obtain between the reflecting component and the *ad hoc* totality it is taken to reflect? This can be broken down, as implied by Bal's formulation, into a question about reference (*what* is being reflected?) and a question about resemblance (*how* is it being reflected?).

First, how strictly do we expect the part to refer to the whole in question? How closely must it pick it out and circumscribe it? For the sake of simplicity, let us take the general case of a novel in which mention is made of a novel. A *first* possibility is that the novel referred to as a whole novel is *this* novel and no other. In the second part of *Don Quixote*, characters appear who have read the first part and discuss it. In the six-hundredth and second night, according to Borges, Scheherazade tells the Khalif the story which is the frame-story or the ground situation of the *Thousand and One Nights*. This is what Dällenbach called aporetic or specious *mise en abyme*. The trouble with it is that it jeopardizes the very possibility of closure in such a work and, as Borges noted, the possibility of formally marking off the fictional world from the reader's own life. This raises the same kind of problems as no. 1. A *second* possibility is for the reflecting fictional novel to be not *this* novel but a novel *such as this*. Instead of identity of reference, we have a referent belonging to the same class as the sign referring to it. But how narrowly should this class be defined? Can we move from this kind of novel to any kind of novel at all? Any story at all? Any kind of representational art in any medium? Any art? Any patterning? Any making? Clearly, no limit can be fixed to this continuum without reference to a particular work and, beyond some point—but which?—we would no longer want to use the term *mise en abyme*.

As to *how* the reflection is accomplished, Bal, following Van Zoest, suggests a tripartite classification of the relation between iconic signs and their referents.

(a) A *topological* icon has a spatial or pictorial relation to its object. A canonic example of this is the blank page in Robbe-Grillet's *Le Voyeur*, which everyone seems to agree is the *mise en abyme* of "the blank in Mathias's consciousness" (Bal 1978:126). The point here is that the blank in the man's consciousness, so far as I can *see*, does not partake of either spatiality or pictoriality but is merely a verbal image, a metaphor, although eroded almost to the point of complete automatization. Such a consideration risks luring us into the deep waters of the ontological status of metaphors. There is another continuum here which takes us from this blank page through the black page in *Tristram*

Shandy and the drawings representing the meandering of the storyline from digression to digression and the ups and downs of a man's life down to the snake which this drawing becomes in Balzac's *La Peau de chagrin*, a continuum that leads from the iconic exploitation of concrete properties of writing to full-fledged pictorial illustration.

(b) A *diagrammatic* icon is one where the resemblance resides in a *relation* between the constituents of the sign and those of its referent. Bal cites the description of Rouen, analyzed by her in a particular way, and *Madame Bovary* in which it occurs. But nothing further is specified as the ground of this resemblance beyond "a relation of opposition between the positive and the negative, an opposition manifesting a fluctuating structure which finally resolves itself in the absolutely negative" (127). It may be possible to present more solid examples of this type but this is useful to indicate how vague the categories that enter the relation can be and still be considered as diagrammatic and therefore iconic and therefore in the given context placed *en abyme*.

(c) *Metaphorical* icons involve two referents, one mediating the other. Bal's example, already cited by both Dällenbach and Van Zoest, is the parable "Before the Law" in its context in Kafka's *The Trial*. First, we are told, K.'s failure to apply the parable to his own case is similar to the futile waiting of the man from the country in the parable and this is a diagrammatic icon. There is no reason why this icon should not count as a *mise en abyme* of story since the same diagram can be said to underlie K.'s entire relation to the law, which extends to the whole novel. But Bal sees it as becoming *mise en abyme* only when both K. and the man from the country are seen as analogous to man in general. I cannot understand why we need two specimens to make this metaphorical leap from individual to species. Once again we have an indication that readers are willing to adopt very vague or general class concepts in staking out possible wholes to be placed *en abyme*. Any human character is, in some sense, an icon of Man.

In sum, anything can be said to resemble anything else in some respect. I do not believe that we can specify in advance which aspect can count in identifying icons in general and *misses en abyme* in particular. This general consideration leads to the next problem.

3. *Explicitness*. Must the presence of *mise en abyme* in a narrative be explicit? Must the text somehow underwrite this figure by some special kind of *marker*?

This easily deteriorates into the general question about authorial intentions vs. reader's prerogative and austere decoding vs. extravagant interpretation. Here the lines would be drawn around the beleaguered positions of defenders of rationality in discourse such as E.D. Hirsch and Wayne Booth. Dällenbach adopts the Beardseley-New-Critical position on the intentional fallacy to the extent of not requiring explicit evidence of an author's intention to plant *misses en abyme* in his work

"Usher" and Edouard's journal in *Les Faux-monnayeurs* are all canonic examples which exploit this possibility. Yet Dällenbach waives this condition: "relay of narration (in the strict sense) and diegetic interruption do not constitute distinctive features of *mise en abyme*" (1977:74). This statement follows an inventory of devices for the embodiment of authoritative reflection in the story itself, including different types of agents (from wise old men through artists and novelists to dreamers and madmen) as well as certain classes of *objects*. It would seem that, insofar as such objects are not in themselves literally textual, i.e., are for instance a picture or a piece of music, they are only capable of being *described* by the diegesis as it goes along and do not constitute a diegetic downshift.

Bal is uncharacteristically ambiguous on this issue: "*Mise en abyme* is therefore always an *interruption*, some narration relegated to a character, often also, but not necessarily, a relay of focalization and/or interruption of the diegesis. *Mise en abyme* is reflexive and hypodiegetic, the object of a second degree narration" (119). Later, in her discussion of icons in general, she notes that *mise en abyme* may differ from them in its "form": it must "form an isolatable whole, constituting an interruption, or, at least, a temporary change in the narrative" (124). In what sense is a painting mentioned or described in a novel an interruption or a change in the narrative? In no sense that I can see as necessary. But there is a sense in which such a painting is isolatable: it may, for example, have a *frame* marking it off from the contiguous context. But this, of course, is not by any means a fact about *narrative*. It is only an observation about the *represented world* which such a narrative may be said to convey. The description of a picture, laden with reflexive implications as it may be, need not form a set piece or a textual unit of any sort. It may on the contrary consist of an indeterminate number of allusions scattered all over the text. Such a picture would only be especially isolated from the wall on which it hangs.

It is hardly possible to believe Bal guilty of such a crude category mistake. That she does not really mean that, is clear from the example she gives for *mise en abyme* involving diagrammatic iconicity, that of the description of Rouen in *Madame Bovary*. I prefer, in this connection, to consider an example of my own which is more amenable to brief presentation. Dickens's *Great Expectations* tells the story of a young country boy who, adopted by a mysterious benefactor, goes to London to be educated as a gentleman. There he forgets his true friends and turns his entire moral outlook topsy-turvy. Only on finding out that his benefactor was Magwitch, the escaped convict he had once helped, does Pip begin to reestablish his moral perspective. In the very first scene of the novel, the convict terrorizes the boy into doing his will by turning him upside-down and holding him there momentarily: "He gave me a most tremendous dip and roll, so that the church jumped over its own weather-cock. Then, he held me by the arms, in an upright position on

On the other hand, he rejects the deconstructionist view that all literary texts are emblematic of themselves, their literary status and literariness in general, which would automatically make them nothing but *mise en abyme*. Still, when in doubt, he prefers to have a "hermeneutic key" provided by the text so that "it does not lend itself to reflection before the narrative has revealed its existence and indicated its location" (1977:63). In other words, one counts on some code established by each text *ad hoc*, consisting of marks like "homonymy, repetition or some other symptom" (Bal 1978:118), which call attention to a special relation between components of the narrative. This can be limited to a single lexical choice, as in Poe's "The Oval Portrait," where the hypodiegetic story of the painting of the portrait takes place in a "turret" (Poe 1938:291), which is also the word used to designate the room where the narrator in the extradiegetic story has found refuge (292). In fact, I would argue, such phenomena can prompt readers to posit a *mise en abyme* relation with very little additional substance.

The question is whether there is any way for an author or a text to overwrite the correct identification of *mise en abyme*. A famous case of overt application is the one from "The Fall of the House of Usher" quoted earlier. But what if Roderick had been wrong? And was he really proven quite right? Perhaps authorial commentary might be more reassuring? It would, of course, have to refer to something "on the scale of the characters" and identify it as *mise en abyme*; mere authorial commentary, of *en* used to generalize, has nothing to do with our problem. But an author's comment on his story might well be unconvincing or intentionally ironic (and now we're back to the need for special markers etc.; cf., Booth 1974 and Muecke 1978).

Criticizing Dällenbach as a closet intentionalist, Bal suggests a more rigorous test based on a reader-oriented approach: "In order to know whether there is in fact resemblance, the relation between sign and referent must be describable in a metadiscursive language. The verbal descriptions which the investigator can give of the sign and of the referent must then have an important element in common" (123). This suggestion in fact places Bal in close proximity with a pragmatist epistemological position of truth as "warranted assertibility."

4. *Isolability*. Closely related to the question of perceptibility discussed under the heading of "explicitness," the focus here is on the relation of *mise en abyme* to the text continuum in which it is inserted: How the figure is distinguished from its immediate neighbors in the syntagmatic chain.

Mise en abyme must be located "on the scale of the characters," i.e., intra- or hypodiegetically. If it is a distinct figure, it must have its own distinct identity within the diegetic chain. It is tempting, therefore, to stipulate that it must be inaugurated each time by a *diegetic downshift*. *The Murder of Gonzago in Hamlet*, *The Mad Trist* or "The Haunted Palace" in

top of the stone ..." (37). This mini-sequence of events is diagrammatically iconic of a major aspect of the story as a whole and I believe it to be a canonic example of *mise en abyme*. Yet it is hard for me to see how it can be said to constitute an "interruption" in the narrative. This leads me to conclude that, here again, the criterion must be a pragmatic one: the reader's ability to give a verbal description or paraphrase which picks out of the story just that part which resembles the whole (say by diagrammatic iconicity). Any demand for actual interruption in the text is liable to get lost in the general principle of spacing between signs which, as Derrida (1972) has shown, is constitutive of any identity signs claim to have.

5. *Orientation*. What reflects what? When both terms of such a relation are semiotic and representational objects, as with *mise en abyme*, the relation is in principle reversible. Yet the specificity of this figure consists of a certain part reflecting the whole and not vice versa. Perhaps we can formulate a rule: In *mise en abyme*, the reflecting part must be located at the same or at a lower diegetic level than the whole it reflects. Further, if it is located at the same diegetic level as the whole it reflects, it cannot take the form of metalinguistic commentary. In other words, the orientation of *mise en abyme* is centrifugal in relation to the hierarchy of instances of narration.

Thus, in *Tom Jones* Fielding (or "Fielding" as Booth would call him) sets out to provide his readers with a "bill of fare" for his novel. Declaring that "the whole, to continue the same metaphor, consists in the art of cookery of the author," he goes on to develop this analogy in some detail, applying it directly to the actual *sujet* of *this* novel:

In like manner, the excellence of the mental entertainment consists less in the subject than in the author's skill in well dressing it up. How pleased, therefore, will the reader be to find that we have, in the following work, adhered closely to one of the highest principles of the best cook which the present age, or perhaps that of Heliogabalus, hath produced! This great man, as is well known to all polite lovers of eating, begins at first by setting very plain things before his hungry guests, rising afterwards by degrees, as their stomachs may be supposed to decrease, to the very quintessence of sauce and spices. In like manner, we shall represent Human Nature at first to the keen appetite of our reader in that more plain and simple manner in which it is found in the country and shall hereafter hash and ragoo it with all the high French and Italian seasoning of affection and vice which courts and cities afford (52-53).

Had Heliogabalus's cook or one of his modern disciples been allowed to exercise his art in *Tom Jones* "à l'échelle des personnages," we might have been alerted by a discerning poetician to an instance of *mise en abyme*. But since cookery here is the vehicle of a metaphor in the author's discourse, this is, trivially, authorial commentary.

There is also the possibility of a part located at an extra—or in-

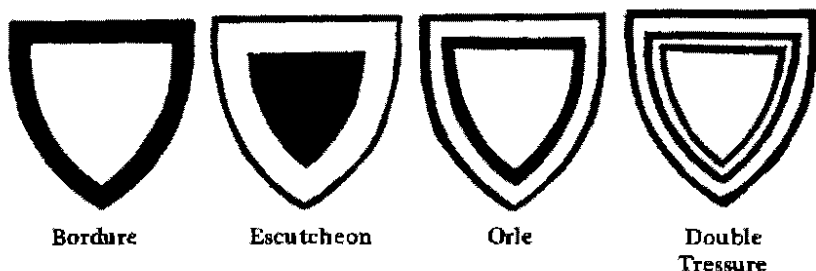
tradiegetic—level reflecting a whole located at a hypodiegetic level. This is the case of a frame story analogous to the main story it frames. An example is the Marquise de Rochefide's refusal to honor her erotic pact with the narrator of Balzac's "Sarrasine" seen as a reflection of Zambinella's misleading of Sarrasine in the main story. (Barthes, [1970] who pointed out this relation, wrote of "castration" in both cases.) This might have qualified as *mise en abyme* if we had been able to regard Sarrasine and Zambinella as reflecting the narrator and the Marquise. But, since Sarrasine's story is not only the one singled out by the title but also far more absorbing in itself, no one would be inclined to see it as a reflection of the narrator's case rather than vice versa (despite their roughly equal size).

Both frame story and *mise en abyme* involve a certain reversal of the diegetic hierarchy of the process of communication. But, whereas the specificity of a frame story lies in a certain devaluation of a higher diegetic level, that of *mise en abyme* consists of heightening the significance of something at a lower level. The special interest of the latter derives in part from the higher authority carried by an element speaking to the reader, as it were, from lower down on the diegetic scale.

6. *Quantity.* *Mise en abyme* is also a rebellion against scale in the quantitative sense. It is a *small part* carrying "as much" significance as the whole that contains it. Not *any* intratextual analogy will qualify. *Mise en abyme* is not only an iconic relation, it must also be a *synecdoche*. *The Mad Trist* is a good example because it is so considerably shorter than the whole of "The Fall of the House of Usher." The example from "Sarrasine" would be doubtful (even if everything else were equal) because the extent of the two levels is of nearly equal size. In "The Oval Portrait," the extradiegesis is twice as long as the story of the portrait itself, thus once again complicating the question of frame story vs. primary narrative.

Here the implications of the heraldic metaphor provide a helpful graphic representation. Several treatises note this interesting formal problem relating to relative size of part and whole: "When an escutcheon is borne on a shield, it should be appreciably smaller than the space enclosed by a border, otherwise difficulty may be met in distinguishing between (for example) *Argent, a bordure sable*, and *Sable, an escutcheon argent*" (Boutell 1966:54). Deploring the fact that "some coats of arms, for example the arms of Molesworth, will always remain more or less a matter of uncertainty," Fox-Davies counters cogently: "But as a matter of fact a bordure should not be wide enough to fill up the field left by an inescutcheon, nor an inescutcheon large enough to occupy the field left by a bordure" (1929:138).

These writers are clearly concerned not about the coat of arms itself but about the need to emblazon it, i.e., to give unequivocal *verbal* descriptions. It is a problem of metalanguage akin to the one elaborated in this



paper. More specifically, it suggests the need to reflect on the relation between the concept of *mise en abyme* and that of "frame story." *Mise en abyme* in a multi-layered text is thus seen as the inverse of a "frame story" with an analogy to the "main story."

In heraldry, it is possible to keep "inescutcheon" and "bordure" apart by legislating a certain mathematical proportion between part and whole for each one. In literature, the criterion cannot be purely quantitative but must be supplemented by some evaluation of relative interest or importance. This is further complicated by my problem no. 5, that of hierarchic orientation. For, typically, a frame story too is quantitatively smaller. It is, however, a higher diegetic level, i.e., is considered conventionally as *containing* all the diegetic material at lower levels much as thin paper is used to wrap a bulky package. The quantitative principle of small for large is not sufficient unless conjoined by the principle of a "lower" element asserting itself over "higher" ones. The recognition of such an element as *mise en abyme* endows it with a force of compression and superior significance.

III

My last three points have to do with the functioning of *mise en abyme* in context rather than with its definition.

7. *Distribution.* Dällenbach inaugurated the discussion of this interesting problem with the following observations:

1. that a text may integrate a *mise en abyme*
 - a) by presenting it a single time "en bloc,"
 - b) by breaking it down so that it alternates with the narrative that frames it,
 - c) by submitting it to diverse occurrences.
2. that reflections included in a) permit us to articulate more clearly than others the problem of the incidence of the positional component in the general economy of the narrative.
3. that this problem both poses and resolves itself in terms of narrative temporality (1977:82).

I have touched on the possibilities of I b) and c) in my discussions of isolatability, orientation and quantity. Let us now consider it, following Dällenbach's suggestion, as a problem of narrative temporality. Here the most general observation is that, as with regard to the conventional formal hierarchies of relative size and diegetic level, *mise en abyme* simply will not keep its place. True to his Genettian affiliation, Dällenbach distinguishes three types of anachronically discordant *misses en abyme*: "first, the *prospective* one, prematurely reflects the story to come; second, the *retrospective* one, reflects the accomplished story after the fact; third, the *retroprospective*, reflects the story revealing events which are both anterior and posterior to its point of anchorage in the narrative" (1977:83). While prospective *mise en abyme* can serve to speed up the exposition and orient the narrative programmatically from the start, it also risks revealing too much too early and spoiling any effect of narrative suspense. Likewise, a retrospective *mise en abyme* can usefully recapitulate and summarize the foregoing plot but it can also belabor the obvious and burden with boredom. Clearly, these considerations put in first place a conception of narrative art in terms of what Barthes (1970) has called the "hermeneutic code," in contradistinction to the "proairetic code." Whereas the latter concerns the logic of sequential action in the story as it is really supposed to have happened (Premature Burial, Emergence from Coffin, Knocking at the Door, etc.), the former concerns the dynamic process whereby the text teases the reader's curiosity by posing narrative enigmas and delaying their resolution (What really happened to Madeline? What is the strange noise from below? Who is knocking at the door? etc.).

Ann Jefferson (1983) protests against the end-oriented privilege of the hermeneutic code and especially against the notion that prolepsis per force spoils the fun of reading. Citing the example of proleptic chapter headings in Dickens, she notes that rather than kill suspense, they have the effect of "intriguing" (199). Jefferson then discusses two examples in some detail. First there is Sophocles's *Oedipus*, where the audience not only knew the myth before the performance began but the text provides several accurate statements of the truth about Oedipus. Since the oracles given to Laius and to Oedipus, the Sphinx's riddle, and Teiresias's accusation all come before the recognition scene, they count as prophetic *misses en abyme*. Their misreading, at the time, says Jefferson, "seems almost deliberate" (202). The term "prophetic" she glosses as interchangeable with "what Genette in his *Narrative Discourse* calls *proleptic*" (198). A second text including prophetic *misses en abyme* willfully disbelieved is "The Fall of the House of Usher." The metaphorical association of the House of Usher with the family of the same name, for instance, is taken by the narrator as a sign of madness when asserted by Roderick. But it is in fact, as the story's ending confirms, a "statement of the truth," says Jefferson, who also speaks in this connection of "the full extent of the narrator's error" (204).

We may then ask the question of whether such things as a prophecy uttered by a character or his assertion of the literal identity of a metaphorical association can count as proleptic. I believe that such utterances may be termed "prophetic" but that this is not directly relevant to temporal anachrony in narrative. Prolepsis is not prophecy, ESP or second sight, although it may be motivated as such in the text. That an event has been narrated prior to its position in the chronological order of the story can only be determined on the basis of knowledge of the whole story. This knowledge is of the most ordinary and banal kind, that of being familiar with a text you have read. A conception of time which subscribes to circularity and foreordination makes nonsense of the notion of chronological order altogether.

Indeed, a moral-theological conception of knowledge and a rational-empirical one clash in *Oedipus* but it is only the latter that has anything to do with narrative time in Genette's sense. Strictly speaking, the oracles given to Laius and to Oedipus are alluded to as *past events*, and are therefore in themselves *analeptic* rather than proleptic. Even the events which these oracles had darkly prophesied have for the most part already come to pass (Oedipus has killed his father and married his mother). The only sense in which the oracles reported by characters in Sophocles's play can be thought of as prospectively oriented is that they announce Oedipus's eventual recognition of what is already the case. The essential point is that this recognition can only come about once the information suggested by the oracles is *confirmed* by the results of Oedipus's *rational-empirical investigation*. Finally, if the story foretold by the oracle were literally true and therefore genuinely proleptic, it would be the "whole" of Oedipus's story *itself*, and not a fragment which *reflects* it, hence not a *mise en abyme*!

Similarly in Poe, if we accept the principle that a metaphorical relation amounts to identity, we will find ground (for instance) to interpret any two of the three main characters as in fact a single character (both the narrator and the sister are in some sense Usher's *alter ego*). The permissibility of such hermeneutic moves makes the entire model of narrative poetics besides the point. Without temporal order, without distinct characters and without separate diegetic levels, it is hard to see what *mise en abyme* could be.

Since at least as readers we are bound by the empirical necessity to follow the linear order of the text, we can never know that what we have just read has been a prolepsis unless it emanated directly from authorial discourse or until the text has brought us up to date with its "proper" narrative present. For *mise en abyme* of story, a reader can only determine that he has read one once he has had access to the entire text. A prospective *mise en abyme* can therefore only serve the reader as a *model for hypotheses* about the totality of the story. This is so not only because the reader does not yet know the end; for, even when he does, the events that go into the *mise en abyme* of story, if any, will not be literally

the same as those which will bring the story to a close but only others alluding to them by some iconic relation. If you abandon the literal identity of each narrative event, if you consider events as already subject to repetition without origin, you have become either a mystic or a deconstructionist; in any event, you have discarded the ground on which a narrative poetics like Genette's is founded. Without such a rational-empirical conception of time and human knowledge, *mise en abyme* becomes a banal textual device. Borges, that great connoisseur of the abyss, may be ironically commenting on this when he places the Aleph, that *mise en abyme* of the whole universe, in the basement of a house about to succumb to urban renewal.

8. *General function.* Can any general function be assigned to *mise en abyme*? Attempts to assign a general function to any figure are usually misguided. Nevertheless, an interesting idea has been advanced by Jean Ricardou (1967). The starting point is the notion (going back to Shklovsky and beyond him to Romantic Irony, a tradition not acknowledged by Ricardou) that "great narratives are recognizable by this sign, that the fiction they propose is nothing but the dramatization of their own functioning" (178). Thus, the occurrence of *mise en abyme* can either *contest* or *reveal* the proper functioning of a particular narrative. Unlike Ann Jefferson, Ricardou does not seem to consider prophecy given to correct decoding as forming part of the "normal" apparatus of narrative. He interprets the narrator's rushing out of the falling house of Usher at the last minute as resulting from his correct decoding of the *mise-en-abymeness* of *The Mad Trist* which, in addition to the parallels noted by Roderick, also includes the *demolition* of the Hermit's hut by Ethelred. The narrator's survival to tell the story is therefore not a "fair" move but a sort of narrative freak: "It is by the microscopic revelation of the global narrative, therefore, that *mise en abyme* contests the preordained sequence of the story" (176). The emphasis is on "*contests*," implying that Ricardou regards linearity as part and parcel of narrative "normalcy." In the section of his essay entitled "Revelations by *mise en abyme*," he deals with texts whose proper mode of functioning consists of *concealing* certain events. Again the canonic example is Robbe-Grillet's *Le Voyeur* and discussion of it is prefaced by this general remark: "In a story which desires to remain incomplete, *mise en abyme* may find its contestation specified as a power to reveal" (182). In more general terms, *mise en abyme* always ironically subverts the representational intent of the narrative text, disrupting where the text aspires to integration, integrating where the text is deliberately fragmentary.

It was Dällenbach (1980) who formulated this insight in terms of reception theory (unfortunately this article is not well translated; in quoting from it I shall correct silently wherever the probable meaning can be reconstructed). For Ricardou's "mode of functioning" or my

"representational intent" read reader-oriented criticism "reception programmed into the primary narrative." For "quasi-pragmatic" read "realistic," "naturalistic" or "non-reflexive." "If [the primary narrative] calls for a quasi-pragmatic reception, *mise en abyme* clears the way for self-reflexive reception and permits us to take account of the text in its materiality. If, on the other hand, self-reflexive reception predominates, *mise en abyme* reestablishes quasi-pragmatic reception and the powers of the imaginary. In other words, *mise en abyme* suddenly appears as the *opposite* of the dominant reception and as such is unsurpassed as a means of bringing contradiction into the heart of the reading activity" (445).

In conclusion, *mise en abyme* derives its special interest from the contestation of the hierarchies and ground rules which organize the "normal" (or classic or readable) narrative text. But by virtue of this contestation, it implies that entire system of rules and hierarchies. When a new representational or narrative mode appears which seeks to undo that "normal" system, the recognition of *mise en abyme* in it revives that old system precisely because of its dialectical relation to this special figure.

9. *Motivation*. This issue arises in the course of an original attempt by Brian McHale (which he kindly permitted me to read in manuscript) to construct a systematic model for the literary history of American fiction. To the Richard Chase-Leslie Fiedler view that American fiction has its ancestry in British romance he adds the idea that provincial British fiction in the early nineteenth century is in roughly the same position vis-à-vis the mainstream English novel of manners of that period as its American counterpart. If romance, according to Chase, puts intelligibility before verisimilitude and if doubling devices of various sorts are characteristic of romance but less so of novels, it seems to follow that *mise en abyme* should be a characteristic of romance rather than novel. If this hypothesis proves correct, it follows that the proliferation of *mise en abyme* in American "postmodernist" fiction identifies it as stemming from that nineteenth century tradition of romance.

The trouble is—and McHale is the first to recognize this difficulty for his theory—that *mise en abyme* also occurs in texts that are incontestably novels. To overcome this difficulty, he proposes introducing as a criterion the mechanism supposed to ensure verisimilitude: realistic motivation or naturalization, present in the novel, absent in romance. His test case is a juxtaposition of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* with Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Both feature a *mise en abyme*, the rehearsal of *Lovers' Vows* in Austen, the "Bridewell" charade in Brontë. The difference is that "Jane Austen ensures verisimilitude through realistic motivation of character and action, while Charlotte Brontë strains verisimilitude to the breaking point" (5). How does this difference manifest itself in these respective cases of *mise en abyme*? In the novel, says McHale, "the

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world isolated for the sake of description. "Resembles" is an abbreviation for "can be convincingly argued to resemble."

Proviso no. 1: The resembling diegetic segment must be considerably smaller (in textual extension) than the work it resembles. Proviso no. 2: The resembling diegetic segment may not be located at a higher diegetic level than the pertinent and continuous aspect of the work it resembles.

What exactly is a continuous and pertinent aspect? How can resemblance be measured? What counts as considerably smaller? Well, excluded middles are bad shit. Even novelists have had to pay tribute to this incontestable principle. If we insist on ideal sanitary conditions around the concept of *mise en abyme* we may well find ourselves obliged to discard it altogether. The view of poetics implied here falls short of requiring its concepts to correspond to metaphysical essences. It settles instead for concepts that are distinctly soft-edged. Descriptive poetics is a language game where the clarity and distinctness of our ideas can only be determined in dialogue with our peers. It is not simply that one man's *mise en abyme* is another man's mush. Judgments about *mise en abyme* are based on the stipulations of the definition and on prior judgments about diegetic levels, relative size and general pertinence. These, in turn, are based on an *ad hoc* or conventional distinction between the literal reading of narrated events (or represented entities) and any figurative relations they may form. Warranted by reference to these principles, assertions involving the term "*mise en abyme*" may be true.

A concrete example would be the bit of seascape into which the protagonist of John Berger's *G.* has literally been cast at the conclusion of this text:

The sun is low in the sky and the sea is calm. Like a mirror as they say. Only it is not like a mirror. The waves which are scarcely waves, for they come and go in many different directions and their rising and falling is barely perceptible, are made up of innumerable tiny surfaces at variegating angles to one another—of these surfaces those which reflect the sunlight straight into one's eyes, sparkle with a white light during the instant before their angle, relative to oneself and the sun, shifts and they merge again into the blackish blue of the rest of the sea. Each time the light lasts for no longer than a spark stays bright when shot out from a fire. But as the sea recedes towards the sun, the number of sparkling surfaces multiplies until the sea indeed looks somewhat like a silver mirror. But unlike a mirror it is not still. Its granular surface is in continual agitation. The further away the ricocheting grains, of which the mass become silver and the visibly distinct minority a dark leaden colour, the greater is their apparent speed. Uninterruptedly receding towards the sun, the transmission of its reflexions becoming ever faster, the sea neither requires nor recognizes any limit. The horizon is the straight bottom edge of a curtain arbitrarily and suddenly lowered upon a performance.