THE LITERARY THEORY OF
MISE EN ABYME AND
ITS PHILOSOPHICAL MEANING

MISE EN ABYME AND MIRRORING

Dällenbach, following Magny (1950), views an 1893 paragraph from Gide's Diaries as the first theory and founding "charter" of mise en abyme:

> 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 Velazquez'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.[1]

A major principle which Dällenbach draws from the charter is that the mise en abyme, as a means by which the work turns back on itself, "appears to be a kind of reflection."[2] Indeed, literary theorists and philosophers alike have associated the mise en abyme with the emblem of the mirror right from the start. The type of mirror which they usually invoke, however, is unique—infinite parallel mirrors ("two mirrors would in fact suffice!"[3])—a device which Deleuze, following Bergson, also terms "dynamic" or "mobile" mirroring. The specular relation prevailing in mise en abyme, writes Ricardou, "is not that of a still mirror, but a dialectical one which elaborates itself, incessantly resettles itself, and which escapes any immobilization."[4] Whilst the static mirror bears a relation of correspondence with the object it reflects, so that one can stably determine any part of the mirror-image to represent a part of the person gazing at the mirror (and that part alone) in the mobile mirror one stands on moving sands. In a mobile mirror where "A reflects B while being reflected by it in continuous mirror effects,"[5] the "selves" (and features) of both the reflecting device and the reflected object incessantly change. Mirror A cannot reflect mirror B without being *always already* a different subject reflecting a different object, it is retroactively transformed into a conjunction such as (mirror A within mirror B), that is, mirror C. The subject and object of the mobile mirror bear not a "coded" identity, to use Deleuze's terminology, but only a "situational" one, deriving from a here and now constellation. This also means that though a difference between the reflected and the reflecting does persist, one cannot stably discern here two respective substances, that is, determine which is the origin and which is the copy. There is no unique, singular, "first time," preceding other instances of repetition temporally or qualitatively: The mise en abyme "does not redouble the unit, as an external reflection might do; in so far as it is an internal mirroring, it can only ever split it in two."[6]

The subject and the object of mirroring, incessantly changing, do not preexist the here-and-now juxtaposition between them. This is to say that the true object of reflection in mobile mirroring is neither the person gazing at the mirror, nor the mirror reflecting this person, but the very "middle" between them, their very juxtaposition. Correspondingly, if *La Tentative amoureuse,* as Gide writes in the charter, "explains much better what he strove for," it is due to bearing what Dällenbach calls a "relational mise en abyme." Mise en abyme, writes Gide, reproduces the "subject of the work itself." Bal notes the ambiguity of the word "sujet," which may designate either the subject-matter or the creative, grammatical, and narrating subject.

Gide, she writes, "was interested primarily in the power of the narrating subject, a power which seems to increase when the subject doubles itself."[7] But, contrary to Bal's interpretation, *La Tentative* in fact shows interest in neither the subject matter, nor the narrating subject. What reproduces itself in *La Tentative* is rather *the relation between the two*: the subject is duplicated "as soon as the work begins."[8] This novel not only attributes to a character in the narrative the activity of the narrator in charge of the narration, but also poses an analogy between the situation of the character and that of the narrator, so that its mise en abyme is "a relationship of relationships, the relation of the narrator N to his/her story S being the same as that of the narrator/character n to his/her story s."[9] If Gide dismissed Poe's story and others' as imperfect examples it is because "the duplication they provide only comprises two of the four terms required (N:S::n:s)";[10] mise en abyme, to stress again, doubles no simple, but what is split into two at its very origin, what is retroactively *already* double. Indeed, in a paragraph adjacent to the "charter"—later to inspire Blanchot—Gide explains the mise en abyme in terms of a mechanism of retroaction:

> I wanted to indicate In *La Tentative* the influence the book has on the author while he is writing it . . . A subject cannot act on an object without retroaction by the object on the subject that is acting . . . An angry man tells a story—this is the subject of the book. A man telling a story is not enough—it must be an angry man and there must always be a continuing relationship between the man's anger and the story he's telling.[11]

In mise en abyme, as in the double mirror, a subject of reflection becomes retroactively its object. In the other adjunct paragraph it is already explicitly a "double mirror" Gide reflects on:

> I am writing on the small piece of furniture of Anna Shackleton's that was in my bedroom in the rue de Commailles. That's where I worked; I liked it because I could see myself writing in the double mirror of the desk above the block I was writing on.[12]

I am not sure how Gide could view himself writing while writing, but it is definitely the case that only in a double mirror can one view oneself gazing at the mirror, that, contrary to the still mirror, one can gaze at the object

of reflection and the process, or subject, of reflection, *at one and the same time*. Such principle of simultaneity between incommensurable logical or narrative levels also governs, as we shall see, the mise en abyme. Certainly, in the "charter" itself it is rather convex mirroring which served as Gide's criterion in selecting pictorial examples, but Deleuze would later show convex mirroring to precisely share with double mirroring the principle of simultaneity. Like mobile mirroring, reflecting not only an external object but also the very reflecting device, the convex mirror, capable of condensing within itself almost the entire field of vision that is presented on the canvas, allows the painter to "perform the paradoxical feat of including observer and observed together in the painting."[13]

What Gide terms "retroaction" is the breaking of linearity between cause and effect. The man's telling the story as a cause of the story becomes, through "an act of retroaction," an effect of that story. This system thus comprises two incompatible moments. On the one hand, the cause gains temporal and qualitative priority over the effect. On the other hand—it is the effect which gains such priority; the mechanism of retroaction entails a double articulation, with the two discontinuous "slopes"—to use Blanchot's terminology—separated by an irreducible gap. If metaphysics throughout history invoked the static mirror paradigm—entailing a substance-based distinction between the reflected and the reflecting—to impose binary values upon free-floating variants, poststructuralist philosophy would invoke the double mirror—entailing the irreducible gap of retroaction—to pursue the "difference in itself," unmediated by the binary logic of representation.

It was by taking interest in the poetics of the mise en abyme that philosophers adopted the emblem of infinite mirroring. At the same time, it was through attentiveness to the contemporary philosophical discourse that poeticians like Ricardou were careful to establish a qualitative distinction between static and mobile mirroring, associating mise en abyme with the latter alone. Dällenbach is salient among poeticians who remained blurry as to this distinction. On the one hand, it was he who identified that in Gide's supreme example of mise en abyme, the "relational mise en abyme," "reflexion of reflexion" is a governing principle. Furthermore, in his definition of mise en abyme as "any internal mirror that reflects the whole of the narrative by simple, repeated or 'specious' (or paradoxical) duplication,"[14] he incorporates the term "internal mirror," which Ricardou, as we saw, has already used as an equivalent to mobile mirroring.

On the other hand, he negligently overlooks that it is in fact a *double* mirror which Gide mentions in his paragraph on mirroring, and he recounts

"images of mirroring" among writers and theoreticians of mise en abyme, without any discrimination between static and mobile ones.[15] Finally, in articulating the three types of the mise en abyme, he seems to understand this distinction as rather quantitative. The term mise en abyme, he says, applies to three essential figures, corresponding to three "aspects of mirror reflection":

a) simple duplication, represented by the shield within the shield, where a sequence is connected by similarity to the work that encloses it;

b) infinite duplication, represented by infinite parallel mirrors, where a sequence is connected by similarity to the work that encloses it and itself includes such sequence; and

c) aporetic duplication, where a sequence that is supposed to be enclosed within the work also encloses it.[16] This type is represented by the Liar's paradox or other contradictory statements such as "there cannot be anything other than a personal philosophy" (which is itself a personal statement claiming to be a general proposition). At the same time it is represented—like the infinite duplication—by Gide's *The Counterfeiters*, where the main narration "cannot be captured in a single mirror, but is projected, through various filters, in a series of mirrors that open up dizzying perspectives."[17]

These three underlie three types of mise en abyme, respectively: the "simple," the "infinite," and the "paradoxical" (indicted as types I–III in Dällenbach's typology). What is notable here is Dällenbach's implicit association of the "simple type" of mise en abyme—including Gide's important figure of the shield-within-shield—with the still mirror. Alternatively, these "aspects of mirroring" do not correspond to empirical types of mirroring—the simple and the mobile—at all, or else the "infinite" and "aporetic" would not have been differentiated. This indicates Dällenbach's disinterest in the actual mirroring devices and their phenomenology, so that the "mirror reflection" in Dällenbach is an abstract genus whose three "aspects," continuous to each other, differ in quantity rather than quality.

Dällenbach, I will show further on, often employs a conscious and methodical ambiguity in his research on mise en abyme. This is not, however,

the case here. His blurriness regarding the significance of mobile mirror-ing would have been avoided had Dällenbach, like Ricardou, been aware of the ontological paradigm shift—from still to mobile mirroring—which contemporary philosophers, invoking mise en abyme, have conducted.

THE DOUBLE-BIND OF THE MISE EN ABYME

If the first distinctive feature of the mise en abyme—the essential and indi-visible feature that distinguishes it from other literary notions—is the idea of reflexivity, the second, writes Dällenbach, is its immanence in the text: Mise en abyme is a "transposition of the subject *at the level of the characters.*" Immanent reflexion is "hypodiegetic" (or "metadiegetic" in Gérard Genette's lexicon[18]). If Achilles and the Tortoise in Hofstadter distract themselves from a tense predicament by reading a story in which two characters called Achilles and the Tortoise read this very story, then "Hofstadter's dialogue projects a primary world, or *diegesis*, to which Achilles and the Tortoise belong. Within that world they read a story which projects a *hypodiegetic* world, one level down from their own. The characters of *that* world, in turn, enter the hypo-hypodiegetic world . . . ; and so on."[19] What Gide was setting out to exclude were reflexive elements that do not concern the "diegesis," or the spatiotemporal universe of the narrative, such as personal intervention by the author within the narrative, or prologues.

However, true "immanence" according to Dällenbach cannot involve the abolition of narratological "transcendence." It rather consists of putting these two vectors—the immanent and the transcendent—in "simple juxta-position, with no logical constraint necessarily governing the enterprise,"[20] to use Ollier's words. Far from adhering to binary values (entailing as such, as we shall see, a mediating and reconciling unity), this dyad consists in "double meaning"[21]—what Deleuze would term a "double articulation" or "double bind"[22]—two competing hypotheses whose differences cannot ever be reconciled or mediated. Specifically, the reflective utterance (that which conveys the double) operates in two incompatible series at one and the same time. On the one hand, it "continues to signify like any other utterance," succumbing to and reaffirming the totalitarianism of the hegemonic narra-tive. On the other hand, it "intervenes as an element of metasignification,"[23] an autonomous element, the "other in the text,"[24] that as such diversifies the discourse.

Correspondingly, mise en abyme is "neither opaque nor transparent,"[25] neither an allegory, nor a symbol—as understood by Ricœur. Allegory is signified only by means of *formal* reasoning: A is to B as C is to D. This means that its figurative meaning is external to, and not directly accessible from, its literal one, and its literal meaning could be easily exchanged by another, as long as formal relations between the literal and the figurative are maintained. Allegory is hence "transparent": "once the translation is made, the henceforth useless allegory can be dropped,"[26] as it has no more to contribute to the understanding of the figurative. By contrast,

> In the symbol, I cannot objectify the analogical relation that connects the second meaning with the first. It is by living in the first meaning that I am led by it beyond itself; the symbolic meaning is constituted in and by the literal meaning which effects the analogy in giving the analogue . . . The symbol makes us participate in the latent meaning and thus assimilates us to that which is symbolized without our being able to master the similitude intellectually.[27]

Symbolic signs are opaque "because the first, literal, obvious meaning itself points analogically to a second meaning which is not given otherwise than in it."[28] The symbol—a crucifix, a flag, etc.—constitutes its figurative level as much as it represents it; it represents something, writes Gadamer, "by taking its place."[29] Rather than a formal, fully demonstrable relation of translation between the literal and figurative meanings, the symbol comprises a dissimulation between the two. To use Heideggerian terminology, rather than *adequatio* or correspondence, the truth of the symbol consists in *aletheia* or "self-disclosing"; symbolic analogy is situated in time, so that the analogy "happens," and is always "more" than its (extra-temporal) formalization. Rather than judgment—a comparison of the two sides of the analogy—the symbol consists in giving "faith" in, an "engagement" with one of the two sides, namely the analogue or literal level of the symbol. The symbol provides the analogue which has no existence in disconnection with the symbol. It is by "giving in," by "living in the first meaning" that a reader is led by it beyond himself.[30]

Now the interesting point is that mise en abyme is in fact both an allegory and a symbol. On the one hand, by presenting the content of the whole book in a limited space and by saying the same thing as the story

elsewhere, mise en abyme—like a symbol—establishes itself as a self-presenting segment. On the other hand, as in the case of allegory—whose signification depends on a judging, transcendental party—it is the text itself, not only, or initially, the primary meaning of the reflexive sequence that "enacts the analogy by providing the analogue."[31] One can only give a reflexive value to a sequence, says Dällenbach, if the text signals so (for instance, by creating homonymy between the characters of the inserted and enclosing narrative) or if "this is justified by the text as a whole."[32]

　　Bal (1978) here accuses Dällenbach of being a "closet intentionalist," recovering a "consciousness" which is not immanent in the text, functioning as a substance which regulates and directs its reading, interpretation and criticism. But in truth it is rather in order to avoid substantialism that Dällenbach sets these maxims. In fact, according to Dällenbach, and somewhat to Ron, it is precisely those "who are obsessed with this notion and find it anywhere,"[33] that subordinate the text to substances, by applying pre-established categories of similarity between the reflected and the reflecting, such that are either empty ("any human character is, in some sense, an icon of Man"[34]), or are uncovered only by means of a thorough critical retrospection that can by no means be compatible with a textual immanence. We shall later see how Derrida, being one of those to "find mise en abyme anywhere" (by applying it to textuality in general), also as a result fell—if we are to follow Deleuze's criticism—into the trap of substantialism. What Dällenbach acknowledges is that it is never by negating the transcendental factor that one allows textual immanence, but rather by putting the latter in coexistence with the former. Consisting of a double articulation, mise en abyme comprises the "middle" between these two vectors, an "economy" of totalitarianism (of the dominant text) and defiance (of the autonomous, reflective, segment).

　　In other words, it is not in itself that the autonomy of the reflexive segment can embody a textual alterity. To the contrary, the reflective utterance bears the potential of substituting one totalitarianism—that of the hegemonic narrative—with another—that of the reflective segment. Self-presenting, the segment, writes Dällenbach, functions as (a Ricœurian) symbol, with which one engages in a "hermeneutics of faith," a concept drawing on the Heideggerian hermeneutic circle: " 'Believe in order to understand, understand in order to believe'—such is its maxim; and its maxim is the 'hermeneutic circle' itself of believing and understanding."[35] However, writers, as we shall see, criticized Heidegger's hermeneutic circle (or the precomprehension of Being latent in the question of Being) for reinstating rather than destroying the truth of Being as a "transcendental signified." Despite comprising

a "to-and-fro movement" between the two poles of the primordial differ-ence—the ontological and the ontic—the ontological precedes the latter in both the qualitative and the temporal sense, so that "Being" functions as a totalizing ideal rather than a function of difference. To use entirely differ-ent terms and context, the autonomous, metasignifying segment can rather reinforce textual totalitarianism, provided the two become stagnated into a Russellian meta-level/object-level structure. In order to solve the paradox of classes—which we shall discuss further—Russell, in his theory of logi-cal types (1922, 1956), postulates that a class is of a higher type than its members and should not be confused with them. But in such a structure, seemingly incompatible levels are in fact "reconciled," being distributed onto well-distinguished loci upon a hierarchy or a unity. In mise en abyme, to the contrary, such hierarchy "becomes ambiguously reversible."[36] It breaks with such hierarchy, because far from being confined to a single logical or narrative level it is an object that participates *at once* in mutually exclusive levels—both the signifying level and the metasignifying one.

If mise en abyme diversifies the work's discourse; if it forgrounds the "other in the text," it is ironicaly for refusing to blindly succumb to the particularistic and anti-totalitarian banner raised by the reflective utterance. Instead, it puts this anti-totalitarian call *in juxtaposition* with the totalitarian claim of the hegemonic text. There exists in fact a circularity, or even a "mise en abyme" in Dällenbach's very determination of mise en abyme. If mise en abyme is the "other in the text," if it challenges the dominant text's claim for totality and interrupts the consecutive, linear order of time such total-ity implies, it is not so much because it embodies the small-scale segment that duplicates the whole—thus "challenging" it by means of paradoxes of time, space and causality—but rather because it populates *the seam between that segment and the totalizing whole that embeds it*; it comprises these two incommensurable poles of the bind—the "particularistic" segment on the one hand, the totalizing text on the other—at one and the same time. Far from bearing a coded, "internal" essence, mise en abyme "only becomes such through the duplicative relationship it admits itself into with one or other aspect of the narrative,"[37] a "pure becoming," in Deleuze's terms, to the extent that it is even doubtful "whether a poetics of such a grafted-on function is possible."[38] Difference, for Deleuze, I note in advance, would be likewise a dynamic, complex and always already second-degree entity, such that comprises incommensurable yet "resonating" poles—the Same and the Different at one and the same time. If for Dällenbach the immanence of the mise en abyme means a temporal and logical "interruption to the

diegesis,"[39] it is not—as Bal believes—due to the "relay of focalization,"[40] an equivocality caused by the relegation of narration to a character on the hypodiegetic or metadiegetic level, but rather due to the two incommensurable perspectives paradoxically forming a *univocal* diegesis.

Ricardou demonstrates this "economy" of otherness through exploring a mise en abyme in the myth of Oedipus—the sphinx's riddle. "What creature walks on four feet in the morning, two at noon, and three at night?"—"It is man"—replies Oedipus correctly, thus defeating the monster, winning the throne of the dead king, and winning the hand in marriage of the king's widow, his mother, Jocasta. But this is precisely why the solution was also in truth the supreme error. It is by answering correctly that Oedipus *engenders* the true solution to the enigma, which is "Oedipus himself": Who, more than any other, has dragged on four feet during his childhood, stood upright before the sphinx, and finally, blinded, been in need of a walking stick? Oedipus "has indeed made appeal to the saving principle of the mise en abyme, but his timing has remained most imprecise."[41] To perceive an utterance to be reflective also necessitates a knowledge of the text, "a progressive assimilation of all the narrative."[42] The mise en abyme is the "structural revolt of a fragment of narrative against the ensemble which contains it," but the text inevitably "takes revenge": "To what do we turn in truth if not to the revenge of the basic, monovalent narrative . . . against the structural disruptions that the mise en abyme brought to it?"[43] The reflective text is given to "a subtle, tricky game . . . between the hegemonic and the challenging," so that the text "is never enclosed within a single territory,"[44] but rather, the ground upon which mise en abyme encounters the dominant text is diversified *in the first place*. As in mobile mirroring where A cannot reflect B without becoming retroactively the reflected object, an "attack" of A over the hegemonic narrative B is displaced by the very action. It becomes retroactively a counter attack, which in turn, as Blanchot would extensively develop in his mechanism of worklessness, is displaced as well. A transgression of the given toward the exterior entails "the overture of the infinite movement,"[45] an infinite series of crossings and recrossings.

In addition to his main typology, which I will introduce in the next section, Dällenbach recounts three types of dissonance between the time of the narrative and the time of the reflective figure; three manifestations of the attack/counterattack dialectics:

(i) The "prospective" mise en abyme, situated more or less at the beginning of the narrative, reflects the story to come. The "dissonance" which it causes is due to its "overtaking" the fiction, leaving it with "only

a past for its future," a room for maneuver limited to reflecting back on this previous reflection. However, as in Ricardou's economy of challenge/revenge, "any 'story within the story' must necessarily challenge the development of the chronology (by being reflexive) while respecting it."[46] The temporal interruption caused by the prospective mise en abyme is effective only if completed by "respecting" the main text, for example if, instead of taking away all the "anecdotal interest" from the fiction by "programming it forcefully," the prospective mise en abyme would provoke tension or gradually enhance the reader's expectations.[47]

(ii) The "retrospective" mise en abyme. If the prospective mise en abyme challenges the text by saying everything before the fiction has really started, the final or terminal mise en abyme has nothing to say save repeating what is already known. Such conforming can only be avoided by "moving on to a higher plane and universalizing the meaning of the narrative."[48] To this end, the mise en abyme might "form a pact" with the themes of the narrative in the shape of a symbol that "seems destined to terminate but never to conclude."[49] However, if a symbol engulfs its figurative meaning, if the latter is not given otherwise than through the symbol, then a mise en abyme embodied by a symbol "transcends transcendence."[50] It entails a peculiar case where mise en abyme, which by definition occupies an inferior narrative level, is found located on a higher level than the primary narrative. It is a paradoxical case where a segment of the text nonetheless precedes and even engenders the whole. Ricardou calls such case "*mise en périphérie*":

> If the mise en abyme illuminates the fiction, isn't it sometimes so, because it engenders that fiction out if its own image? . . . We should sometimes not hesitate to overturn the entire figure and replace the idea of a micro-narration as a mise en abyme of a macro-story, by the assumption of a macro-story as a *mise en périphérie* of a micro-narration.[51]

An example of such *mise en périphérie*, where the macro-narration becomes a "periphery" of the micro one, is *La Mise en scène* by Claude Ollier. Lassalle, a geologist, arrives at Imlil in the hills of French Morocco. His mission amounts to establishing links: Between a mine and the road below, and between the murder of Jamila, a local girl, and the disappearance of Lessing, his predecessor in this mission, whom Lassalle has every reason to believe also recently met his death in the same region. Toward the middle of the book, while Lassalle is dedicated to his second task, a "proof" breaks out.

Coming fantastically from the past of another memory, an engraving on a prehistoric stone assembles a whole pertinent scene:

> A person straddling a moderately-sized quadruped (a small donkey?) brandishes a mallet with which he threatens a child prostrated with joined hands beside him, to the right. On the opposite side, a body is reclining behind the animal, arms flung wide. In the absence of perspective, the body is shown standing up, but at a lower level than those of the other characters, as if the animal, upon passing, had plowed him straight under the earth: the man has just been struck and lies there, dead or fatally wounded. Still farther to the left, at normal level, a second animal is receding with a raised hoof.[52]

The figures engraved on the stone sum up Lassalle's own story as well as those of Lessing and Jamila: Any foreigner who ascends to those high regions on the left route will fall victim to a deadly assault, while his successor, adopting the right route, will pass through unscathed. "Left" and "right," one must observe, however, are relative directions that can serve in no geographical "outside"; they are designators endemic to the stone, or, more accurately, to the *literal depiction* of that stone in the story. The plot is modeled on *générateurs* which are related referentially to no "outside reality." The interplay between the *words* "right" and "left" *generates* right and left—on the referential level. While mise en abyme usually only *reflects* the work it is embedded in, in the case of *La Mise en scène*, the mise en abyme—despite being a mere segment of the narration, and an object in its spatiotemporal universe, paradoxically *engenders* that universe, which becomes a "periphery" of its mise en abyme. The stone is a "startling otherness," says Ricardou, due to fulfilling the attack/counterattack principle in a unique manner: engendering the narrative it forms a segment of, it breaches its unity and undermines its homogeneity.

(iii) The "retro-prospective" mise en abyme*,* provides a fulcrum between the "already" and the "not yet," passing from recall to prophecy, from deduction to induction. A prime example is in *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, where the titular character finds, to his surprise, a book, a miniature version of *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, which articulates his present and immediate past in uninterrupted succession. Consequently, the protagonist (and the reader, looking over his shoulder) "can easily infer that a book that contains his past and his present so exactly can also be prophetic."[53] By including the

"fulfillment' (the second part of the book) at the very heart of the "expec-
tation" (the first part), this mise en abyme causes "irreparable damage to
the consecutive order of the narrative," it "allows past, present and future
to become interchangeable."[54] But such disruption to the "universe" of the
narrative succumbs once again to Ricardou and Dällenbach's principle of
revolt and "counterattack." We read in Novalis: "Someone in the midst
of this crowd had caught Heinrich's attention—a man he thought he had
seen frequently at his side in the book."[55] As in Gide's mechanism of "ret-
roaction," according to which "a subject cannot act on an object without
retroaction by the object on the subject that is acting,"[56] the mise en abyme,
the reflecting segment, participates *at once* in both discontinuous vectors of
the work—the "presumed" and the "resumed." A person presumed to exist
is now resumed to exist, and the retro-prospective mise en abyme, in the
form of the inserted book, always already "turns back" on the text, thus
"implementing" and "dominating" it. It flickers between being the object of
interpretation and being the subject and the key to the interpretation of the
novel; between subverting the work's chronological order, and functioning
as *an ordinary object* in the work's diegesis. The "retro-prospective" mise en
abyme produces *a single, yet pluralistic time*, "threads of memory" for which
Deleuze would invoke it in articulating his "synthesis of the past," modeled
on Bergson's concept of "duration."

STRATA AND UNDERCURRENTS
IN THE TYPOLOGY OF THE MISE EN ABYME

What underlies Ricardou's typology of the mise en abyme, or "cross of
auto-presentation," is his conception of the narrative as an arena of struggle
between two basic vectors, the "ideological" and the "generative," of which
the "revolt-counterattack" mechanism is only derivative. Ideological forces
attempt to subjugate the text to totalizing ideals—such as the "self" of
romanticism or the "real life" of realism—to which the text serves as a
mere copy, a cliché. Their objective is "to conceal the text," to deprive it of
specificity by "setting a correspondence between what is to be said and the
text which says it."[57] Such ideal takes over the surface and infrastructure of
thought so fiercely that it becomes "an absolute, pure and simple common
sense."[58] It is this "too readily approachable tyranny" that the counter vector of
text—that of generation and specificity—defies, aiming to maintain the text's
"particularistic" nature. Ideological forces overtake narrations and narratives

through reinforcing the referential level of the narrative which points to an extra-linguistic universe—either real or imaginary. The generative vector on the other hand, concerns the literal or material level of the text, the medium through which that universe is communicated or created: The letters, the words, even the ink. The referential and the literal levels of signification are inversely proportionate: "The reader can perceive one only at the expense of the other,"[59] by effacing it at least temporarily, or by subjugating it to the other. A text is then generative when the referential dimension—the diegesis or story-universe—is "in service" of the literal level rather than vice versa. Since the latter is essentially specific and contingent—*no two material levels are identical*—the work modeled on it is a singularity, a leap from totality, and its story—rather than reaffirming a presupposed ideal—comprises a "dramatization of its own working."[60]

Two types of mise en abyme in Ricardou's cross reaffirm the vector of ideology: In type 3, "the horizontal, referential auto-representation," certain aspects of the referential level reflect certain others. As in "The House of Usher," "the story imitates the story."[61]

In type 1, the "vertical, descending auto-representation," aspects of the literal dimension of the work are modeled on certain characteristics of the referential, "the writing is subordinate to the story."[62] In this mise en abyme (which Dällenbach would call "textual mise en abyme"), the predominance of the referential level is affirmed even more strongly, as this mise en abyme lays bare not the concrete, specific, literal dimension of the text, but its general representation, the literal level *as already fictionalized by the narrative*.

In the two other types, by contrast, the mise en abyme manifests the generative forces of the work. In type 2—the "vertical, ascending auto-representation"—certain aspects of the referential dimension are modeled on certain characteristics of the literal dimension, "the story is subordinate to the writing."[63] This category applies mainly to the "generative" novel, a subgenre of the *nouveau roman* descending from Raymond Roussel, and in whose development Ricardou, as both a novelist and a critic, played a key role. In this genre lettristic, syllabic, phonetic, and directly or indirectly anagrammatic factors serve as linguistic generators. In Roussel's "Parmi les Noirs," for example, the plot consists of two sequences. The one recounts events of a certain Balancier, a writer of a novel concerning an old African plunderer (*un vieux pillard*). The other recounts events pertaining to the narrator, a publisher of Balancier, entertaining friends in a country cottage and inscribing a cryptogram on an old billiard board (*un vieux billard*). The two sequences on the level of reference are thus assembled and consequently

generated by a contingent constituent, the purely literal difference between *b* and *p*. Despite the exotic titles, writes Morrissette, "nothing in [Roussel's] works came from outside reality; everything came from inside the text, from the words, their relationships, their interplay."[64] The generative work is generative because the referential dimension (the diegesis or fictional world) is in service of the literal (the letters, the ink, even the book-cover) rather than vice versa, and since the latter is essentially specific and contingent, the work is a singularity. In one of the most striking examples of this genre, Ricardou's novel *La Prise de Constantinople*, the settings, characters, episodes, and descriptions all derive from the letters, syllables, and typographical aspects of the title page itself.

Type 4, the "horizontal, literal auto-representation," is also generative. Certain aspects of the literal dimension of the work serve here as a model for the rest: "writing imitates writing."[65] For example, the syllable OI in Robbe-Grillet's "Three Reflected Visions," common to two major aspects of the functioning of the whole—the trOIs of the triad, and the mirOIr of the reflection the work opens with—also bursts forth in paragraphs that reflect those aspects. Dällenbach would denounce such anagrams—reflecting parts, never the whole of the narrative—as "diffusing" mise en abyme or blurring its distinction from metaphors in general. Ricardou, on the other hand, views type 4 as the ultimate mise en abyme. Like the double mirror, where the subject of mirroring is indistinguishable from its object, the anagram bears "jigsaw" contours, incomplete in essence hence open to its outside.

Dällenbach, we previously saw, distinguished three types of mise en abyme based on three "aspects of mirroring": the simple, the infinite, and the aporetic. If the level of types concerns the "essence" or "form" of mise en abyme, he now moves to introducing four "elementary mises en abyme," "species" in Bal's words, that concern an extrinsic factor—the object of duplication:

1. The "mise en abyme of the utterance" or "fictional mise en abyme," is equivalent to Type 3 in Ricardou's typology. It reflects the referential aspect of the utterance as a "story" or fiction narrated.

2. The "textual mise en abyme," is equivalent to Ricardou's Type 1. It reveals not the actual literary level of a work, but a fictional entity "without being mimetic of the text itself,"[66] a textuality which is already engulfed by the "story."

It is therefore "a sub-category of the mise en abyme of the utterance."[67] An example of this species is the emblematic metaphor of the text as "fabric," as found in the last pages of Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. Text and textiles, interlinked arrangements of elements, are both being interwoven.[68]

3. The "mise en abyme of the enunciation" makes present in the diegesis the anonymous, faceless, producer, production, receiver, or reception of the narrative. Don Quixote, for example, makes a narrative scandal by allowing the characters in the second part to judge the first part (from which they have escaped, as it were). In this mise en abyme, the narrative tries to track down the invisible, immanent author and reader. However, the pre-eminence of the referential vector of the text is again in action. Whilst Ricardou's Types 2 and 4 claim to lay bare the *concrete* production, reception, and literal-material level of a given work, Dällenbach dismisses such possibility, believing them to bring off but an illusion which will "sooner or later be undone."[69] The text and production which mise en abyme can uncover, he believes, are themselves fictional entities, mere *representations* of text and production.

4. The function of the fourth species, the transcendental mise en abyme*,* is to reveal something in the text that apparently transcends the text, and to reflect, within the narrative, on what simultaneously "originates, motivates, institutes and unifies it."[70] In Beckett's *Watt*, for example, we find a picture in Erskine's room comprising a circle and—in the background—a point, or dot, inscribing decentering at the very center of the text, but also guaranteeing ("in an era where the Logos which hangs over the entire history of Western metaphysics no longer subtends words"), the "unfolding of a text deprived of any anchor."[71] However, like the textual and enunciative mises en abyme, this series reflects only a fictionalized "origin" of a work. Since the originating reality is—"by definition," believes Dällenbach—out of reach or already duplicated by the time it comes into play, the transcendental mise en abyme "can only put forward a fiction (or a metaphor) of it."[72]

In Dällenbach, therefore, we are faced with four species of mises en abyme which eventually merge into one—the fictional mise en abyme. He views the text, the production and the origin revealed by the mise en abyme, as *already* engulfed by the referential level, being part of a fiction rather than the pragmatic circumstances that surround it. This is superficially a harsh monistic stance, and an adherence to a "metaphysical" tradition that has ascribed to these elements of reading, as Derrida taught, the status of *parergon*, "what is only an adjunct, not an intrinsic constituent of meaning,"[73] a fall away from the "essence" rather than a factor defined in its own terms.

In truth, however, such monism is but one out of two incommensurable "slopes" (to use Blanchot's terms) in Dällenbach's typology. Recurring all through *Le Récit* is a methodological ambiguity. Dällenbach establishes a tight formalist model, only to overturn it, to search for "a gap, a contradiction, a point where the project breaks down."[74] He does so drawing on Blanchot's philosophy of ambiguity, Derrida's deconstructionist method, and Roman Jakobson's principle of "dynamic synchronicity,"[75] but above all, this methodologically ambiguous criticism aims at compatibility with the double bind of the mise en abyme, the fact that the latter comprises its other at its very "originary" self.[76]

The "gap," the pluralizing factor which Dällenbach introduces into his typology, is first manifested by an "inevitable implication" of the predominance of the mise en abyme of the utterance, the fact that it governs the formation of the level of types. What determines the simple, infinite and aporetic mises en abyme is the degree of analogy between the mise en abyme of the utterance and the object it reflects:

> It is according to whether the basic reflexion reflects a similar work (resemblance), the same work (mimetism) or the work itself (identity) that it engenders respectively type I, II, or III.[77]

The mise en abyme of the utterance governs the transition between the types through increasing or decreasing the level of this analogy. Type III, for instance, the "infinite," emerges by injecting the title of the book itself into the diegesis or by the inclusion of the book in a reflexive sequence that substitutes it.[78] Whilst his ascribing predominance to the mise en abyme of the utterance is fairly reductionist, Dällenbach, at the same time, exploits the subversive implication of this ascription. Despite concerning an extrinsic factor—the object of duplication—and therefore being subjugated to the level of types, the level of species in fact manipulates the formation of types and the transition between them.

The second "pluralizing gap" Dällenbach infuses into his typology is an ambiguity with regard to the transcendental mise en abyme. This species:

> . . . can never be put in the same footing as any other mise en abyme, since it is linked to that which determines all of them. If the transcendental mise en abyme is a metaphor of the primary instance that constitutes the meaning of meaning and enables signs to communicate, does it not follow that it reflects the code of codes, namely that which regulates the possibility of bringing elementary reflexions into play, governs the form of those which are exploited by the narrative and ensures that they form one type rather than another?[79]

While previously viewed as making present in the narrative only a fictionalized origin, here the transcendental mise en abyme is said to reflect a real "code of codes," capable of bringing other reflections into play. What underlies this ambiguity is the Blanchotian meaning and context which Dällenbach ascribes to the category of "transcendence" right from the outset. Indeed, the very category of transcendence breaks with, and is in fact essentially alien to, Jakobson's analysis of verbal communication on whose categories of addresser, addressee, a message passed between them, and a shared code which makes that message intelligible, the other species in Dällenbach's typology are modeled. In Blanchot—explicitly invoking Gide's mechanism of retroaction—a work is created by being in quest of its "origin" or "absolute exterior." Since the point of departure of the quest and that of its destination are discontinuous, that is to say, any common, interdimensional ground to bind them together is absent, any leap towards a pure exterior departing from X, if successful, is transformed by the very action. It takes place *ab initio* in the domain of its *destination*, Y: "[Whoever] purports to follow one slope is *already* on the other."[80] The attempt to leap toward the "outside" of X is always already another attempt—to leap toward the outside of Y, which, due to the discontinuity, hence irreversibility, between X and Y can by no means be X. A leap toward the origin of the work is at the same time an infinite, simultaneous series of recrossings embedding one another, a mise en abyme. In other words, the crucial difference intriguing the mechanism of recrossings is vertical rather than horizontal. It is less that between X and its exterior, Y, than that between the aggregate X-Y and this aggregate put to the nth power, that is its double—X'-Y'. As in a double mirror, where

the true object of duplication is neither mirror A nor mirror B, but rather the middle, the very juxtaposition between the two, the true origin of the work which the work is in quest of, the "primary instance that constitutes the meaning of meaning and enables signs to communicate," is the quest itself: X is in quest of (X in quest of Y). The work is in quest of an origin which is nothing but the transcendental mise en abyme it contains, hence, despite reflecting a fictional origin, the transcendental mise en abyme functions *as the origin itself.*

Dällenbach's third "gap" infused into his typology is the pluralization of the level of species. Blanchot's decentering of origin as "simultaneously the cause, of which the text is the effect, and the effect, of which the text is the cause,"[81] leads Dällenbach to assign priority to more than one "dominant," to use Jakobson's term. Jakobson saw the history of literature as forming a system in which at any given point some forms and genres were "dominant" while others were subordinate. However, despite his claim about the monolithic character of a literary history organized in terms of a series of dominants, "Jakobson's concept of the dominant is in fact plural . . . Different dominants emerge depending upon which questions we ask of the text, and the position from which we interrogate it."[82] Dällenbach applies this pluralism in a more radical way. Like doublets in the Pentateuch (the two accounts of the creation in the beginning of the book of Genesis, for instance), he assigns predominance to both the fictional mise en abyme (into which all the others "eventually merge"), and the transcendental mise en abyme (which "can never be put in the same footing as any other mise en abyme, since it is linked to that which determines all of them"[83]), *at one and the same time.* Despite its monocentric appearance, Dällenbach's typology consists of shifts of accent and fluid strata, a "crowned anarchy," where dominance is never stratified and the leader "more like a leader or a star than a man of power . . . is always in danger of being disavowed."[84]

Mise en abyme, an object that "only *becomes* such" through a *hic et nunc* encounter between incommensurable parties, might not be compatible with taxonomical endeavors, which Deleuze, discussing Aristotle's *Categories*, has shown to consist in presupposed, "coded," essences. Dällenbach, well aware of the problem, stops "considering the mise en abyme only from the strictly taxonomic angle . . . but rather from a resolutely 'economic' point of view."[85] He offers a unique, dynamic typology, where species "tend to combine" and none is "uncompromisingly pure and simple"; where a species' "essence" vacillates between a series of claimants, "from one privileged instant to another."[86]

MISE EN ABYME IN THE NEW NEW NOVEL:
REVERSING MIMETOLOGISM "IN ONE FELL SWOOP"

Mise en abyme stands out in four epochs: The Baroque, Romanticism, Naturalism-Symbolism and the New Novel prevailing in the 1950s–'60s. It is only with the last, however, that mise en abyme was associated from the start, becoming immediately "one of its distinctive elements,"[87] and indeed this genre has employed self-reflexivity in a more varied and methodical way than any other literary trend in the past. However, the pivotal occurrence in the history of mise en abyme, according to Dällenbach, is the transition that took place around 1970 from the New Novel to the new New Novel, the *nouveau nouveau roman*. At a monumental conference taking place in 1972 at Cerisy la Salle it was already acknowledged that novelists who associated themselves with the militant positions of *Tel Quel* could no longer be thought of as practicing the earlier genre. At the time of this polarization the (old) *nouveau roman*, maintaining relations with the commonsense world, looked almost reactionary.[88] Aiming to break with the prevalence of pre-established ideals (political, aesthetic, noological or any other) in art and thought and to leave mimetologism—the principle which presupposes the "precedence of the reflected over the reflecting work"[89]—behind, these novelists subscribed to a writing that was a radical experiment with language and representation. Like Derrida, using the mise en abyme to liberate the potential of metaphor as free of transcendent, referential frameworks—that is, as bearing an analogue which resonates with yet is not identified in terms of the target—mise en abyme in the *nouveau nouveau roman* serves in generating a diegesis which does not posit the existence of a preordained reality, whether empirical or fictive.[90]

While the *nouveau roman* viewed mise en abyme as Gidean, a "textual equivalent of mirror images,"[91] an encapsulated, "unit-like," and "tidy" con-toured image which reflects the "whole of the narrative," the mise en abyme in the *nouveau nouveau roman* comprised "jigsaw"-like segments, reflecting "scraps," never the "whole" of the narrative: "Like the pieces of the jigsaw, their curving edges are designed so that none of them, in isolation, bears the complete image of a character, an animal or even a face."[92] "Unit-like" entities are given to identity conditions. They bear determinable contours, an internal nature and intrinsic properties which remain continuously present throughout all change. Eventually, they presuppose a substance—such as "real life"—that assigns, safeguards and sustains these monolithic identities and properties. "Jigsaw"-like segments, on the other hand, bearing indetermin-able boundaries, are meant to break as such with realism, substantialism, mimeticism, or other centrism.