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Dorrit Cohn, translated by Lewis S. Gleich



Metalepsis and Mise en Abyme

The mechanisms of metalepsis, as several chapters in this work show, extend beyond narrative fiction.¹ For my part, reflecting on metalepsis has led me to an extension and a critique of the brief section in *Narrative Discourse* where Gérard Genette names and examines it. To begin, I will focus on two distinctions that seem essential to me. Genette defines narrative metalepsis as “any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc.) or the inverse” (234–35). Metalepsis thus designates the transgression of a line of demarcation that authors usually do not touch, namely the “shifting but sacred frontier between two worlds, the world in which one tells, the world of which one tells” (236).

The first distinction I wish to stress is between metalepsis at the discourse level and metalepsis at the story level.² Metalepsis at the discourse level is (in the sense established by Genette) a kind of “figure”: it consists in the habit of certain narrators interrupting the description of the routine actions of their characters by digressions; it results in a light-hearted and playful synchronization of the narration with the narrated events. Genette illustrates this kind of metalepsis with several passages from

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Balzac, including one that begins thus: “While the venerable churchman climbs the ramps of Angoulême, it is not useless to explain ...” (235). In the following pages, I will not be concerned with this relatively inoffensive kind of discursive metalepsis,³ but rather with the kind of metalepsis that is much more daring and shocking, also much more spectacular, and that appears at the level of the story: a particularly troubling transgression that Genette exemplifies with Julio Cortázar’s story “Continuity of Parks.” In this very brief tale, a man who is reading a novel becomes the victim of a murder that is committed *in* the novel that he is in the process of reading. Here, the boundary between the primary story (the reader’s story) and the secondary story (the framed novel) is violated, leading to a confusion between distinct ontological levels.

The other important distinction—Genette makes it himself, but without emphasizing it—is between what I call exterior metalepsis (by far the more frequent) and interior metalepsis.⁴ I call *exterior* all metalepsis that occurs between the extradiegetic level and the diegetic level—that is to say, between the narrator’s universe and that of his or her story (e.g., John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*). I call *interior* all metalepsis that occurs between two levels of the same story—that is to say, between a primary and secondary story, or between a secondary and tertiary story (e.g., Flann O’Brien’s *At Swim-Two-Birds*).

Exterior Metalepsis

Although my interest in the following pages is mainly in interior metalepsis, I will pause for a moment to consider exterior metalepsis, first to focus on a fact that has not been noted until now, namely that we do not find metalepsis in homodiegetic narratives but only in heterodiegetic narratives. One searches in vain for cases of a fundamental destruction of the narrative situation in the first person. We do not even find it in the most casual stories, the most self-ironic. Thus, the metafictional games of *Tristram Shandy* leave intact the form of the “I.” It is the same in Beckett’s *The Unnamable* and in Nabokov’s *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. Thus, Beckett’s narrator maintains the same “I” when he writes, “How, in such conditions, can I write. ... I don’t know. ... It is I who write, who cannot raise my hand from my knee. It is I who think, just enough to write, whose head is far” (295). And Nabokov’s narrator maintains the “I” even when he questions his own existence in the final sentence of the novel: “I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I, or perhaps we both are someone whom neither of us knows” (205). This “someone” is evidently the author, who is however far from beginning to speak himself.

I am aware of only one clear exception to the rule that exterior metalepsis cannot occur in homodiegetic fiction; but to tell the truth this is an exception that confirms the rule. It is found in *Remembrance of Things Past* in the disconcerting moment when, after some two thousand pages, the narrator’s name appears for the first time in the text. The scene takes place in the early morning when Albertine wakes up: “Then she would find her tongue and say: ‘My —’ or ‘My darling —’ followed by my Christian name, which, if we give the narrator the same name as the author of this book, would be ‘My Marcel,’ or ‘My darling Marcel’” (69). Here, Proust, the true, the actual

“author of this book,” intervenes explicitly in the text and reveals a highly ambiguous difference in identity between his narrator and himself. This exception relates clearly to the equivocal status in Proust’s novel between fiction and autobiography, a status that I have examined in detail elsewhere (Cohn 58–78).

The situation is entirely different in third-person, or heterodiegetic, fictions. There, at least in theory, an exterior metalepsis may take the reader by surprise at any moment. And this surprise occurs most often in a quite peculiar form: an extradiegetic narrator suddenly comes into direct contact with one of his or her diegetic characters. Thus, in Miguel de Unamuno’s *Mist*, the protagonist, Augusto, visits his fictional author when he decides to kill himself, which the author warns him not to do—a warning, which as it turns out, is given in vain. Similarly, in Chapter 55 of John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, the narrator takes a seat in the train compartment where his protagonist, Charles, is traveling, in order to contemplate the course of his fate: “... what the devil am I going to do with you?” (405).

Exterior metalepsis has a long history. It has recently been summarized by Frank Wagner, who believes that it goes back to *Don Quixote* and that in French fiction it is emphasized strikingly by Denis Diderot’s *Jacques the Fatalist and His Master* long before it became a recurrent feature of the *nouveau roman* (Wagner 241–43). Wagner does not mention a pre-realist literary movement that is normally neglected elsewhere in discussions on the subject of metalepsis: German romanticism, where this figure appears in many works and where it is generally theorized under the name of romantic irony (*romantische Ironie*).⁵ I choose to discuss a narrative that dates from this time period in order to draw attention to the importance of this literary movement for the study of metalepsis. My example is a well-known story by E. T. A. Hoffman named *The Golden Pot*, published in 1815, that styles itself as “a fairytale for modern times.”

It is a narrative that recounts the story of the transformation of a student into a poet. In the epilogue, the student, Anselmus, having become a poet, disappears from Dresden, where the story takes place. On the other hand, the extradiegetic narrator himself—who has not entered the scene up to this point—becomes the hero of the story. Speaking in the first-person, this narrator labors in vain to write the conclusion to his narrative—in other words, to describe the life that Anselmus presently leads in Atlantis, the transcendental world of poetry [*le monde transcendental de la poésie*]: “When I looked over the eleven vigils, which are now fortunately completed, it grieved me to the heart to think that inserting the Twelfth Vigil, the very keystone of the whole, would never be permitted me” (131). He concludes, “In vain I tried, gentle reader, to set before you those glories which surrounded Anselmus, or even to create in the faintest degree an impression of them in words. I was reluctantly obliged to admit to myself the feeble quality of all my attempts at expressing this” (131). The day comes, however, when the narrator receives a letter written by one of the characters in his story: a sort of magician who had helped Anselmus become a poet. This character urges the narrator to come to Anselmus’s assistance, if only the narrator will come down from his garret in order to pay him a visit. The narrator agrees to do so. In the magician’s house, he has a marvelous vision of Anselmus’s new life, a vision that takes the form of a fascinating passage describing the world of poetry, a passage

now laid before us, the real readers. Afterward, the magician consoles the narrator for having to continue to live in the prosaic world of his garret in Dresden, instead of remaining forever in the transcendental world of poetry.

In short, the epilogue of this story presents us with a radical rupture of the normally firm and closed boundary between the narrative action and the narrator's act, or (to employ Jean Ricardou's terms) between the narration of an adventure [*le récit d'une aventure*] and the adventure of narration [*l'aventure d'un récit*]. At the moment when the narrator is transformed into a fictional character, he ceases to hold authority over the narrative. This enables the reader to become aware of the narrative authority that stands behind him—the authority that we call “author.”⁶

Interior Metalepsis

It is time now that I come to interior metalepsis, which, unlike exterior metalepsis, appears to belong only to modernity, not having—to my knowledge—an earlier history. It is here that the relationship indicated by the title of this essay—metalepsis and *mise en abyme*—becomes pertinent.

In the well-known excerpt from André Gide's journal where he explains his predilection for the structure that has come to be designated as “*mise en abyme*,” Gide mentions examples taken from painting and literature. He goes on to add, however: “None of these examples is altogether exact. What would be much more so . . . is a comparison with the device of heraldry that consists in setting in the escutcheon a smaller one ‘*en abyme*’” (30). What Gide seems to have in mind here is a structure without end; for the second coat of arms, which is contained in the first, must obviously contain a third *mise en abyme*, then another and so on. In short, in a *pure* *mise en abyme*,⁷ an interminable process is inevitably involved, and it develops, at least in theory, in two directions.

One writer who has become fully aware of this is Jorge Luis Borges. In his essay “Partial Magic in the *Quixote*,” he cites several texts where characters become readers or spectators of their own stories, including *Hamlet*, *The Ramayana*, and *The Arabian Nights*. It is here that he suggests “that if the characters of a fictional work can be readers or spectators, we, its readers or spectators, can be fictitious” (196).

This statement is well-known to readers of *Narrative Discourse*. Genette cites Borges's statement, however, not in regards to the structure of *mise en abyme* (about which he speaks in a previous section), but in the section entitled “Metalepsis.” There, metalepsis serves to explain why the reader feels such strong vertigo when the boundary between the world *where* the narrator narrates and the world *that* the narrator narrates disappears. And after quoting Borges's statement, Genette adds: “The most troubling thing about metalepsis indeed lies in this unacceptable and insistent hypothesis, that the extradiegetic is perhaps always diegetic, and that the narrator and his narratees—you and I—perhaps belong to some narrative” (236). Genette does something here that is very daring, if not extremely risky. He relates the effect of *pure* *mise en abyme* to that of metalepsis—to the troubling effect, the feeling of vertigo, that metalepsis induces in the reader. And he is not the only one to make this connec-

tion between *pure* *mise en abyme* and interior metalepsis: the merging of these two branches of standard narrative ontology is on the verge of becoming a cliché in literary theory (Scheffel 75; Martinez & Scheffel 79–80, 190; Wolf 300; Dällenbach 121, 144–45; Nelles 157). It seems to me, however, that the time has come to analyze this connection more closely and to see whether, in truth, this is not mistaking one idea for another.

Let us begin by noting that in *The Mirror in the Text* (the only critical work that explores *mise en abyme* in detail), published in French in 1977, Lucien Dällenbach devotes very little space to *pure* *mise en abyme*.⁸ For a deeply suggestive account of this type of *mise en abyme*, we must go back to 1950, to Claude-Edmonde Magny's *Histoire du roman français depuis 1918*. In the passages devoted to André Gide's *The Counterfeiters*, the author alludes to the metaphysical mystery, to the "transcendental meaning" expressed by this structure, which cannot be appealed to "without opening at our feet the 'abyss' that the mind cannot contemplate without a sense of vertigo" (277). Exactly like Borges, Magny faces the disconcerting sight of a configuration that suggests an infinite repetition of the read text.

The verb "to suggest" that I use here is perfectly suitable in this context. A *pure* *mise en abyme* can only be suggested in a narrative: it can be conceived only in theory and not developed in practice. The reason seems to me to be the temporal or linear constraint of literature where a fully developed *pure* *mise en abyme* would have to take the form, if not of a simple repetition, then of an increasingly rapid summary—unlike in the graphic arts where it can be realized in smaller and smaller versions of the original but remain basically intact. In Aldous Huxley's *Point Counter Point*, Philip Quarles, a character who is himself a novelist, conceives a perfect example of *pure* *mise en abyme* in a novel that he plans in his journal and whose protagonist would himself be a novelist: "But why draw the line at one novelist inside your novel? Why not a second inside his? And a third inside the novel of the second? And so on to infinity, like those advertisements of Quaker Oats where there's a Quaker holding a box of oats, on which is a picture of another Quaker holding another box of oats, on which etc., etc. At about the tenth remove you might have a novelist telling your story in algebraic symbols or in terms of variations in blood pressure, pulse, secretion of ductless glands, and reaction times" (294). This passage shows us that literature vanishes, cancels itself out, in an actualization of *pure* *mise en abyme*, that it transforms a novel into algebra, into chemistry, into biological data.

This is probably why Gide, in his own novel, does nothing more than evoke this infinite structure: it is hinted at when the novelist-protagonist Édouard is shown writing a novel that bears the same title—*The Counterfeiters*—as the novel that we are reading, a novel that itself contains a protagonist who is a novelist. Thus, Édouard writes in his journal: "I invent the character of a novelist, whom I make my central figure; and the subject of the book, if you must have one, is just that very struggle between what reality offers him and what he himself desires to make of it" (173). But Gide does not give us Édouard's novel, for in doing so, he would be doing nothing other than repeating his own novel.⁹

Jean Ricardou, an author of the *nouveau roman*, is probably the writer who pushes the structure of *pure* *mise en abyme* the furthest. In his novel *La Prise de Constan-*

tinople, he in no way avoids repetitions when the protagonist reads the story of his own life. Inevitably, this character reaches a passage that describes the episode where he reads his own story. In principle, the book is thus structured as an infinite series of readings nested one inside the other. But because this series is without end, it is also without beginning. The book tells the story of a bigger story that is contained in a story that is even bigger. This infinite story obviously would not sell very well in a bookstore. Ricardou himself feels obliged to insert a kind of we-narrator [*nous-narrateur*] in the text who formulates his principle thus: "Everything was part of an immense book, a kind of library whose tangled texture it was impossible to escape" (237).

Another work that presents itself as *pure* mise en abyme, without ever (no matter what the critics say about it) structuring itself as metalepsis, is John Barth's tale "Life-Story." The fictional narrator of this story, who calls himself D, suspects, like his fictional author, that the world is a novel in which he himself is a character who writes his fictional autobiography. I quote the narrator of this work, who calls himself E: "Moreover E, hero of D's account, is said to be writing a similar account, and so the replication is in both ontological directions, et cetera" (117). Resulting from that is another "story about a writer writing a story! Another *regressus in infinitum!*" (117). At the end, the fictitious author gives up writing his novel for the simple reason that no one in the grand literary tradition has written anything similar. This is a hasty conclusion, as Ricardou's example shows!

If we allow that dreaming is like a literary creation, Borges's story "The Circular Ruins" offers a parallel theme. In his commentary on this tale, Borges reveals to us that the source is "the concept of an endless series [...] of dreamers, an infinite regress" (267). The analogy would take the form of "chessmen who do not know they are guided by a player, a player who does not know he is guided by a god, a god who does not know that he is guided by other gods" (267).

These various examples prove that a potentially infinite structure of this kind has nothing to do with a story that contains interior metalepsis. Interior metalepsis is an event that occurs in sudden and surprising isolation, like the murder of the fictional reader in Cortázar's tale "Continuity of Parks," which in no way gives us the impression that we, the readers, belong to an infinite series of fictional beings.

This does not mean that metalepsis and *pure* mise en abyme have nothing in common. They share at least two features. The first is obvious: these two figures can exist only in stories that have at least two narrative levels. The second feature is responsible for the confusion that I referred to earlier: it stirs up in the reader a feeling of disarray, a kind of anxiety or vertigo. In this way, both metalepsis and mise en abyme produce a troubling state in the reader—one that would be less so if it did not reflect deep human anxieties.

It should be noted that no such anxiety is associated with other seemingly impossible [*invraisemblance*] modernist techniques that disrupt the illusion of fictional realism: when a narrator, for example, invents several different conclusions to his novel—such as the three epilogues that are proposed to us in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*; or when the narrator of Robbe-Grillet's *The Voyeur* emphasizes the artificiality of his narrative by reiterating a number of clues—the innumerable figures of eight;

or when a novel (by its very title) cries “fiction!” by signaling its intertextuality—James Joyce’s *Ulysses* or Thomas Mann’s *Doctor Faustus*; or when the work in question emphasizes its unreality by the use of explicit metalanguage—as in John Barth’s long tale *Lost in the Funhouse*; or when a novel presents its story as apocryphal, as taking place in an unknown universe, in the tradition of science fiction. The reader, in these cases, may feel amused, astonished or intrigued, encouraged to play the role of detective, but he feels no anxiety, no vertigo.

We must try to define better the anxiety that can take hold of the reader when encountering interior metalepsis, or rather the *anxieties*, for it seems that each text of this kind produces a particular kind of anxiety. The kind of anxiety that follows a reading of Cortázar’s tale seems different from that created by *pure* *mise en abyme* because it is an extension of a situation that exists inside the text itself: if a second-level fiction can act on a first-level fiction (such as the murder in Cortázar’s tale), the first-level fiction may intrude on reality, on the world we inhabit, and thus on ourselves. It is Marie-Laure Ryan who has proposed the significance of “Continuity of Parks” as parable: reading the novel immerses the fictitious reader so deeply in the fiction that he loses his usual safeguards against death (Ryan 165–67). But Ryan says nothing of the real reader of this text, except that this text causes a mind warp in the reader. For my own part, it seems to me that this tale triggers an anxiety in the actual reader of a reading that is overly immersed, a reading that might lead to death. Such a reading is not necessarily the standard, however; for as Félix Martinez-Bonati has shown, the reader of novels is doubly aware: his credulity vis-à-vis the real existence of fictional characters and events is essentially ironic, split in two by his awareness of their artifice (Martinez-Bonati 34). Even the most immersed reader knows that he is reading a novel. “Continuity of Parks” poses as imagined reality the potential absence of this duplicity. Conjuring up this danger pushes the reader into a state of confusion.

Of course, there are second-level texts that do not strictly speaking have a fatal outcome. When metalepsis occurs in a humorous novel (as in Flann O’Brien’s *At Swim-Two-Birds*), the anxiety of the reader gives way to his amusement. It seems to me, however, that if the mood of a novel is dark, interior metalepsis would produce the anxiety mentioned above. I use the conditional purposely: I must admit that, aside from Cortázar’s story, I have discovered no literary work that produces this effect. The scarcity of such structures is without doubt the reason why Genette uses this isolated example to illustrate his point. Even the procedures for rupture employed by the *nouveau roman* present mainly visual devices (posters, postcards, stained-glass windows, and paintings) that are transformed into diegetic stories—like the famous engraving of the café in Robbe-Grillet’s *In The Labyrinth*—rather than what Genette calls metadiegetic stories. If we take into account the difference between *pure* *mise en abyme* and interior metalepsis, the latter becomes an exceptional figure that is found in contemporary works of which I am unaware but with which some readers may be familiar. Even though its existence may only be potential, virtual, it would be wrong to neglect it. This neglect would be to risk not having known how to foresee works yet to come in a theoretical study devoted to this subject. For this reason, it has been necessary to focus on interior metalepsis.

Endnotes

1. Translator's note: This essay was originally published in French as "Metalepse et mise en abyme" in *Métalepse: Entorses au pacte de la représentation*, edited by John Pier and Jean-Marie Schaeffer, 121–30. Paris: École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 2005. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the French are the work of the translator.
2. See Nelles, where metalepsis at the discourse level is called "unmarked" and metalepsis at the story level is called "distinctly marked" (153–54).
3. This is examined by Frank Wagner (238–41).
4. See Richardson (35), Wolf (349–50, 359), Wagner (244). Also, see Malina for her distinction between "outward metalepsis" and "inward metalepsis" (46–50).
5. See, among others, Strohschneider-Kohrs.
6. For a detailed interpretation of the end of Hoffman's tale, one that adopts a similar perspective to my own, see Heine. Heine rightly views the formal structure of this episode as a paradigmatic illustration of Friedrich Schlegel's ideas on transcendental poetry and romantic irony.
7. Previous critics have used other terminology to designate this structure. Ricardou uses the term "textual mise en abyme" (189) and Dällenbach the term "infinite redoubling" (51).
8. Although one of his typologies contains the category "infinite redoubling," it is never clearly examined.
9. Except for the page that Édouard shows his nephew Georges. However, in this scene Gide deals with Georges's story and seems to have forgotten the mise en abyme structure of his work.

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