

The Allegorical Function of *Mise en abyme* in Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and Ah Cheng's "The King of Children"

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Abstract

Mise en abyme, according to Gregory Minissale's definition, is "a process of representation within representation". It is a narrative technique characterised by eternal extension of repetitive images. Under Paul Ricoeur's framework of narrative-metaphor analogy, *mise en abyme* can be regarded not as a blank intertextuality, but as an allegorical infinity structurally performed by textual arrangement. Following his discussion, it is important to explore the functions of allegory from the connection of text and reality to the integration of different elements of text, such as plots, rhetoric usage, ideas, personal characters, etc. As both narrative and the reality imitated by narrative are bound with time, the temporality of *mise en abyme* enables narrative to be more internally referable. This referability is significant to understand how narrative constitutes reader reception. Structured with this central idea, this paper examines Nietzsche's "eternal recurrence" mentioned in Milan Kundera's novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and the Sisyphusian life mode in the enclosed communist countryside shown in Ah Cheng's novella "The King of Children".

Keywords: *mise en abyme*, *rhetoric studies*, *allegorical function*, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, *The King of Children*

1. Introduction

In Gregory Minissale's (2009, p. 49) definition, *mise en abyme* (literally "setting into abyss") is "a process of representation within representation which points to the *mise en abyme* of consciousness that produces it, and is engaged with it in the art experience", or simply "frames with frames" (p. 51). He regards *mise en abyme* as not merely structural repetition within the representation borders of artistic works, but also as a psychological archetype which supports metonymic externalisation of subjective conditions. In the philosophical frameworks of Immanuel Kant and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, perception goes first and, simultaneously, undertakes an interchange with the material world. The nature (or more precisely the structure, characteristics and interchangeability) of human body and reality pre-determines the forms of artistic representations, revealing structural similarity between two sides. As un-transcendental beings, humans are bounded by reality, which is materially bounded as what we can perceive. Humans are but relatively less framed than the characters in human-made stories. Identical to the condition that we cannot transcend our own limitations beyond rationality and subjectivity to reach the transcendental God as Kant asserts, characters cannot transcend the unwritten in the story and their shared author—"God". In this hierarchical framing structure, a search for the functions of figure of speech, or other less technically definable usage of language, is significant. It can pragmatically dissolve the division and divergence between reality and virtuality, and provide an inter-referable ground for discussing art-creators and their created worlds under variable social-cultural contexts which link up both together.

The multifarious layers from the creation of reality to the creation of virtuality mirror not simply the possible recurrence of textual reproduction of the self, but also a rhetoric that could represent it across text and life. *Mise en abyme* is one of the rhetoric forms that act as both an expressive technique and a metaphor of certain life patterns. It is allegorical as its spatial or temporal nature predetermines its flexibility to encode various comparable forms of endless repetition, and those forms of repetition are decipherable allowing a differentiation between the signifier and the signified. This paper will examine the rhetoric function of *mise en abyme*, especially in terms of

literature, in order to see how *mise en abyme*, as a narrative technique characterised by eternal extension of repetitive descriptions, performs, what Minissale calls, the "acts of self-reflexivity" (p. 51) of authors and how its functional characteristics favour the allegorical use of it for rendering certain patterns of human conditions. Taken as examples, the examination of Nietzsche's "eternal recurrence" in the Czech-born writer Milan Kundera's novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984) and the judgment of a Sisyphusian life mode in the enclosed countryside in the Chinese writer Ah Cheng's novella "The King of Children" (1984) will assist the illustration of *mise en abyme* in literary creation and interpretation. Moreover, these two examples could reveal the correspondence of utilising *mise en abyme* to deliver pessimistic views over communism between the two writers with different geopolitical background. The exploration of *mise en abyme* is simultaneously a revisit to intellectual individuals' post-communist literary reflection before the end of the Cold War in 1991¹ (but it is not the focus of this essay). In the following, the temporality of *mise en abyme* will be the first issue to address. Nietzsche's idea at the first chapter of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* will help justification, and explaining its extension to the relation between weight and lightness by the author will reveal how metonymical use of *mise en abyme* could implicitly develop dramatic plots. The fourth section will explore the allegorical connectivity of *mise en abyme* inside a narrative through Ah Cheng's fictional enquiry about the anti-reflective pedagogy in mainland China.

2. The Time of *Mise en abyme*

Before textual analysis, knowing the temporality of *mise en abyme* is crucial for answering, what Roger Fowler (1985, p. 78) points out in relation to Mikhail Bakhtin's criticism on monologic novel, how "the narrator's language reacts to the language and the structure of consciousness of the characters in a novel". In Fowler's (p. 113) view, "[s]tructural patterns in a language by convention encode various interpersonal and cognitive experiences and relationships." The authorial commitment to language, as the "medium to work in", necessarily results in an attitude conveyed through linguistic structure and the temporal structure embedded in

narrative (p. 76).² In this sense, the literary use of *mise en abyme*, as an elective choice of writers, has dualistic significance: to transform the repetitive structure from reality into decodable textual meanings, and to activate the temporal dimension of a narration and hence potentially integrate different plots, characters and meanings. Through the connection between time and narrative that Paul Ricoeur famously constructed, we can look into a deeper structure of *mise en abyme*, showing it as not either a blank translation of the repetitive form of reality or an empty connection of different narrative elements, but as both, based on its external transfiguration and internal refiguration of time.

Although Ricoeur (1984) paid most of his attention to plots, rather than to any kind of figure of speech, his discussion about “imitating or representing”, as “a mimetic activity”, that produces “the organization of events by emplotment” (p. 34) provides sufficient referable arguments for examining the connective function of *mise en abyme*, which is one of the literary forms that load plots. He states, “It is only in the plot that action has a contour, a limit (*heros*) and, as a consequence, a magnitude.” (p. 39) Accordingly, the way or strategy that an author uses to represent and inter-relate the plots in his story more fundamentally determines the denotation of what narrators and characters do or do not do, can do or cannot do, and the possibility of whether, or to what extent, the plots are relevant to the real world parallel to the textual world. In the case of *mise en abyme*, its core characteristic as endless repetition has structurally determined that the plots under this form would grant the reader a sense of temporal infinity, especially because textual media, unlike heraldry—the terminological origin of *mise en abyme*—which spatially delivers the sense of infinity, necessarily develop its layer-by-layer structure through chronological, rather than synchronical, narration³.

Looking into the first two chapters of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, readers probably notice that the philosophical discussion about Nietzsche’s “eternal recurrence” is what Kundera arranges to foreground his main story. The argument on the relationship between life as a single one or as an infinite repetition and the lightness-heaviness dialectic altogether act as a foreword and also as more than a foreword, because they have direct connection to the plots of the third chapter.

Structurally speaking, in Chapter 1, the narrator first introduces that "[t]he idea of eternal return is a mysterious one, and Nietzsche has often perplexed other philosophers with it: to think that everything recurs as we once experienced it, and that the recurrence itself recurs ad infinitum!" (1985, p. 3) The recurrence of everything and the recurrence of recurrence, in Kundera's interpretation, are blank repetitions of incidents and personal experience without changes of content and sequence. That means individuals need to live again and again identically. As an assumption, eternal recurrence is based on imagination instead of empirical observation. It is about never-perceivable lives before and after one's current life. Its archetypal rhetoric is *mise en abyme*, which does not have any presumed connection to human life and any sort of ideology. As a process of adding value to the frames-with-frames form of *mise en abyme*, the interpretation of eternal recurrence not only stresses the temporality that the words "eternal" and "recurrence" semantically possess, but also discursively links up those literal meanings, embedded in a form of repetition, to the universal condition of human being.

Following the brief introductory paragraph, the narrator continues, "the myth of eternal return states that a life which disappears once and for all, which does not return, is like a shadow, without weight, dead in advance, and whether it was horrible, beautiful, or sublime, its horror, sublimity, and beauty mean nothing." (p. 3) The singular use of the term "life" (in the original text, *život*⁴) reveals Kundera's existentialist concern for personal fate situated in the opposite extreme of eternal recurrence. Similar to Martin Heidegger's focus on "being-in-the-world" (1962, p. 84), which aims at evoking individuals' reflection on their habitual existence in reality, Kundera's juxtaposition of two possibilities of life is an attempt to raise readers' subjective sensitivity to their own existence. Despite using two examples ("the war between two African kingdoms in the fourteenth century [...] that altered nothing in the destiny of the world" and "an infinite difference between a Robespierre who occurs only once in history and a Robespierre who eternally returns, chopping off French heads" [pp. 3-4]) that point to the difference between recurrable and non-recurrable history to collective human development, the whole chapter ends up with a self-reflection of the narrator. His case of "reconciliation with Hitler" aims

not only to “reveal the profound moral perversity of a world that rests essentially on the nonexistence of return”, but also, more significantly, to arouse readers’ personal sense of being in the world where “everything is pardoned in advance and therefore everything cynically permitted” (p. 4).

In Chapter 2, the narrator turns back to the discussion of eternal recurrence, but not develops his argument on “the nonexistence of return” that he ensures in Chapter 1. As stated in the first paragraph, “In the world of eternal return the weight of unbearable responsibility lies heavy on every move we make.” (p. 5) He uses the setting of eternal return to initiate his discussion on the weight of personal decisions. Certainly, the form of *mise en abyme* is more favourable in this case. The reason is that the narrator has implied that the absence of eternal return would free individuals from choosing. In this sense, this kind of one-off life is in the form of, what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari terms, “rhizome”, which signifies to an indifferent acceptance of all the potential choices regardless of context⁵. In other words, the absolute certainty of a one-off life, as a negation of the possibility of eternal-recurrence life, would confirm the insignificance for an individual to identify the weight of decisions and to take up any moral responsibility. In contrast, the form of *mise en abyme* allegorically supports the concept of eternal recurrence to transfigure temporally infinite repetition into a situation that one’s single action would have eternal significance because of its endless continuity.

3. The Dialectic of Weight and Lightness Reminiscent of *Mise en abyme*

In the following paragraphs of Chapter 2, the narrator suggests rejecting the possibility of eternal return through living in “splendid lightness”, as a way to get rid of “the heaviest of burdens” (p. 5). Soon afterwards, he questions whether “heaviness [is] truly deplorable and lightness splendid” and then argues that the weight of burden determines to what degree one belongs to the earth, is real and is truthful (p. 5). His alternate use of the presence and absence of eternal return metonymically embeds *mise en abyme* into a conceptual structure of weight, and hence the presence of *mise en abyme* represents extreme heaviness and its absence represents extreme lightness.

Following a question "What then shall we choose? Weight or lightness?" (p. 5) stated in Chapter 2, the narrator introduces Tomas, the male protagonist of the story, in Chapter 3, which begins with a dilemma that Tomas would like to be in a relationship with a girl who may become his burden. His conflict corresponds to the question about choosing heaviness or lightness. As the narrator comments,

Should he call her back to Prague for good? He feared the responsibility. If he invited her to come, then come she would, and offer him up her life.

Or should he refrain from approaching her? Then she would remain a waitress in a hotel restaurant of a provincial town and he would never see her again. (pp. 6-7)

While the narrator contextualises his previous philosophical discussion, he dissociates the concept of eternal recurrence from the love-responsibility connection, derived from his allegorical emphasis on weight. In the step-by-step metonymy construction—from the absence and presence of eternal recurrence to the lightness and heaviness carried by personal decision, and from the weight of life to the conflict between love and responsibility, the allegorical function of *mise en abyme* is apparently reducing. It no longer supports the metaphysical thinking of the iterability of life, but provides a pre-text of the story, instead of a pretext within it. On the contrary, the weight which Kundera has delinked from the form of *mise en abyme* since Chapter 3 dominates the development of the main plots. It centralises readers' thinking of the validity of characters' moral decisions concerning being an intellectual during and after the Prague Spring (1968).⁶

4. The Narrative Connectivity of *Mise en abyme*

Comparatively, the form of *mise en abyme* has a more central position in connecting the plots and highlighting their connotation throughout the story of Ah Cheng's "The King of Children". Different from supporting the signification of repetitive identical lives in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, *mise en abyme* helps frame the meaninglessness of repetitive labouring activities in "The King of Children". In

this overt and homodiegetic (first-person) narration, the narrator-protagonist is an educated youngster in the context of the Down to the Countryside Movement (during the late 1960s to the late 1970s). He is sent down to rural area to labour. As he states at the beginning of the story, “In 1976, I had been working in the Production Team for seven years. I had learnt how to clear the land, burn off the undergrowth, dig holes, transplant seedlings, hoe the fields, turn the soil, sow grain, feed the pigs, make mud bricks and cut grass.” (Ah Cheng, 1990, p. 157) His identity, together with his life mode, is transformed from being an urban intellectual who possesses potential diversity to actualise himself into being a farmer who repeats a set of labouring practices day after day. This life mode, centred by ritual and non-progressive working which I term as “Sisyphusian labouring”⁷, is cyclical repetition of activities which occupy one’s single life. Such cyclical repetition is empty and hence regarded as meaningless. On this point, the absolute meaningfulness of personal decisions that Kundera recognises upon infinite repetition of lives is opposite to Ah Cheng’s denial of self-replication. Two writers apply the form of *mise en abyme* in two different allegorical directions.

Moreover, *mise en abyme* embedded in Ah Cheng’s story has a stronger internal connectivity. His continuous use of repetition as a narrative strategy enables *mise en abyme* to stick to a larger amount of vehicles, and hence to grant connotation to a wider range of plots and characters. For instance, Brownie said to “I”, “If Central Radio gives you the first sentence I can give you the second. [...] It’s always the same old stuff, I know it back to front, I don’t need to listen to it.” (p. 183) His implication about the duplication of speech content that the central government delivers to the public reveals the rigidity of propaganda politics. As a story mainly concerning the inflexible education system in China that results in inflexible labouring mode and lifestyle, “The King of Children” uses an analogical skill rather than explicit logical deduction to indoctrinate the cause-and-effect between two sides. Upon the Mao’s politics which is regarded as similarly inflexible, Ah Cheng utilises the repetitive pattern that narrator—“I” perceives through his personal horizon, bound by the authorial intention, to express the causality of his idea step by step. In the first step, the author first lists out the chronological linkage between studying and working

without additional comments through the conversation between Brownie and "I". As Brownie said, "the students now [...] just do what they like, and then when they reach the right age they come back to the Team to work, they barely know how to read and write." (p. 188) His saying is under a historical setting that knowledge was regarded as less valuable than labouring because most of the educated youngsters had been sent down by Chairman Mao for being re-educated by farmers. In the second step, the author highlights the male protagonist's reflection on his students' learning method (unceasingly copying the texts from books), after Wang Fu told "I", "I'll—I'll do [copy a Chinese dictionary through handwriting] a bit every day, fifty thousand characters, a hundred characters a day, five hundred days. We've spent eight years copying our textbooks." (p. 204) In the next paragraph, "I" reflects, "I felt, however, that I should go on teaching them to be conscientious and honest. This made me feel more at peace with myself, though I still felt worried about Wang Fu." (p. 204) The narrator does not explain further about why he needs to be more "conscientious and honest" and feels worried after knowing that Wang Fu will keep studying in a blindly repetitive style. In the third step, the author implicitly relates repetitive studying to repetitive labouring. When "I" gathers his friends in a classroom and pretends to teach them for fun, he tells them a story and mentions that they have to listen carefully, "Once upon a time, there was a mountain. On the mountain, there was a temple. In the temple, there was an old monk telling a story. What was the story he was telling? Once upon a time, there was a mountain. On the mountain, there was a temple. In the temple, there was an old monk telling—" (p. 206) The story surrounding never-ending images of "mountain", "temple" and "old monk" is a story-within-story in an absolute cyclical narrative structure: the ending of one in-story story connects to the beginning of another in-story story with identical content. The blank repetition without extension of in-text meaning is similar to the mythical pattern about Sisyphus who is punished to roll up an immense boulder to the hilltop, waiting for it rolling downhill and then rolling up again, and so on and so forth. Told in a classroom, a government-monitored space similar to its external space, this story not only corresponds to the plots about Wang Fu copying the dictionary, but also echoes the Sisyphusian labouring activities of the educated youth outside the classroom. As

the author narrates, after “I”’s friends shout out the story again and again all together with rhythm, they “make the mountain gullies ring with the chants they make up to keep in step as they carry heavy logs” (p. 207). Shouting out chants is a usual practice for distracting one from an on-going hard work. Its empty repetition is a carnivalesque hypnosis against, and parallel to, the physical exhaustion and mental frustration continuously evoked by repetitive hardship. In the sense that carrying heavy logs and copying a dictionary similarly shares *mise en abyme* in representation, the second step and the third step enrich the significance of what Brownie said in the first step. After summing up the rhetoric similarity of later two steps in relation to their connection pre-established in the first step, we can see that barely having the ability of reading and writing, without critical thinking, is not unimportant, because the narrator has constituted a relationship between rigid pedagogy and slavery labouring, both of which are characterised by non-reflexive repetition.

Mark Turner (1996, p. 85) states that “parable typically distributes meaning over many spaces”. In the case of “The King of Chess”, we can obviously see that *mise en abyme* enables wider distribution of meaning in its enclosed virtual world. Compared to the rhetoric use of *mise en abyme* in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, the use in “The King of Chess” has a stronger connectivity and wider in-text coverage. It acts not only as an analogy of some repetitive models / possibilities of human life, which facilitates readers’ imaginative access to the co-text in-between reality and virtuality, evoking a certain degree of enlightenment, but also allegorically integrates separated textual meanings in a narration in place of explicit clarification without connotative use of language. One should notice that, as an allegory or a support of allegory, *mise en abyme* is empty in meaning. It is out of narrativity because of its simplicity. Only through clinging to relevant narrations can it achieve depth and complexity of signification. The more the elements of the fictional world and the real world it can refer to, the higher the level of defamiliarised diversity⁸ a work can achieve due to the use of this form.

5. Conclusion

To end up this essay, I would like to emphasise the function of *mise en abyme* in mediating the relation between time and narration. While Ricoeur draws our attention to mimesis which transfigure real time into narrative time through "its power of configuration" (1984, p. 53), we have to particularly notice how literary form or figure of speech scaffolds textual transfiguration. The reason is that emplotment, as a process of mimesis, entails a temporal match of narration with the adopted form or skill. In the case of *mise en abyme*, an author who builds his plot upon this form has probably considered its eternal nature which matches his intended connotation of content. At the same time, his narrative use of form, instead of merely the content, has framed the readers' interpretation of the time narrated by the author. As both reality and narration, which imitates reality, are bound by time, the internal complexity and integratability of plots require authorial sensitivity to the temporality of forms used to fill in contents. This sensitivity is not usually a conscious matter in a writing process; however, conscious examination of the linguistic composition of narration can probably help clarify the temporal arrangement of story and the plots and characters stuck to it. This paper illustrated the eternity of *mise en abyme*, through which I demonstrated how its allegorical nature enables the narrative development of complicated signification system. For sure, we can adopt the same understanding to analyse the allegorical function and temporality of other forms and build up more topics for further discussion, such as the allegorical specificity of personalisation, the imagined time in the use of metaphor, the temporal transition of foregrounding, and so on. This kind of discussions must require a discreet mind to look into the frames within frames. Hopefully those who are interested in it will not fall into *mise en abyme*, in which they have to pay Sisyphusian effort for no final answer.

Notes

- 1 The dissolution of the Soviet Union gave birth to the capitalist Czech Republic in 1993, and the People's Republic of China adopted capitalised socialism in the late 1970s to foster its economic growth. While writing *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* as an exile

writer, Kundera was situated at a non-communist context as Ah Cheng.

- 2 Concerning the temporality of narrative, Fowler mainly focuses his argument on the function of past tense which “generaliz[es] about outmoded customs and habits of mind” (p. 73).
- 3 A simple way to understand the necessary temporality of *mise en abyme* in literary application is to refer to the division between spatial arts and temporal arts. Literature, as a type of temporal arts, like music, is presumed to be significant only through chronological consumption according to the orders arranged by an author, but not to a spatial constellation, which a painter deploys for his work.
- 4 The plural form of *život* is *životy*.
- 5 As Deleuze and Guattari (1988, p. 9) describe, a rhizome “never allows itself to be overcoded, never has available a supplementary dimension over and above its number of lines, that is, over and above the multiplicity of numbers attached to those lines. All multiplicities are flat, in the sense that they fill or occupy all of their dimensions”. That means the mode of rhizome is a full acceptance of all the possibilities, which are viewed as equal (or “flat”) regardless of any presumption about morality or other issues.
- 6 The Prague Spring was a liberalist political movement that lasted for 7 months and 14 days. On 5 January 1968, Alexander Dubček was elected as the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. He attempted to democratise Czechoslovakia and gave suggestions about marketizing the economy, relaxing controls on freedom of speech and artistic expression, reducing the power of the Communist Party, and dividing the country into two. On the 20th and 21st of August 1968, half a million troops with tanks sent by the Soviet Union spent six hours occupying the country; this abruptly ended the reforms. Gustáv Husák then replaced Dubček and reversed his reforms, practising normalisation policies. He re-established the Soviet Union’s political sovereignty, including persecuting the writers who had supported Dubček’s suggestions, including Milan Kundera.
- 7 The use of the term “Sisyphusian labouring” has made a reference to the connection between the labouring of educated youngsters and the myth about Sisyphus that Liang Xiaosheng (1988, p. 262) built in his fiction. As he narrated, the educated youngsters who had returned to city “realise that, from ‘the Red Guard period’ to ‘Rustication’, they are but a stone: ‘the stone of Sisyphus’. They were rolled up by a giant to the top of mountain,

and then rolled down from the mountain top, and then were rolled up by the giant onto the mountain again, and rolled down again..." (This quotation is translated by the author of this paper.)

- 8 As Victor Shklovsky (2006, p. 778) illustrates his idea of defamiliarisation, "The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar', to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged." The increase in the referability of *mise en abyme* can centralise it in a more complicated signification system. Readers will need to take more time to decode the logical arrangement of a story, which then, by definition, becomes more aesthetic.

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