

ART “EN ABYME,,

“What I like in a work of art, is when one finds the very subject of the work transposed, with specific reference to the characters in it. [...] Thus, in certain paintings by Memling or by Quentin Metzys a small convex dark mirror reflects on its own the interior of the room where the painted scene occurs. [...] Then, indeed, in literature, in *Hamlet*, the scene of the play; and in a lot of other theatre plays as well. [...] In *The Fall of the House of Usher*, the story that is read to Roderick, etc. Not one of these examples is totally accurate. What would be far more so, [...] is to compare it to a coat of arms where one image places a second one in a *subjugated* position (*en abyme*).”

André Gide was not quite twenty-four when, in August or September of 1893, he jotted these thoughts into his *Journal*. A few months later, the author of the *Traité du Narcisse* was writing *Paludes* where one can find, as we shall see, the main processes of “mise en abyme” technique.

Since 1932, which is the date of the *Journals* publication, Gide’s term of “mise en abyme” has frequently been used in literary criticism. Surely it is an ambiguous term, originating as it does, from heraldry as well as from philosophy (*abyssus*), but it fulfilled the need to assign a name to certain manifest devices, apparent both to the creators as well as to the public. And if the usage of this term is recent, yet the phenomenon it describes is a very old one, and it belongs to several fields of artistic endeavor.

Translated by Paul Mankin.

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The reasons why writers and artists in all periods and in all countries resort to the "mise en abyme" of their work or in their work are indeed quite varied. The motivations may be aesthetic and psychological, social and political. It is at times a matter of abolishing established conventions, to impose a new art, or, on the other hand, to conform to the reigning fashion. On one side there is the search for a purely formal effect, a gratuitous game, on the other the search for a non-aesthetic goal or an ideological purpose.

Such a vast phenomenon, whose meaning or rather whose meanings go beyond the world of art, deserves to be looked at from different angles, period by period, area by area. And yet it may be useful to try to give a global view, to grasp it in its entirety, by looking for analogies and convergences throughout totally different works. Gide's sketchy sentences in his *Journal* refer to the novel, to drama and to painting. In the forthcoming analyses we intend to take these forms of expression into consideration while yet adding the domain of music. Nevertheless our chief concern will be to circumscribe the phenomenon of the "mise en abyme," complex and poorly defined, to see what forms it takes and what dimensions it can assume. In order to do this we shall distinguish and describe four main techniques: quotation, incasement, autothematism and mirror game.

One statement must be made from the outset. The fact that we shall differentiate among these four processes does not mean that they are mutually exclusive. On the contrary, they often coexist within the same work, they interpenetrate and the final "mise en abyme" effect may bring out two or three techniques at the same time. André Gide's *Paludes* is a typical example. One finds quotations: Mallarmé, Barrès and, above all, two of Virgil's verses which introduce the story of Tityrus, a tale within the tale. This inner tale is inserted several times in the text of the "large" tale, which corresponds to the incasement process. Autothematism is the outstanding trait of *Paludes*: the book is a confession of the writer in the process of creation, his thoughts about his work and his creative urge; "I am writing *Paludes*," "place this into *Paludes*," "end *Paludes*," words like these recur like a Leitmotif throughout the text. And finally, the tale on

which the writer is working has the same title as Gide's book: an effect which one can compare to the mirror game.

QUOTATION

The quotation is an extremely common technique and one encounters it in various forms of artistic and non-artistic expression. In dealing with words, it concerns what is called a textual setting apart (*prélèvement*). The term "intertextuality" is also used, but it may assume at times a wide range of meaning ("every text is an absorption and a transformation of a multiplicity of other texts.") Even if one considers the quotation in a narrow sense, as a conscious and intentional lifting (setting apart) nevertheless there are few works of literature where it is not found.

Although it is a common phenomenon, its importance, both quantitative and qualitative, is quite variable. "The quotation may be defined as a statement with a double stating process, a statement whose actual stating is not original".¹ There are, however, not many textual borrowings that are fraught with meanings in so far as the entire work is concerned and there are even fewer that make up a "mise en abyme."

The origin of the texts quoted is infinitely varied, and literary periods and genres are intertwined. In a novel, it often occurs that textual liftings from another novel can be found, or from a short story, a poem, a dramatic work or a fable; some quotations are limited to a few words, others involve entire works. Four novellas, rather long ones, are inserted into the *Roman comique*, borrowed by Paul Scarron from two contemporary Spanish authors, don Alonso Castillo Solorzano and Maria de Zayas y Sotomayor. If *Hollins Liebeleben*, a youthful work of Achim von Arnim, incorporates fragments of Schiller's *Maria Stuart*, this device is by no means gratuitous: the hero will kill himself while playing the part of Mortimer.

As far as dramatic works are concerned, the length of the

1. Tzvetan Todorov, *Littérature et signification*, Paris, Larousse, 1967, p. 24.

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quotations is necessarily limited, but their diversity remains great. Certain textual liftings, imbedded in the dialogue, are barely noticeable. Expressions like "the thinking reed," "and yet it moves," or even "the wind rises, we must try to live," found in Boris Vian's *Les bâtisseurs d'empire*, are clichés which underline the pretentious speeches of the character of the Father. "Salut, demeure chaste et pure" (it is the tenor's aria in Gounod's *Faust*), on Jupiter's lips, underscores the game of anachronisms which is one of the guiding themes of Giraudoux' *Amphitryon* 38. And Manon Lescaut's confidences quoted in *La dame aux camélias* fulfill the function of points of reference in the relationship between Armand Duval and Marguerite Gautier. The use of proverbs assumes unusual proportions in the comedy *Mr. Jowialski* (1832) by the Polish poet Alexander Fredro; most of the lines spoken by the central character are studded with proverbs, sayings, maxims, pronouncements and aphorisms of all kinds. Authors of historical plays fish in many varied sources: chronicles, documents, historical treatises. Some do it in a big way. Research has revealed, in John Webster's *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, that he quotes nearly two hundred authors; one fourth of the text in these two tragedies written by this contemporary of Shakespeare is made up of borrowings. Webster is an exceptional case, even for his time, but textual borrowings are still frequent even in our day. In Montherlant's *Port-Royal*, the Bible, Sister Angelica's *Relation de captivité* and Sainte-Beuve are largely exploited, often without any alteration.²

A fact which deserves particular attention, where the "mise en abyme" is concerned, are quotations, within a play, of another dramatic work. There too it is often simply a matter of creating a sort of local color. If Scribe and Legouvé have Adrienne Lecouvreur recite verses from *Bajazet* and *Phèdre*, it is because their heroine is a dramatic actress. Nothing seems more natural than to place into the mouth of a character playing an actor some bits of Shakespeare, as Chekhov (*Swan-Song*, *The Seagull*) and O'Neill (*Long Day's Journey into Night*) have done. For the

2. Cf. Jacques Robichez, *Le théâtre de Montherlant*, Paris, S.E.D.E.S., 1973, pp. 157-182.

same reason we come across quotations from *Hamlet*, *L'école des femmes* and *Andromaque* in Jean Anouilh's *Ne réveillez pas Madame...* On occasion some characters who recite a famous play are not actors. Such is the case of the hero in the romantic Polish drama, *Kordian* by J. Slowacki, who recites *King Lear* while he is sitting on the cliffs of Dover.

Sometimes a quotation, even a short one, fulfills a very special function, that of indicating the ideological content of the play. In Alexander Ostrovski's comedy, *The Forest*, the actor Guennadi Nechtchaslivtzev accuses the landed nobility of Russia by using the words of Karl Moor. When his questioners threaten him with "you will have to account for your words!", "he'll simply have to be taken to the commissioner, we are all witnesses!" the actor calmly replies: "I? You are wrong!" And he pulls a copy of Schiller's *Die Räuber* from his pocket: "Approved by the censor. Look! Authorized for presentation."

A simple quotation may serve as a cover-up to express feelings, a wish, an order and, furthermore, it may place "en abyme" a dramatic situation. When Marion Delorme says, as the players who have arrived at the castle of Nangis are being introduced, "Moi, je suis la Chimène" (the action of Victor Hugo's drama takes place two years after the first performance of *Le Cid*), the evil Laffemas, a spy for the Cardinal, answers her:

La Chimène? En ce cas, vous avez un amant
Qui tue en duel quelqu'un...

At that very moment, Marion, "half turned toward Didier," recites Corneille's famous verses:

Puisque, pour t'empêcher de courir au trépas,
Ta vie et ton honneur sont de faibles appas,
Si jamais je t'aimai, cher Rodrigue, en revanche,
Défends-toi maintenant pour m'ôter à don Sanche;
Combats pour m'affranchir d'une condition
Qui me donne à l'objet de mon aversion.
Te dirai-je encor plus? va, songe à ta défense,
Pour forcer mon devoir, pour m'imposer silence;
Et si tu sens pour moi ton coeur encore épris,
Sors vainqueur d'un combat dont Chimène est le prix.

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If the fearsome chief character of Brecht's play, Arturo Ui, learns to recite Mark Anthony's speech, taken from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, the reason for it is that he is getting ready to eliminate his partners and to take over the leadership. The lesson will not have been lost: some echoes of this funeral oration reoccur in a speech made by Arturo Ui during a public gathering, in the next to last scene of the play. The dialectic function of a quotation becomes clear when one opposes the two dramatic works based on Kean. In Alexander Dumas' play, whose sub-title is *Disorder and Genius*, the great actor has his fit of jealousy while he plays the scene of Romeo's farewell: he interrupts the show and insults the Prince of Wales. Jean-Paul Sartre, in his *Kean*, which is based on Dumas' drama, has replaced the *Romeo and Juliet* episode by a scene from *Othello* and he has done so quite obviously in order to place the personal position of the hero "en abyme."

In painting, quotations are an equally frequent phenomenon. Many times the artist, while depicting an interior, will show one or more paintings by a past master, a colleague or even one of the artist's own works. Themes like "a painter's studio," "a collector's gallery," "a dealer's shop" are particularly apposite to this procedure and sometimes serve as a pretext. In David Teniers the Younger's painting *The Archduke Leopold Wilhelm in midst of his collection in Brussels* (Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum) one can see fifty paintings and six sculptures that make up three fourths of the painted surface (another version of this theme shows the reproduction of more than thirty paintings). Edouard Vuillard decided to paint some galleries of the Louvre; *The La Caze Gallery* (Binningen-Bâle, private collection) shows two lady-copyists with their easels, in front of a wall on which hang five canvases of the 18th century.

In addition to these pictorial "anthologies," certain quotations have a deeper relationship with the subject of the painting. Thus the *Allegory of the Faith* by Vermeer of Delft (New York, Metropolitan Museum) includes a huge crucifixion by Jordaens. And in *The Weavers* (Madrid, Prado Museum) Velasquez has reproduced, on a tapestry, *The Rape of Europa* by Titian, his great predecessor, whose characters are placed in correlation with the weaving women. It happens frequently that the quotation makes up the

center, the axis, the chief element of a painting. In his *Homage to Cézanne* (Musée National d'Art Moderne), Maurice Denis has placed ten people around an easel with a still-life of the master of Aix (not to mention other canvases which can be seen in the background).

In the realm of music, the process of quotation holds an equally important place. Just as the dialogues of *L'impromptu de Versailles* inserted by Giraudoux into his *Impromptu de Paris* are an homage to Molière, and Maurice Denis' painting is one to Cézanne, thus a musical quotation may serve to honor an admired composer. The form of the "tombeau," fashionable in the 17th century, is not forgotten even in our time. Let us recall Ravel's *Le tombeau de Couperin* and, quite recently, *Le tombeau de Marin Marais* by Pierre Bartholomé where Lully's disciple (who was himself the composer of a *Tombeau de Lully*) is quoted at length.

Variations on a theme by..., there we have another genre where the quotation is used as a starting point. Some musicians have a marked preference for this kind of expression: Brahms, whose variations on a theme by Haendel, Haydn, Paganini and Schumann are well known, or Max Reger who uses themes of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven and Hiller. There are some musical works where quotations abound, they are like "collages," as the *Capriccio Italiano* by Tchaikovsky or the recent *Sinfonia* by Luciano Berio where several composers are found side by side: Berlioz, Mahler, Debussy, Berg and Stravinsky.

In some cases the quotation is a formal game where its only function is to show the artist's inventiveness, but there are others where the borrowed passages render the very essence of the work, its guiding idea, where they constitute its emotional focus, in a gay or lyrical tone. Brahms includes old songs in his *Academic Festival Overture* in order to recreate the mocking spirit which is part of student life. Few listeners will recognize a Polish Christmas carol in Chopin's *Scherzo in A minor*, while this melody evoked one of the most moving childhood memories to the composer.

Quoting a national anthem may have a particular meaning. If we hear the *Marseillaise* in Schumann's *Faschingsschwank aus Wien*, the reason is that, at that time, this patriotic song was

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forbidden in Vienna. A totally different historical and emotional context explains the presence of the *Marseillaise* in Tchaikovsky's 1812 overture. At the beginning of World War I Debussy composed the *Berceuse héroïque*, dedicated to Albert I of Belgium, in which the strains of the *Brabançonne* can be heard. And to show that the spirit of quotation can be found even in electro-acoustic music, let us mention Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Hymnen*, where several national anthems, including the *Internationale*, are reproduced, albeit in a highly disfigured form.

INCASEMENT

The second technique which we shall endeavor to present is: incasement. Other terms are used—incastration, framing, interpolation, insertion—at times to indicate a difference among several variations of this method, at others to use these terms interchangeably. What distinguishes this process from the one we have just examined, is the fact that in a quotation we are dealing with a "foreign body," a borrowing from an autonomous already existing work, while incasement is a technique where the two components—both the "inner" and the "outer" work—stem from the same author and have most often been conceived to form a whole, to coexist.

In narrative literature two extremes must be distinguished: on the one hand there is framing, on the other there is insertion. In the first case we are dealing with a story which is used as a framework and link to a certain number of tales. *Thousand and One Nights*, the *Decameron* and the *Heptameron* are the classic models of this technique. At the other end, the proportion is reversed: one or several short stories are inserted into a narrative work of greater length. This genre was fashionable in the 17th century and *Don Quixote* and *L'Astrée* are famous samples. Among the "romans à tiroirs" of the beginning of the 19th century, let us evoke Jan Potocki's *Manuscript found in Saragossa* and Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Wanderings*, into which work at least five tales are introduced. The process is still used in our century, suffice it to mention James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Marguerite Duras' *Le vice-consul*. While it is true that in the "romans à tiroirs" the inserted texts have often only tenuous

links with the main story, *Le vice-consul* is an example of a novel within a novel in the proper sense of the word: the relationships between the inner tale, introduced in two “slices,” and the outer tale, have more than a formal order. Among the characters of the outer tale one finds the author of the inner tale, Peter Morgan, as well as the Cambodian girl who is the model of the book which he is writing.

At times, within the technique of incasement, the narrative genre is combined with the dramatic genre. In the Spanish literature of the *Siglo de Oro* there are many novels and novellas containing short comedies. Even more refined mixtures are not lacking. Let us mention *La philosophie dans le boudoir*, libertine dialogues “intended for the education of young ladies” and very close to the theatrical form, into which the Marquis de Sade has incorporated a sort of treatise on religion and customs, called *Français, encore un effort si vous voulez être républicains*, so that his characters could recuperate from the sexual excesses which they were practicing in groups while discussing. In *Le missionnaire* (1894) Marcel Luguët achieved the “dual form of drama and novel” by intermixing the narrative text and the dramatic dialogue.

Let us now try to see in what way the two polarities of framing/insertion function in the field of drama.

On the one hand we can find many works where a prologue and an epilogue frame the play itself, as is the case for Shakespeare’s *Henry VIII*. It is a simple, almost banal process, which nevertheless allows many variants and achieves effects of a certain originality as soon as the character or the characters of the prologue and the epilogue (Chorus, Entertainer, Poet, Director, etc.) intervene in the plot. Thus, for instance, in Henry Medwall’s *Fulgens and Lucrece* (considered the first modern drama using the play within a play technique) the two “announcers”, A and B, become characters in the story that is being played out, without relinquishing their role as commentators of the action. And Arthur Miller in his *A View from the Bridge*, puts the lawyer Alfieri who explains the action in the foreground, but he also has dealings with the characters of the play.

Fanny’s First Play by G. B. Shaw shows a rather rare use of framing. We are dealing here with a play within a play, but the

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outer work, that is to say the framework, is restricted to a prologue (which Shaw, following the Elizabethan tradition, calls *Induction*) and an epilogue, while the inner play, in three acts, makes up more than two thirds of the entire text. In *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, Brecht creates three superimposed levels, of unequal importance. A kind of prologue is played among members of a kolkhoz, during the Second World War, then the Singer introduces the play itself, he makes comments about it from time to time, and he is the one who ends it. There is no turning back to the reality of the prologue.

In the cases just mentioned, the framing elements take up less space than the inner play. In what we call insertion the situation is the opposite. A dramatic text is inserted into the main work, and this text is most often a fragment or a few fragments of a play (*Le pont de l'Europe* by Salacrou, *Colombe* by Anouilh) or it is a play whose action is interrupted (*Hamlet*, *The Seagull*, *Casanova* by Guillaume Apollinaire). It even happens that an entire play is incorporated in a dramatic work (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*).

Some authors go beyond the inclusion of a single inner play. Lope de Vega shows us the actor-character of *Lo fingido verdadero* in two different dramas. And the work of the Polish playwright Jerzy Szaniawski, *The Two Theatres* (1946), contains two entire plays, *The Mother* and *The Flood*, illustrating the style of a purely realistic theatre, the "Little Mirror," opposed by the "Theatre of dreams." Philip Massinger's *The Roman Actor* includes three inner plays, while the heroes in Peter Ustinov's *The Love of Four Colonels* improvise four little scenes, in which the personality of each one of the colonels is wittily portrayed.

The technique of incasement, in drama, does not limit itself to these two general orientations, framing and insertion. Here is an example of a rather unusual form, namely the comedy by the baroque author Andreas Gryphius. The very title indicates an unusual mixture: *Verliebtes Gespenst. Gesangspiel; Die geliebte Dornrose, Scherzspiel*. The four acts of the first play, which is about a ghost in love, alternate with the four acts of the second, about the well-loved Eglantine, and only during the final dance scene do the characters of the two plays meet.

The plan of framing/insertion can be used quite well in the

realm of painting. Framing finds its literal expression there when the artist adds a painted border to the canvas. In his ingenious *Self-portrait* (London, National Gallery) Murillo has represented himself with an oval shaped frame (could it be a mirror?) and, what adds to the originality, his hand is placed on this frame and stretches beyond it. Rouault had an almost obsessional habit of giving his paintings a painted frame; there are several canvases, especially after 1925, where he employed this method of "distanctiation." Picasso used the same process a great many times.

As far as insertion is concerned, we are faced with this phenomenon each time that a painting is represented in a painted work, on the condition that the painting be created *ad hoc*, and is not the copy of an already existing canvas (which would make it a quotation). There are numerous examples, in the realist art of all periods as well as in the "metaphysical painting" of De Chirico, the futurism of Carra or the surrealism of Magritte; in the latter's case, the expedient of the painting within the painting (*Les signes du soir*, *Le maître du plaisir*, *La condition humaine*, etc.) is used to express a network of very subtle links between the outer and the inner world.

Even a banal and conventional variant may have an underlying content. The *Family Portrait of John III Sobieski* by Henri Gascar (Museum of Pieskowa Skala, Poland) shows the queen and her four children gathered around the effigy of the king. This procedure is surely appropriate for the period, but it is not without significance. Was it simply a matter of indicating the distance between the sovereign and the members of his family? Other interpretations may be equally valid. One can see the king's momentary absence in it, since he was waging war in Moldavia in that particular year of 1691. But it may also be a sign that, after twenty-six years of married life, things were no longer going as well for the couple as at the time of their mad love affair. In any case, the two levels are separate in the clearest manner possible.

Sometimes the differentiation between two planes of reality is marked by means of a window or a door opening onto another scene, another world. There are, moreover, some ambiguous cases where interpretations vary. Velasquez' painting known by

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the name of *Christ in the House of Martha* (London, National Gallery) shows two women in the foreground, while Christ accompanied by two other women can be seen in a frame in the background to the right. Is it a bay window opening onto another room, is it a painting hanging on a wall or is it a reflection in a mirror?

In music, the incasement is a fairly widely heard phenomenon, but it is more complex than quotation, harder to pin down and it is perhaps more subjective. The criteria for considering a set part of a composition as inserted or interpolated vary according to the period, the style and the personal feelings.

Certain musical forms are based on alternances from the standpoint of the performance; in a concerto, for instance, the parts interpreted by the orchestra, by the solo instrument (piano, violin, cello) and by the two at the same time, alternate and insert themselves. In other forms, the introduction of a new performer aims at the destruction of a certain traditions. Such is the case of the vocal parts inserted in the symphony (Beethoven's Ninth, five of Mahler's nine symphonies, etc.). At the present time, the blending of magnetic tapes with instrumental music (*Musica su due dimensioni* by Bruno Maderna, *Déserts* by Edgar Varèse, *Poésie pour pouvoir* by Pierre Boulez, *Différences* by Luciano Berio, *Kontakte* by Stockhausen) stems from the same intent to break up the uniformity of a musical work through the effect of incasement.

AUTOTHEMATISM

The third process which we shall analyze is autothematism, that is to say the reflection of an artist upon his own work, his creative process and his profession. During the past half century, the prefix *meta* generally characterizes these sorts of phenomena. *Meta* means: whatever goes beyond or around, thus metalanguage is "a language which goes beyond language or surrounds it," whose function it is to describe, to study and to analyze it, a language which deals with language. In the same way one speaks of metamathematics, metasemiotics, metaliterature, meta-theatre, etc.

Some elements of autothematism can be found in the narra-

tive works of all times, and we need mention only *Don Quixote* or *Jacques le Fataliste*. In the 20th century two books stand out in so far as the usage of this technique is concerned: André Gide's *Journal des Faux-monnayeurs* and Thomas Mann's *Die Entstehung des "Doktor Faustus"* (*Roman eines Romans*). "Par son *Journal des Faux-monnayeurs* Gide a voulu témoigner que les problèmes de production (ou, si l'on préfère, la fabrication et la mise en forme esthétique) primaient pour lui ceux de la représentation (c'est-à-dire la reproduction du réel, et la narration proprement dite)".³ In poetry we need only recall Mallarmé and his poems about the process of writing the poem, or the impossibility of doing it, poems whose subject is often their own genesis. It is significant to what an extent critical thought is linked to literary creation with certain authors of the "nouveau roman," such as Alain Robbe-Grillet, Michel Butor or Jean Ricardou.⁴

In the realm of dramatic literature, the phenomenon of auto-thematism is quite varied, being often (but not necessarily) tied to the process of the play within the play. A first variation: the play which questions itself. Examples abound, ranging from *La critique de l'Ecole des femmes* and *L'impromptu de Versailles* to the dramas of Pirandello, Robert Pinget's *Abel et Bela* or *Sarcelles-sur-Mer* by Jean-Pierre Bisson. *Votre Faust*, an opera libretto by Butor, shows, within the text itself, a particularly interesting example of a work revealing its mechanism.

There exists a large repertory of plays *about* the theatre (which, incidentally, seldom use the technique of the play within the play in its literal meaning). Since dramatic art and all that surrounds it, from time immemorial, makes up a considerable part of social life, it seems natural that this social life should be reflected in dramatic literature and on the stage, just as it has always been found in the novel and in painting. To this primordial reason one must add the totally justified special interest which theatre people have in presenting their profession, their milieu, their

3. Alain Goulet, "Lire *Les faux-monnayeurs*," in "André Gide, 5" of *La Revue des Lettres Modernes*, n^{os} 439-444, 1975 (4), edited by Claude Martin, p. 23.

4. Cf. Lucien Dällenbach, *Le livre et ses miroirs dans l'oeuvre romanesque de Michel Butor*, Paris, Lettres Modernes, 1972.

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problems and their quarrels on the stage. Thus we have many plays whose focus is a playwright, one or many actors, the director of a troupe; these are plays whose subject is a play, a performance, a theatrical enterprise and even, in a wider sense, dramatic art or the art of the theatre. Ever since Aristophanes' *Thesmophories* and *The Frogs* down to Peter Weiss' *Hölderlin*, dramatic authors have been characters in plays. Among famous actors, Jodelet, Adrienne Lecouvreur, Justine Favart, Deburau, Rachel and Jouvett (to mention only French ones) have been the inspiration for plays. As an author-actor-troupe director, Molière has been a frequent subject for playwrights: from *L'ombre de Molière*, written a few days after Molière's death by de Brécourt, a former member of the troupe, until *Molière* by Michael Bulgakov, *La petite Molière* by Jean Anouilh and *La vie de Jean-Baptiste Poquelin dit "Molière"* (a collective work done by the Théâtre de la Salamandre), well over a hundred plays have been devoted to him, both to the theatrical genius and to Molière, the man. Even a contemporary author-director, Bertolt Brecht, became a character in a drama a few years after his death: we see him, under the name of "Boss," in *Die Plebejer proben den Aufstand* by Günter Grass.

Playwrights and actors become theatrical heroes not only when they are historical characters, but also as fictional characters. In the following plays, where the historical situations are quite varied, the fate of an actor, an actress, a playwright, be they successful or failures, constitutes the main theme, the pivotal action or the dramatic mainspring: *The Actor* and *Behind the Scenes* by the Polish poet C. K. Norwid, *The Guilty Innocents* by Alexander Ostrovski, *The Seagull* by Chekhov, *L'échange* by Claudel, *Sortie de l'acteur* by Ghelderode, *Trovarsi* by Pirandello, *The Entertainer* by John Osborne and *Le jardin des délices* by Arrabal. And many are the plays reflecting the life of a troupe and the social conditions of theatre folk, starting with Gougenot's *La comédie des comédiens* and Scudéry's *La comédie des comédiens* up to Apollinaire's *Casanova*, Henri Lenormand's *Les ratés* and Serge Ganzl's *Fracasse*.

Finally, there are play-manifestos that serve to explain theories dealing with the art of the theatre. Although this genre is at times confused with the preceding categories, let us mention a

few works nevertheless which were of particular significance for their time: *Il teatro comico* by Goldoni, Sheridan's *The Critic*, Tieck's *Der gestiefelte Kater*, Gogol's *Leaving the Theatre*, Giraudoux' *L'impromptu de Paris*, Tadeusz Rózewicz' *The Interrupted Act*, Peter Handke's *Publikumsbeschimpfung* (Insulting the public).

There is one model, infrequently used in dramatic literature, which expresses better than the others what we have chosen to call autothematism. It applies to the case where the author places himself as a character into his own play. Molière had given an example of it in *L'impromptu de Versailles* and others made use of this expedient, as for instance Lenz in *Pandämonium germanicum*, Grabbe in *Fun, Satire, Irony and Deeper Meaning*, Mayakovsky in *Vladimir Mayakovsky*, Ionesco in *L'impromptu de l'Alma*. Some playwrights place their name and/or the titles of their previous plays on the tongues of their heroes, as does Pirandello in several of his dramas or Cocteau in *Les monstres sacrés*. These phenomena bring us closer to the fourth process yet to be studied, namely the mirror game. But they also coincide with those manifestations of autothematism in the plastic arts which we shall now consider.

The self-portrait is the most typical expression of autothematism, in painting as well as in sculpture, drawing or etching. Typical does not mean that it is always the most original. Except in particularly ingenious cases, the largest number of self-portraits—and we know of thousands from Antiquity to the present—offer only historical interest.

The proper form of metapainting is the painter in the act of creation in his studio, and that is what one might call the artist's reflection on his craft. It is another problem whether it concerns the painter painted by himself, as is the case in Gustave Courbet's *Atelier* (Louvre). Besides, is it always possible to identify the painter presented in the act of painting? In Vermeer's famous canvas called sometimes *The Painter in his Studio*, sometimes *The Allegory of Painting*, sometimes *Ars Pictoria* (Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum), we see the model, a charming blonde in a blue cape, holding a book in her left hand and a trumpet in her right hand, we see the easel with its canvas on which the master's brush has already immortalized the blue laurel

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wreath crowning the model's head, but the artist himself turns his back to the spectator, and one always wonders whether it is Vermeer or Pieter de Hooch. And as for the series of Picasso's sixty paintings, called *The Painter and his Model*, which were done between February and June of 1963, physical resemblance is certainly no criterion in the identification of the painter.

Metapainting's interest consists in the enormous diversity of the possible variants. The minimum traits which allow the qualification of "artist at work" consist of showing the painter with his chief tool, the brush, and possibly the palette. The easel is another of his attributes. The painting which he is working on, whether finished or not, allows the passage to another category, a higher level: the artist and his creation. It is the artist himself, as in countless *Self-Portraits*, to mention only those of Boucher (Louvre) or of Hogarth (private collection). But there may also be another artist, not necessarily a "professional," as in the case of *The Marquise of Villafranca* by Goya (Madrid, Prado Museum): she is seated in an armchair, a brush in her hand, the palette in front of her, and on the easel is a male portrait which seems finished. Another variant occurs when the model is shown but one cannot see the canvas on which the painter is working. *The Portrait of Vincent Painting Sun-Flowers* by Gauguin (Laren, Coll. V. W. van Gogh) is a good example: van Gogh is holding his brush and his palette, there are flowers standing in a vase, the easel is there, but the canvas remains invisible.

The most complete exteriorisation of the painter's work takes place when we see the artist, his work and his model. The latter may occupy a choice spot, as in Edouard Goerg's *Les modèles* (private coll.) where the two nude women are in the foreground, while the painter and his painting are in the background, behind their backs. Let us go back to the beginning of the 16th century to find another highly original example: *Saint Luke Painting the Virgin* by Jan Gossaert called Mabuse (Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum). The model, a Madonna with child, surrounded by small angels, appears at the left in a cloud. The painter is kneeling in front of a portrait of the Virgin with the child Jesus, almost completed. He is adding a touch to it with his brush, but what strikes us is the fact that his hand is guided by an angel leaning over the painter-evangelist. The artist

is thus only carrying out the supreme will. It takes us back to the pictorial representations of the evangelists who are recording the Gospel while their hand is being held by a heavenly messenger.

In concluding these observations about metapainting, painting whose subject is painting, let us recall an even more subtle illustration, mentioned by Jean Paris⁵ and which goes back to 1402. We refer to *Marcia painting herself*, in a Franco-Flemish manuscript of Boccaccio's *De claris mulieribus* (Bibliothèque Nationale). "On the side, the young woman is leaning over her portrait which she is completing with a brush held in her right hand while studying her face in a small mirror held in her left hand." This triple portrait offers an unusual trait in that the artist, the model (that is to say the reflection of her face in the mirror) and her work are three replicas of the same face. This brings us close to the mirror game since the two phenomena are frequently found in the same work. But before we shall discuss this last technique, it is necessary to make a few observations about autothematism in music.

More than in any other artistic realm, the field of music is one where autothematism, the composer's reflection upon his art and his creative activity, in short all that can be called metamusic, blends with what we define as mirror game or doubling.

The variations, variations on an original theme, a musical form as ancient as it is common, are a good solution to this kind of preoccupation. So is the repetition, by the composer, of his own musical motifs. In the last scene of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, Don Giovanni, served by Leporello, is joyously celebrating to the sound of music which reproduces not only well-known melodies of the time, especially those of Soler and Sarti, but also the *Non più andrai* aria from *The Marriage of Figaro*, a work created shortly before. And in *Ein Heldenleben*, Richard Strauss repeats the melodies of his previous works, namely those found in his tone poems *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and *Don Juan*. Quite like Molière who is a character in his own play, or Courbet who becomes a subject of his painting, so Mozart and Strauss show and mirror themselves in the realm which is their own.

5. *L'espace et le regard*, Paris, Ed. du Seuil, 1965, pp. 248-249.

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MIRROR GAME

In Schönbrunn, as in other castles as well, there is a hall wherein two large mirrors, framed by chandeliers, have been installed, facing each other. When one is standing between the two, one sees oneself multiplied to infinity. It is rare that a work of art can attain this profusion which nature alone, helped, one must admit, by human ingenuity, is able to assure. But artists of all times, whether they be novelists, poets, playwrights, directors or painters, have been fascinated by this phenomenon and have tried to imitate it. A phenomenon called game of reflections, mirror game, doubling, and which at times comes close to objectification.

We mentioned the *Journal des faux-monnayeurs* as an example of autothematism. This time it is proper that we refer to the novel itself by Gide. In *Les faux-monnayeurs* "Edouard's Journal" is inserted at various times and the hero identifies with the author of the novel. Expressions such as "il sera difficile, dans *Les faux-monnayeurs*, de faire admettre que celui qui jouera ici mon personnage [...]," "je lui ai exposé longuement mon plan des *Faux-monnayeurs*," "écrit trente pages des *Faux-monnayeurs*," are found time and again. Thus the writer reflects himself in his created character, he tries to objectify himself in the latter, he doubles himself. Each time the title of the "external" book is equivalent to that of the "internal" book, as it happens in Irving Wallace's novel *The Seven Minutes*, then we are in the presence of a game of reflections.

We were dealing with a similar phenomenon when a dramatic author was a character in his play. However, we applied these cases to autothematism; they fitted the criteria of this much larger category, because it is defined by the particle *meta*. It seems indeed that in literature and in music this fourth group, the "mirror game," is contained in the previous group, wherein it forms a special and sometimes privileged variant.

This does not apply to the art of the theatre or of painting where the technique of doubling has a more appropriate material basis.

In the field of drama, the phenomenon of the mirror game is closely linked to the device of the play within the play. But

it may appear in different guises and we shall point out the most prominent ones.

When there is a show within the show, the existence of the audience for the inner play must be taken into consideration. This audience is sometimes unseen, imagined, "hidden" in the wings, but it also happens pretty often that it is present on the stage. In such an event, the traditional relationship between actors and audience, the strict separation between these two parties whose presence is vital for the existence of the performance, is at times somewhat upset. One particular group fulfills a double function, namely the audience of the inner play. They constitute or rather they play the role of the public of the play presented to them, but for us who are the audience of the "big" play, they never stop being characters in that play (i.e. the "big" play). We are thus dealing with a certain doubling in the roles of those who participate in the performance, both as actors and as audience.

There is nothing original in this situation, for it has been used in hundreds of plays ever since the process of the show within the show and the scene on stage exists. There is however a variant, rather rare, which is of interest to us as far as it ties in with the mirror game: the reproduction of the house, or of one part of it, at the back of the stage.

In the fifth scene of *Kean* by Dumas père, when Kean-Romeo plays the farewell scene with Juliet, one can see several characters "in a stage-box" and "in a box on the side." At the beginning of the first act of Bulgakov's *Molière*, one more or less senses, in the back, the full house which is "plunged in semi-darkness." "The interior of the theatre cannot be seen, except the box nearest the stage, gilded and empty." In the last scene of the play this loge is filled with "restless figures." But a more original solution than some others is suggested by the Polish poet and painter Wyspianski in the *November Night* (1904). One of the episodes in this drama takes place on the stage of the Variétés theatre in Warsaw, only that the stage is seen from behind and, in back, behind a transparent curtain, one can see the theatre, that is to say the audience of the inner play, who, incidentally, intervene in the course of the action. Let us add, for curiosity's sake, that a similar scenographic process has been used by the

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directors of music-hall spectacles. In 1910, Paris audiences could see, on stage in the Châtelet theatre, in *La petite caporale*, a faithful reproduction of the hall, with the orchestra, ground floor, three balconies and the peanut gallery. A mirror reflection, but an inanimated one.

Another kind of reflection in depth is suggested by Federico García Lorca in his "legend of time in three acts and four tableaux," *Así que pasen cinco años*. In the first scene of Act III one sees on the stage a little theatre, with a curtain and tent supports. At a specific moment "the curtains of the theatre open on the library of the first act, reproduced on a smaller scale and in very pale colors." The stage set of the following (and last) scene shows "the library of the first act." Thus we have, on the small stage, a pale and diminished reflection of the décor which opens and closes the play, therefore a décor "en abyme," the microcosm of the outer play.

The inner play may constitute the microcosm of the outer play not only at the level of scenic design, but also at the level of the plot. In *Hamlet, The Murder of Gonzago*, performed by the troupe of players, recreates the crime committed by Claudius. This "microplay" is a mirror which Hamlet holds up to his uncle and stepfather. "Il s'agit de faire ressentir à Claudius la culpabilité réelle qui correspondra—s'il est suffisamment bien joué—au spectacle du meurtre dont il est coupable".⁶ The king recognizes himself in it and he breaks the mirror which is handed to him, and the performance is interrupted. *Les acteurs de bonne foi* by Marivaux, who are Merlin, Blaise, Lisette and Colette, prepare a comedy where each one has a part that corresponds to his amorous involvements. In Lenz' play *Die Freunde machen den Philosophen*, Strephon tells Séraphine of his love through the intermediary of a drama about Ninon de Lenclos which they are performing. The puppet show shown in the prologue of *Los cuernos de Don Friolera* by Valle Inclán announces the subject of the play. In *La répétition ou l'amour puni* by Anouilh, the inner play is an authentic comedy written by Marivaux, *La double*

6. Ross Chambers, *La comédie au château. Contribution à la poétique du théâtre*, Paris, José Corti, 1971, pp. 33-34.

inconstance; but for the Count and Lucile their position in life corresponds to the one of the characters they portray in the play they are rehearsing. In his *L'architecte et l'empereur d'Assyrie*, Arrabal introduces a short scene, the "Petit Cérémonial," which is a miniature, a reflection of the entire drama.

There is a doubling of plot, but, under certain circumstances there is a doubling of a character when the latter is an actor playing a part in the inner play. Rotrou's *Saint Genest* (as well as its models) is a classic example of this. The problem of the actor identifying with the character he portrays, the question of objectivation, can be found down to the 20th century, to mention only Ghelderode's *La mort du docteur Faust* or the play of the Polish author Roman Brandstaedter *Saint Francis Theatre*, in which a contemporary actor, playing the role of the saint of Assisi, abandons the stage in order to carry out in real life the teachings of the *Poverello*.

Doubling, reflection and mirror are subterfuges which attract painters as well as dramatists. The mirror is the most commonly used tool to let human beings and objects reflect each other and thus present their double image. But it is not the only means, since any shiny surface can accomplish this function. Thus the face of Vermeer's *Woman Reading a Letter* (Dresden, Gemäldegalerie) is reflected on the panes of a window; and there are many *Narcissus* looking at his image in the waters of a fountain. The reflection in the water produces at times an almost ideal effect of doubling, as in *Le pont de Maincy* of Cézanne (Louvre) where the limit between two tree trunks and their replicas is almost imperceptible.

According to a tradition which goes back to the Middle Ages, "le miroir, lieu privilégié, capte les reflets d'une réalité supérieure et cachée" (Jean Frappier). Painters have always favored showing people from the back and having their faces appear only by means of a mirror. In *The Music Lesson* (London, Buckingham Palace) Vermeer makes us see the young woman's face in a mirror placed above the virginal. The same applies to his contemporary, Cornelis de Man, who shows one of the *Three Geographers* (Hamburg, Kunsthalle) from the back; his face is visible in a mirror above the terrestrial sphere. This process has been frequently used up

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to our times, Bonnard and Marquet being outstanding practitioners.

The mirror plays its vital role of revealing a hidden reality when it reflects (or is supposed to reflect) a world that is located outside the space represented in the painting itself. Thus the convex mirror hanging on the back wall, in Jan Van Eyck's *Portrait of Arnolfini and his Wife* (London, National Gallery), reflects not only the couple from the back, but two persons (one of them being probably the artist) who occupy the spot where the viewer of the painting is standing. We can see this process utilized again by Velasquez in *Las meninas*. Here is another example, often referred to and commented upon (e.g. by Gide): Quentin Matsys' *The Banker and his Wife* (Louvre), in which a small mirror lying on the table reproduces a window and another person.

It may occur that the mirror game is enhanced by the presence of an additional level. In the little known canvas by Vuillard, *Mme Hessel, rue de Rivoli* (Paris, private coll.), a wardrobe with three mirrors not only doubles the woman sitting at her desk, but also reflects a large room with a man and a pier-glass in which in turn another part of the apartment is reflected. Thanks to the mirror game three planes of reality are outlined. Let us point out that the doubling of an object by means of a mirror is sometimes far more than a technical game. *Madeleine au miroir* by Georges de La Tour (Fabius Coll.) touches a skull with her left hand while she contemplates the mirror on the table. She must see the reflection of her own face in it, but as far as we are concerned as we look at this scene, we see the skull reflected in the mirror. The image is full of symbolism and premonition, a "mise en abyme" of the reality "in the first degree" as represented by the artist.

* * *

We have distinguished four techniques—quotation, incasement, autothematism, mirror game—and the order we chose to present them was not a random one. There is a certain progression in that order in so far as it concerns the faculty of placing the work in question or its essential element "en abyme." It is obvious that

the mirror game is a more efficient means than a simple quotation when one wishes to emphasize the gap between two planes of represented reality. Nevertheless, the techniques which we have dealt with in single fashion, for the sake of analysis and systematizing, group themselves, are juxtaposed or enmeshed in certain works, and it is due to their encounter and their convergence that an exceptional intensity of expression is created which accounts for the feeling of the "mise en abyme."

Gide's *Paludes* was mentioned as an example of a narrative work where the four techniques meet and yet reinforce each other reciprocally. Similar phenomena are much less frequent in the realm of music. The reason being that sound adapts itself with difficulty to the notion of the mirror game, which is a typically visual and conceptual one. The echo as a device can be compared to it, but it is far from perfect as an equivalent. And yet composers searched and are still searching for the effect of the "mise en abyme" which goes beyond the formal game of sounds. So, for instance, in Mauricio Kagel's *Sonant (1960/...)*, the five instrumentalists recite texts commenting the music they are playing and commenting upon their own actions as well. But such works straddle two forms of expression, music and spoken words.

On the other hand, painting and theatre offer a vast opportunity for accumulating the means that serve to achieve the impression of a "mise en abyme."

Let us look at Velasquez' *Las meninas*, described and dissected so many times. The quotation is there with several canvases hanging on the wall, two of which have been identified by experts. Autothematism is found in its most common expression: the artist painted by himself, with his brush and palette, in front of the canvas which we see from behind. Incasement refers less to the painting in question (since we see only the backside of it), it is rather the man who appears in the open door in the background, and, even more convincingly, the charming representation of a couple—at first glance appearing to be a portrait hanging in the back of the room, a portrait which, upon more careful scrutiny, turns out to be a mirror reflecting the painter's two models. Now we have the mirror game, the fourth process used in *Las meninas*, a mirror which, together with the painter being represented, determines the "mise en abyme." The

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mirror's utility, it should be pointed out, is both centripetal and centrifugal. It captures the image of the royal couple which is the main character of Velasquez' work without figuring in it directly, and it gives us this image by unveiling the models for the artist at work. We are the spectators of this palace scene, we who visit the Museum of the Prado, but this also applies to the king and the queen, masters and subjects, since, according to the laws of optics and perspective, they are supposed to occupy the place which we occupy in front of the painting: the glance of the painter, as well as that of the infanta and a few other people are witness to it. There is then a sense of identification between the model (model for two reasons: the one on the canvas which we cannot see and the one belonging to a fragment of the real painting, namely the mirror) and the viewer, a viewer for all times, past and future. Thanks to the intervention of the mirror, not only is space overcome but time as well.

It is surprising to what an extent the baroque art of the 17th century delighted in using this kind of process, and did so, furthermore, in all the countries of Europe and in all fields. Seven years after the creation of *Las meninas*, Molière wrote and staged *L'impromptu de Versailles*, a play in which quotation, incasement and autothematism converge to have an analogous function to the one we just analyzed in connection with Velasquez' painting. Another parallel is the following: just as the mirror in the Spanish master's work guides us to the presence of Philip IV and his wife at the foreground of the pictorial space, thus Molière's comedy leads us constantly to Louis XIV, unseen and yet present in the next room.⁷

We shall turn to a modern descendant of Molière's *Impromptu*, namely Ionesco's *L'impromptu de l'Alma*, in order to find a synthesis of the processes in question and, above all, a "mise en abyme" which has rarely been equalled.

Quotation is amply used, although it is mostly implicit: Ionesco's playlet being a confrontation between the author and his critics, the latter are quoted a great deal. Autothematism constitutes the foundation of this play: Ionesco is its central

7. Let us point out that, three centuries later, Velasquez' painting became the subject of a play, *Las meninas*, by Antonio Buero Vallejo, written in 1960. The final scene of the drama re-evokes the famous canvas.

character, under his real name, Ionesco writing a play, “un crayon à bille dans une main,” like a painter with his brush. Incasement is represented by a fragment of his new play, *Le caméléon du berger*, which Ionesco starts to read over and over again to the Bartholomeus characters. And it is here, on this occasion, that a peculiar mirror game appears: the beginning of the new play is nothing else but the beginning of *L’impromptu de l’Alma* (which, as a matter of fact, has the subtitle of *Le caméléon du berger*). “C’est un cercle vicieux,” shouts Bartholomeus I. Indeed, as one goes on reading *Le caméléon du berger* one will again come upon the inner play, with Ionesco as its hero, and so on, without an end, like the song about the dog and the sausage. All of this recreates the effect which we already referred to, the vision of a person between two mirrors and whose reflections are multiplied to infinity until dizziness ensues.

All along the preceding sections we have mentioned dozens of works of which only a limited number could be analyzed. This sampling, restricted as it is, allowed us nevertheless to see the diversity of reasons which drew creative minds towards this kind of process, and it let us know the variety of the results achieved, on the aesthetic as well as on the ideological level. The main purpose of our endeavor was to give an overview, to discover parallels among several forms of expression and to show—in diverse periods and in different countries—the extent of the phenomenon and the vast quantity of the techniques which serve to place a work of art “en abyme.”

It is clear that thousands of other cases deserve a detailed analysis, which would certainly lead to fuller and more nuanced conclusions. Nevertheless, let us attempt to draw from our observations, however succinct they may be, a few rules that seem to determine the usage of the processes in question.

Quotation or incasement, autothematism or mirror game, each one of these techniques (and their combination even more so), implies the co-existence of two or more levels. The relationships between these levels, between the “outer” and the “inner” layer, are located on an axis which one may call resemblance/non-resemblance, analogy/contrast or convergence/divergence. The clash of these extremes brings about highly dramatic situations, and it is the transition from one to the other which

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achieves the most striking effects. This occurs in *Hamlet*, or in Georges de La Tour’s *Madeleine au miroir*, or in Stockhausen’s *Hymnen*.

The purpose of these processes, so widespread and applicable to various fields of artistic endeavor, is therefore to break up uniformity of a work of art, to superimpose various plans, to create a certain depth and to play with this difference of levels in one way or another. The rift which appears within a work after these expedients have been applied, may result in several effects. Here are three which assert themselves forcibly:

First of all, distanciation in the wide sense, a certain withdrawal from the primary reality represented by the artist, a parenthesis in that reality, at times the creator standing back from his own discourse.

Secondly, there is the matter of querying the inherent illusion that pertains to each work of art, by confronting it with a second illusion. And this obliges the consumer, the one who perceives, to go from one level of fiction to another.

And finally there are philosophical and ideological, moral and didactic considerations. Since, at a specific time, the political and social reality of a human grouping, is founded on different registers, often antinomical and incompatible, a game on two or more levels allows these contradictions to become apparent, it is the device through which one expresses what is unstated and non-statable, one unveils an underlying truth. And this may well be the supreme mission of the art “en abyme.”