The Text as Labyrinth

Françoise Létoublon

Emotions and Narrative in Ancient Literature and Beyond

Studies in Honour of Irene de Jong

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CHAPTER 10

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> Yet [Ts'ui Pen] abandoned all to make a book and a labyrinth. He gave up all the pleasures of oppression, justice, of a well-stocked bed, of banquets, and even of erudition, and shut himself up in the Pavilion of the Limpid Sun for thirteen years. At his death, his heirs found only a mess of manuscripts. … As for that other enterprise of Ts'ui Pen … his Labyrinth … "Here is the Labyrinth," Albert said, pointing to a tall, laquered writing cabinet.—"An ivory labyrinth?" I exclaimed. "A tiny labyrinth indeed …!"—"A symbolic labyrinth," he corrected me. "An invisible labyrinth of time. … At one time, Ts'ui Pen must have said; 'I am going into seclusion to write a book,' and at another, 'I am retiring to construct a maze.' Everyone assumed these were separate activities. No one realized that the book and the labyrinth were one and the same."
>
> JORGE LUIS BORGES, *The Garden of the Forking Paths*

⁘

The narratological theory flow inaugurated in France by Gérard Genette found with Irene de Jong a brilliant successor, as is well known since her first works and as her *Narratological Commentary on the Odyssey* (2001) has confirmed. Leaning on her articles on *metalepsis*, we will return to the study of some ancient and modern features through which self-reflexivity appears in the texts and artworks. In this essay, I intend to show that, beside the mirror and its reflections, the labyrinth is an adequate symbol of self-reflexivity, and convenient, too, for the expression of vertigo so well conveyed by Jorge Luis Borges, in his critical essays as well as in his literary work.[1] The mirror and the labyrinth are sometimes combined in modern visual arts or literature, but we also find examples in antiquity, in the Greek novel and perhaps even in Achilles' shield, as I shall argue.

1 See particularly *The Garden of Forking Paths* with the passage quoted here as epigraph, and in the essays the famous and often cited passage of *Partial Magic in Quixote*.

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Metalepsis, *Mise en Abyme* and Mirror

De Jong was for her part first drawn to the narratological concept of metalepsis in the history of storytelling (2009, 2014), and analysed the description of Achilles' shield as metalepsis, bringing it closer to the notion of *mise en abyme* (2011):[2]

> Looking at this passage in terms of metalepsis and *mise en abyme* helps us to see the typically Homeric ways of implicit self-advertisement and *poetological reflection*: via cooperation with a god (metalepsis) and via the presentation of a work of art within his own poem (mise en abyme). The quality of his narrative art that he wishes to bring to the fore is its enargeia/energeia: its ability to bring people and events from the past alive and put them 'before the eyes' of the narratees. After Homer poets will become openly *self-conscious* and explicitly start *to reflect on their own poetic art*.[3]

For *mise en abyme*, let us return to its inventor Gide, in his *Journal* in 1893:

> In a work of art, I rather like to find thus transposed, at the level of the characters, the subject of the work itself … [by comparison] with the device from heraldry that involves putting a second representation of the original shield [*blason*] 'en abyme' within it.[4]

The phrase 'mise en abyme', is linked to heraldry, as the French word *blason* ('coat of arms') proves. In my opinion, the language of heraldry appears to be a trap: when a smaller version of the original shield is reproduced within the heraldic coat of arms, the reproduction is very flat. Gide himself, however, gives—with reservations, to be honest—examples from Flemish painters and the *Meninas* by Velasquez. In those cases, the presence of a (witch) mirror gives a reduced image of the space shown in the painting. But it is in no case the same image in a smaller form, as is the case in the heraldic 'mise en abyme'.[5]

The mirror itself, on the contrary, turns out to be a less ambiguous symbol. We come across it in ancient myths, for instance that of Perseus, who uses

2 This term is borrowed from André Gide's *Journal* and analysed by Dällenbach [1977] 1989 with reservations on terminology that I share.

3 De Jong 2011: 11 (my emphasis). Compare in particular Heerink in this volume, and see furthermore the contributions of Bierl (on *mise en abyme*) and of Allan and Verhelst (on *metalepsis*).

4 André Gide, *Journal*, 1893, tr. in D.H. Walker 1996: 101.

5 Stoichita 1999: 251 ill. 30 about a painting by L. de Jongh, which he calls a 'specular labyrinth'.

his shield as a mirror to avoid the Gorgon's gaze when killing her, and that of Narcissus, who falls in love when he observes his own image in the reflecting water.[6] Therefore, the mirror may be more useful as literary symbol than 'mise en abyme': words like *specular*, *specularity*, *reflection*, *reflexive*, *reflexiveness* should be enough for our needs.

Aesthetic Emotion in Homer

Reflexivity in texts can be an indication of 'aesthetic emotion'. The difficulty of defining aesthetic emotion is generally recognized, even in modern periods,[7] and all the more so in antiquity, where no word is known to describe it.[8] However, we may quote the eloquent silence of the Phaeacians after Odysseus' narration, which seems to express a strong aesthetic shock (*Od.*13.1–2):

> His tale was over now. The Phaeacians all fell silent, hushed,
> His story holding them spellbound down the shadowed halls.[9]
> transl. ROBERT FAGLES

In the epics, we encounter objects and individuals that are qualified as 'beautiful', but the notion is not applied to more abstract concepts, such as stories. Objects called beautiful are pieces of furniture or means of transport. Apart from Nestor's cup, perhaps, (δέπας περικαλλές *Il.* 11.632), the adjective καλός is not used for what we nowadays consider artworks. Besides, no word existed for the category 'art' itself, although τέχνη is often translated as such.[10]

In the *Odyssey*, Alcinous seems moved by aesthetic pleasure when he gives a sensitive appreciation of Odysseus tales:

> In your case, there is a shape
> to your words, and you show sound sense:
> you have spoken a tale knowingly like a poet.[11]
> *Od.* 11.367–369

6 Borel 2002: 95–105 about the mirror in the myth of Perseus, 37–43 about Narcissus.
7 Perlovsky 2014: 1.
8 Halliwell 2012: 16.
9 See De Jong's commentary *ad loc.*: 'The same reaction as after Odysseus stopped narrating the first time: 11.333–334. For the 'enchanting effect' (κηληθμῷ) of storytelling, cf. 8.83–92n.'
10 Though often translated as 'art', τέχνη rather means 'craft', 'skill' or 'technical knowledge', see Roochnik 1998.
11 Passage quoted by Goldhill 1991: 47; cf. De Jong's commentary, 2001: 286.

It seems to me that the aesthetic *emotions*[12] generally linked to reflexivity play an important although hidden role in ancient literature. One of the most striking examples might consist in the sudden apparition of the old king Priam in Achilles' tent in Book 24 of the *Iliad*:

> As when dense disaster closes on one who has murdered
> a man of his own land, and he comes to the country of others,
> to a man of substance, and wonder (θάμβος) seizes on those who behold him,
> so Achilleus wondered (θάμβησεν) as he looked on Priam, a godlike
> man, and the rest of them wondered (θάμβησαν) also, and looked on each other.
>
> *Il.* 24.480–484

This unexpected apparition of Priam is compared to that of a 'despised migrant', a suppliant with blood on his hands arriving in a foreign country in order to be purified.[13] In reality, Achilles is the murderer, and particularly the killer of many of Priam's sons. Since the simile reverses the roles, it provokes a kind of reciprocity as if a mirror is used. The expressive word θάμβος refers to a 'mix of admiration and stupor'. In the article that she devotes to this concept Manon Brouillet concludes that it is linked to a 'divine presence', and in this case to the fact that Hermes guided Priam to Achilles' tent.[14] Moreover, this emotional reaction does not generally concern art, but rather nature or natural phenomena, such as the sublime landscapes shown in Caspar David Friedrich's pictorial œuvres.[15] The meeting of Priam and Achilles is a spectacle, at the heart of which is this image of reciprocal stupor.[16]

12 Cairns 2017: 64 gives a large analysis of negative emotions in ancient Greek aesthetics (mainly horror), and his remarks include many general insights.

13 See on this simile Alden 2012, Heiden 1998, Létoublon 2018.

14 It is worth remarking that *ekphrasis* in antiquity is not at all restricted to art, it often concerns persons: see Webb 2009.

15 The passage of the Alps is generally considered the main occasion of feeling it by British travelers in the nineteenth century: John Dennis first in 1693 described his impression as delight 'mingled with horrors, and sometimes almost with despair'. For Caspar David Friedrich's painting, see for instance *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* of 1817 (Kunsthalle Hamburg), *Cross in the Mountains* of 1808 (Galerie Neue Meister, Dresden), or *Rocky Landscape in the Elbe Sandstone Mountains* (1822–1823, Vienna Belvedere).

16 Létoublon 2018.

Entering the Labyrinth

If the mirror with its various shapes and materials seems an adequate symbol for reflexivity, as it has been in history since Plato,[17] the labyrinth might be that for the sublime. The labyrinth takes its origin from the myths surrounding Minos, the Minotaur and Theseus:

> a complex building constructed by Daedalus for king Minos of Crete and commonly identified with the Minoan palace of Cnossus. … The labyrinth's confusing system of passages, from which no one could escape (Plut. *Thes*.15), concealed the Minotaur which fed on human victims until destroyed by Theseus (Paus. 1.27.10; Apollod. *Bibl*. 3.1.4, *Epit*. 1.7–11). The hero imitated its twists and turns in a ritual dance on Delos (Plut. *Thes*. 21).
>
> *OCD*, HORNBLOWER and SPAWFORTH eds., 1996[3] at the entry 'Labyrinth'

The labyrinth of Cnossus is never specifically referred to as Daedalus' construction needed for shutting away the Minotaur before Callimachus.[18] Pherecydes of Syros—'reputed to be the first writer of Greek prose'[19]—told the story in the fifth century BCE, as appears from a scholion on the Odyssean *Nekuia*.[20] However, Hephaestus' representation of a place of dance on the Homeric shield of Achilles does seem to allude to it, at least if we trust the explicit reference there to Daedalus, Cnossus, and Ariadne:[21]

> And the renowned smith of the strong arms made elaborate on it
> a dancing floor, like that which once in the wide space of Knossos
> Daidalos built for Ariadne of the lovely tresses.[22]
> And there were young men on it and young girls, sought for their beauty
> with gifts of oxen, dancing, and holding hands at the wrist. These
> wore, the maidens long light robes, but the men wore tunics

17 Plato seems to have thought that the first mirror in nature is the eye of another person, hence a model for knowing his soul, see *Alc*. 132e–133a. See Frontisi-Ducroux and Vernant 1997: 121–122.

18 Gantz 1993 refers to Call. *Del*. 311. The whole story is given in Diodorus of Sicily 4.77.1–4, but it seems to have been already known in Mycenaean times, see thereafter.

19 *OCD*, entry 'Pherecydes'.

20 Pherecyd. *FGrH* 3F148 = schol. *Od*. 11.322 Dindorf. See Matricon-Thomas 2014.

21 Edwards 1991: 229.

22 The name *Ariadne* is not sure in the text: Zenodotus read Ἀριήδη, an unexplained form, cf. Edwards 1991: 229.

> of finespun work and shining softly, touched with olive oil.
> And the girls wore fair garlands on their heads, while the young men
> carried golden knives that hung from sword-belts of silver.
> At whiles on their understanding feet they would run very lightly,
> as when a potter couching makes trial of his wheel, holding
> it close in his hands, to see if it will run smooth. At another
> time they would form rows, and run, rows crossing each other.
> And around the lovely chorus of dancers stood a great multitude
> happily watching.
>
> *Il.* 18.590–604, transl. LATTIMORE

At first sight, this dance does not seem to bring with it the Borgesian vertigo we are looking for, but the reference might contain more depth than it seems, to begin with the recurring mention of turning, particularly in the simile of the potter turning his wheel.

If we follow Borgeaud, the labyrinth, the Minotaur's jail, served for the initiation of Theseus and the young Athenians, and disappeared after their return, but a ritual dance remembered it.[23] Indeed, perhaps the materiality of the labyrinth has no actual importance for us, besides the pure idea of the labyrinth as a prison without doors, which hides a secret in its centre and prevents anyone entering to exit again.[24] Therefore, the *idea* of the labyrinth may appear more important than its material reality and existence. Which leads to the metaphoric value of the labyrinth and the thread, beginning with Socrates, according to Borgeaud:

> Socrates addresses his questioner: 'We find ourselves as if fallen into a labyrinth. We think we are at the end, but, turning a corner, we find ourselves always at the beginning of our search, always lacking what we sought at the beginning.'[25]

In this description of *aporia* as an impression of falling (ἐμπεσόντες) into a labyrinth, don't we encounter the Borgesian discomfort? In Borgeaud's first passage referred to above, let us note the expression 'What remained was the image of an image', i.e., the dance as an image of the labyrinth, updated every time the ritual dance was performed by the young Athenians, while the actual labyrinth had disappeared.

23 Borgeaud 1974: 21.
24 Borgeaud 1974: 23. See also the notion of *regressive progression*, p. 24.
25 Borgeaud 1974: 26, quoting Pl. *Euthd.* 291b.

But the text of the Iliadic shield is actually still more complicated, since Hephaestus has made on the shield an image of the dance floor *similar to that* (τῷ ἴκελον, οἷόν ποτ' ...) made once in Knossos by Daedalus. Thus, we reach the fourth degree of the image of an image, and we could feel as if trapped in a labyrinth. A scholiast found it strange that the god Hephaestus imitated the human Daedalus.[26] We see here a (description in a poem of a) dance mimicking a travel into a labyrinth and back, an image of a ritual dance forged by a god on a shield and mimicking the image of the structure once made by the mortal craftsman, the passage into the labyrinth. It might be that the scholiast also felt a kind of vertigo at such an interlocking of images that one cannot distinguish what reality the image is really mimicking. All this comes strangely close to Borges' wording. Needless to say, the monster shut in the heart of labyrinth justifies the vertiginous horror, but the tours and twists also contribute to a kind of fascination: a mixed emotion typical of the sublime.[27] Moreover, if we remark that the turns of the dancers are compared to the wheel of the potter, we reach yet another level of included dizziness. Moreover, the shield including this scene and the description of the shield are other levels of vertigo.

The Labyrinths of *Ekphrasis*

Having explored the *mise en abyme*-element in one of ancient literature's most famous *ekphraseis*, let us now take a closer look at this specific art form typical of ancient literature, and study the labyrinthine effects of its enigma. In antiquity, it seems as if including at least one *ekphrasis*[28] of a mythological painting into the novel as a typical feature for an effect of mirroring were a necessity for a novelist.[29] A painting with the myth of Europa is staged at the beginning and triggers the narration in Achilles Tatius' *Leucippe and Clitophon*, or pretends to compete with it as in Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe*. In *Leucippe and Clitophon*, other paintings invite several points of view on the plot and dramatize the narration with mythological parallels: Andromeda and Prometheus in Book 3, and Philomela and Procne in Book 5. In Alexandria, Leucippe is struck

26 Schol. *Il.* 18.590, see Edwards 1991: 229. Elsner 2002: 5, contrary to the scholia, thinks it is a 'wonderful double-take'.

27 See De Jonge in this volume.

28 On *ekphrasis* see mainly Elsner 2002, Webb 2009, Zeitlin 2013a. See also Van den Broek and Verhelst in this volume.

29 The genre of the novel does not exist in antiquity, see Hägg 1983: 3; Winkler 1994; Holzberg 1996: 11; Ruiz-Montero 1996: 29.

by the sight of a hawk pursuing a swallow and the characters do not know how to interpret the omen, but turning around, Clitophon sees a painting exhibited in a shop:

> It showed the rape of Philomela, Tereus attacking her, her tongue cut out. The plot of the drama was there in every detail—the robe, Tereus, the banquet.
>
> ACH. TAT. 5.3.4

The image on the robe is then described with more details, and Clitophon sees Philomela on the painting, showing herself on the woven picture. A painting inserted into the narrative contains an image on a robe,[30] and both images referring to the myth touch upon the problems encountered in the novel.[31] Leucippe in fact asks for an explanation on the painting (5.5) and Clitophon brilliantly turns the story of Philomela's tongue cut by Tereus into an allusion to Simonides' aphorism on painting as silent poetry and poetry as speaking painting:[32]

> Philomela's skill discovered voiceless speech (σιωπῶσαν εὕρηκε φωνήν). She wove, you see, a robe as messenger, and she threaded the drama into her embroidery, hand imitating tongue (τὴν γλῶτταν μιμεῖται ἡ χείρ); she conveyed the ear's message to Prokne's eyes, telling her what she suffered by means of her shuttle.
>
> ACH. TAT. 5.5.4–5, transl. WINKLER

The double inclusion of the image woven on the robe into the *ekphrasis* of the painting, and its ultimate decipherment appear as features of the labyrinthine reflexivity of the text. The impression of horror comes of course from the representation of the rape and Tereus' violence,[33] but it is mixed with admiration for Philomela's skill, and, ultimately, invites the reader's admiration for the author's clever inclusion of his own version of the representation.

The highest degree of success in this regard is attained, to my mind, by Heliodorus, who, among other brilliant *ekphraseis*,[34] includes in the *Aethiopica*

30 5.3. Nimis 1998: 114.

31 Their friend Menelas explains the events seen on the painting which may be interpreted as signs.

32 This famous maxim is quoted by Plutarchus, *De Glor. Ath.* 346F.

33 Nimis 1998: 113.

34 See particularly the ring with sheep trying to get out of the frame, 5.14.4: Debray-Genette 1979; Whitmarsh 2002: 114.

two allusions to a painting which shows Perseus delivering Andromeda who is tied to a rock, from a marine dragon without any description of this painting.[35] The first allusion to the painting in Book 4 (7.8) lies in a letter written in the hieroglyphic characters of Ethiopia which the young heroine keeps with her among her identity tokens, although she cannot read it. It is deciphered by the Egyptian priest Calasiris who reveals that Chariclea is the daughter of Persinna, queen of Ethiopia, who saw the painting during the conception of her child and was 'impregnated' by this picture so that the girl took the resemblance to Andromeda.[36] The image is not described at all, but one understands that the story of this birth discovered through a patient decipherment played a role in making Chariclea the very image of Andromeda with her white skin.[37] Chariclea, then, is the image of an image, hidden in an encrypted message. The painting comes again to the forefront in Book 10 when king Hydaspes intends to sacrifice both Theagenes and Chariclea to the Sun, the supreme god of the Ethiopians. They are on the pyre, and Chariclea tries to draw the recognition from her father, without success until Sisimithres and Persinna ask the painting of Perseus and Andromeda to be brought up to the sacrificial place, and everyone can then ascertain the astonishing resemblance between living Chariclea and painted Andromeda.[38] To give an absolute and indisputable proof of her origin, Chariclea even uncovers her arm and the king can see 'the ebony bracelet soiling her ivory arm' (ἔβενος περίδρομος ἐλέφαντα τὸν βραχίονα μιαίνων, Hld. 10.15.2), i.e. the black birth mark on her skin.[39] The success of this non-existent *ekphrasis* may be connected to the fact that many representations of Andromeda delivered by Perseus were known in antiquity,[40] so that a mere allusion would have been immediately acknowledged by any cultivated person, at least a 'knowing eye(d)' one, as Goldhill calls it.[41]

Ekphraseis in the novels appear as textual labyrinths in the sense that the decipherment of their more or less encrypted meaning refers to the main text and explains it, at least partially. In the case of *Leucippe and Clitophon*, the

35 On this painting as the model for Chariclea in an 'allusive *ekphrasis*', see Zeitlin 2013a and 2013b: 81.

36 Olsen 2012.

37 Persinna had to abandon her child, fearing the accusation of adultery since herself and her husband were black.

38 See Whitmarsh 2002: 115–116.

39 This birth mark can be compared with other *sêmata* in ancient literature, see Létoublon 1993: 134–136.

40 An *ekphrasis* on *Andromeda* occurs in *Leucippe and Clitophon* 3, and Goldhill 1994: 213–214 quotes an epigrammatic *ekphrasis* by Antiphilus.

41 Goldhill 1994: 223.

image of the rape of Europa which evoked Clitophon's narration at the start does not return at the end, and the presence in Sidon of a lonesome Clitophon makes us think that their story knew no happy end.[42] In both cases, the attentive reader is required to think about the image and its relation to the whole.

The fascination for textual labyrinths has not diminished in recent times; see for instance *Dans le labyrinthe* by Robbe-Grillet.[43] But I would rather take a last example from the visual arts, with an undisputable chef d'œuvre, *The Lady from Shanghai* by Orson Welles (1947). A sailor (Welles himself) is hired by a beautiful woman, Mrs Bannister (played by Rita Hayworth) and her rich husband (Everett Sloan) to steer their luxurious yacht. Although at the beginning she seems to be his victim, one eventually understands that she might be the one pulling the strings, manipulating everyone. In any case, the three characters meet up at the end of the movie in the 'magic mirror maze' fairground, the disabled husband and the murderous woman shooting at one another and breaking the mirrors with their diffracted images; in the last shots, they both lie dead and one sees the sailor going away, while in the mirrors of the gallery is seen the fragmented image of Mrs Bannister, symbolizing her ambiguous role.[44] The mirrors and the labyrinthine vertigo meet there in an enigmatic symbolism, contributing to the reader's bewilderment: an aesthetic emotion.

Abbreviations

OCD Hornblower, S., Spawforth, A., *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (Oxford 1996[3]).

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42 Fusillo 1997; Morales 2004: 144; Repath 2005.

43 Hogan 2011: 207–209 about Robbe-Grillet's *Dans le labyrinthe*.

44 Ishaghpour 2001.

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