MONIQUE BOSCO "EN ABYME"

Michael Greenstein

POST-STRUCTURALIST CRITICISM has eagerly seized upon Gide's concept of "mise en abyme," a phrase he borrowed from heraldry where the inner design of a shield repeats the overall pattern. Modern critics have extended this synecdochic relationship to include the image of two mirrors facing one another thus creating infinite reflection, repetition, or vertigo such as might be experienced on the edge of an abyss. This sense of vertigo appears as an important characteristic of Quebec fiction in general,[1] and more specifically, the "mise en abyme" effect seems central to the novels of Monique Bosco.[2] The present study seeks to explore some varieties of "abyme" that inform Monique Bosco's writing, as her characters lose themselves in bewildering labyrinths of obsessive repetition from which they emerge only to find themselves reeling on the brink of an abyss. Repetitive thoughts, actions, and language that preoccupy her protagonists and narrators reveal dilemmas paradigmatic of modern fiction.

Un Amour maladroit (1961), winner of the American first-novel award, begins with

> Je suis devant le mur
> Le long mur
> Le mur des lamentations
> Le mur des ancêtres qui,
> La face couverte de cendres,
> Venaient pour s'y lamenter
> Se lamenter
> La seule chose gratuite
> Suprême consolation permise.

In these lines Bosco announces her obsession with lamentation: repetitive tears in front of repetitive walls that connect her to her ancestors. In her claustral universe "walls" play a central role, occasionally pierced by windows or mirrors that, instead of offering relief or escape, merely intensify the sense of endless repetition and incarceration.[3] Immediately following the poem about Jerusalem's Wailing Wall or psychological ghetto walls, the narrator "reflects" upon her existence: "Image fuyante, miroir infidèle. Miroir, dis-moi qui je suis: ni la plus belle ni la plus laide."[4] Through her looking-glass the narrator perceives a doubling confirmation of her internalized identity, a vision confounded by domestic labyrinths: "Longs corridors sans fin où j'erre, interminablement, qui ne

donnent que sur des chambres désertes, désespérément vides. A l'intérieur, tout n'est que noirceur. Dans chaque pièce, un miroir dont je n'aperçois que l'envers." By the end of the novel she has resolved the question posed at the outset of how to grasp her life as she returns to her mirror: "Dans la glace, j'accepte que mon reflet me paraisse enfin familier et inévitable. Je n'espère plus de transformations miraculeuses pour mon visage." Where earlier she had sought "le miracle d'une métamorphose," she now resigns herself to confronting a reality unchanged by flattering mirrors.

Like her self-reflexive mirrors, the windows in *Un Amour maladroit* offer no outward escape, for they serve only to isolate Bosco's young protagonist from society. She addresses the shop window separating a little girl from toys: "Un même mur, invisible comme une paroi de verre, se dressait toujours entre la vie et moi." This self-proclaimed masochist finds no outlet at her window which reminds her only of the happiness of others: "Chacun se hâte vers le but qu'il s'est choisi; quant à moi, je m'efforce de ne penser à rien, penchée à cette fenêtre qui ni débouche que sur la joie des autres." While others rush forward, she remains alone, static, petrified at her window: "J'aime cette insidieuse maladie qui me transforme lentement, inexorablement, en une statue de sel." Not unlike Anne Hébert's heroines, Monique Bosco's protagonists find themselves stationed at windows peering into vacant external worlds, or surrounded by walls that enclose an equally internalized emptiness.

Confined within *huis clos*, the narrator eventually succumbs to dizziness caused either by the contraction of walls on her psyche or by a labyrinthine branching of endless corridors perplexing her divided ego. Her reaction to her psychiatrist places her on the brink of an abyss: "Un jour qu'il avait réussi à me pousser plus loin de coutume, j'eus la sensation d'être perdue dans le corridor sombre et désert d'une mine abandonnée. Un pas plus avant et j'étais certaine de tomber dans le noir absolu d'un précipice sans fond." Though ashamed of her excessive egocentricity, she cannot renounce her martyrdom, and her quest for identity meets with failure because the walls of her own ego block her entry into the lives of others. "Je vais, je viens, je tourne en rond, sans fièvre et sans caprice, de façon inéluctable. . . . Je ne puis même pas prendre place parmi les pleureuses du mur des lamentations." The misery of her awkward love knows no company, for Bosco's obsession with walls merely accentuates the whirligig's compulsive *abyme*, shelter, and invisibility: "De cet échafaudage est ne le long mur qui bientôt m'encerclera étroitement, refusant l'entrée de ce domaine à quiconque. Derrière son enceinte. . . . Là sera mon arche, à l'abri des regards, où je serai invisible pour l'oeil même de Dieu."

While she fails to establish contact with mankind at large, she is no more successful in more particular relationships involving women, her family, and her Jewish religion. Just as she is surrounded by walls, so is she enclosed by a femi-

nine family of mother, sister, aunt, and grandmother, for she was born fatherless "en un gynécée." Where her younger sister Elizabeth (whom she considers her double) has a name, she remains "la Petite," an anonymous narrator whose patronym, the sole inheritance from her father, embarrasses her at school. Her grandmother recalls the family's flight from Poland to Paris, and her mother instructs her in the ways of religion:

> Tremble, m'a-t-elle dit, fille digne de moi,
> Le cruel dieu des Juifs l'emporte aussi sur toi.

From this simple rhyme she graduates to Sartre's *Réflexions sur la question juive* later in life and a masochistic Jewishness: "Pour m'en punir, je reprendrai la route, la longue route sans fin du Juif errant." But her wandering Jew turns inward to repeat her intramural role: "Je demeurais prisonnière de mon infernal ghetto individuel. . . . Nulle issue. Nulle sortie vers le monde." Thus, the externals of the plot — hiding in Marseilles during World War II and emigration to Montreal after the War — complement the wanderings of a central consciousness paralyzed *en abyme*, where family and religion do not help in her quest for self-identity and the world at large.

LA FEMME DE LOTH (1970) picks up where *Un Amour maladroit* leaves off with the emphasis once again on obsessive repetition, enclosure, and infinite, abysmal doublings. Structurally the division into 240 short sections furthers the atmosphere of enclosure as one section echoes another. "Toi" and "tu" reverberate throughout the novel as the first-person narrator, Hélène, addresses her departed lover Pierre in a refrain of bitterness bracketed within interwoven narrative and chronological sequences encompassing biblical history, family history, the immediate past, and the present that fluctuates between Montreal and Venice, scene of an earlier novel *Les Infusoires* (1965). *La Femme de Loth* begins and ends in circular fashion with Hélène contemplating suicide: the walls and mirrors of the first novel turn to a window in this later work which seems to have been influenced by Diane Giguère's *Le Temps des jeux* (1961). In Giguère's novel the young heroine experiences vertigo from her window overlooking an existential abyss: "ouvrit la fenêtre, se pencha sur le seuil et ferma les yeux. Son corps oscilla dans la lumière. Il y avait longtemps qu'elle songeait a cette issue, mais elle perdait toujours courage au dernier moment. . . . Prise de vertige, la nausée l'envahit et elle appuya ses coudes à la croisée." Bosco begins comparably: "Il y a la fenêtre. Un bond. Et on échappe à l'horrible son d'une voix. Douce voix, soudain transformée en voix ennemie. . . . Dans ce dur pays de froid, les fenêtres ne s'ouvrent pas sur le vide."[5] To the windows, transformations, claustral emptiness, and suicidal depression of the

earlier novel is added the image of "voice" — whether her lover's or her own that echoes in obsessive litany. As a child she suffers from vertigo near her window: "Je restais près de la fenêtre à relire interminablement mes nouveaux livres. Je les savais déjà par coeur. Je n'osais regarder au sol, à cause du vertige." The window separates the internal world of literature from external reality — a central theme in *La Femme de Loth.*

Hélène's soliloquy or interior monologue heightens the claustral, reverberatory effect. The auditory equivalent of face-to-face mirrors in *mise en abyme* would be a continuous echo, the voice and name of Pierre resounding through section after section. "Tu te moquais de mes 'litanies,' de ce besoin de répéter ton nom, à l'infini." Excluded from the world at large by her closed window and by her rejection at the hands of Pierre, Hélène repeatedly defines herself through a series of negatives that deny the possibility of human contact or relationship. She remains an outsider even to her parents, whom she regards as an ideal couple. When she asks for a baby brother her parents reply, "Il y a des maladresses qu'on ne peut répéter." Their refusal to repeat their error takes on a more poignant note as the child recalls voices that wonder why she fails to resemble her mother and father: "Et la même voix, ou une autre, différente, ou mille autres, réparties au long des années, reprenait en écho, en leur passage: 'Le beau couple. . . . C'est fou comme ils se complètent.' " Ironically her Parisian accent distinguishes her at school in Montreal, and later in life she is complimented for her voice alone, the rest of her body relegated to an inferior status.

Instead of resembling her parents, Hélène discovers that she looks more like her grandmother, the link to her Jewish background which extends from the Bible to the modern Holocaust of the Jews trapped by Hitler. The narrator regards herself as a latter-day wife of Lot, for she must learn to define herself independently of Pierre, and with an eye to the unknown future rather than a failed past.

> En laissant la ville en flammes se consumer. Sans se retourner. . . . Il faut aller de l'avant. Sans un regard pour le passé. Pourtant quand Yahvé voulut sauver Loth, il l'autorisa à partir avec sa femme, ses filles. Et malgré la présence de Loth, le réconfort des enfants nées de sa chair, elle se retourne, malgré la défense formelle, la vieille femme folle regrettant ce qui a été.

The cumulative "re" prefixes stamp Hélène's perverse predicament indelibly upon the archetype to form a palimpsest or statue of salt. This memory of her personal past and her archetypal past causes a feeling of nausea in Hélène who is constantly torn between the demands of past and future with the former somewhat less painful than what awaits her.

> J'aimerais comprendre pourquoi Dieu voulut sauver Loth et sa famille s'ils ne retournaient pas sur la ville en flammes. Je comprends si aisément la femme de Loth.

> Moi aussi, à la fin de cet été, je me serai peut-être transformée — à force de répandre des larmes sur le passé — en une autre statue de sel.

As Bosco's narrators survey their past, they naturally appropriate the myth of Lot's wife with its emphasis on tears transformed into a saline statue; this biblical leitmotif reappears towards the end of the novel:

> Loth et sa famille. Les filles sont jeunes, avec l'avenir devant elles. Pour la vieille femme, c'est tout son passé qui s'engloutit. Alors elle tourne la tête, cherchant à distinguer ce qui se passe, ce qui s'est passé. Elle se retourne, malgré la défense expresse. Pauvre vieille femme. Dans la Bible, tu n'as pas de nom. La femme de Loth, cela suffit. . . . Une statue de sel. La belle image. L'admirable symbole. Une statue de larmes pétrifiées. . . .
>
> Je me retourne, moi aussi, sur ce passé dévasté.

Re-view, re-turn, re-peat — these constitute the static actions within *Un Amour maladroit* and *La Femme de Loth,* the retrogressive pull inhibiting any future progress; moreover, these "re" prefixes meaning "back" and "again" focus on forms of doubling in the novels.

Hélène's solitary existence defines itself in contrast to forms of doubling including the ideal couple that her parents represent or the other young couples who meet and marry while she remains alone. For her this pattern extends back to the biblical archetype: "On accepte seulement les 'couples' comme dans l'Arche de Noé." So, like other masochistic heroines with whom she identifies, she looks into her mirror for a doubling, narcissistic illusion: "Miroir, miroir, dis-moi que, pour lui, je suis celle qui compte." When the flattering mirror fails, she turns to her window only to be reminded once again of her separation from any communion or community, and the impossibility of substituting "romantic" dreams in place of harsh realities: "J'ai passé des années à faire du lèchevitrine aux étalages du bonheur conjugal. L'Amérique entière affichait ses richesses aux fenêtres panoramiques de toutes les belles banlieues peuplées de couples amoureux. Il me convient de pleurer sur mon ersatz de rêve d'arrière-cour." Faced with the claustral reality of four walls, a room of her own, Hélène gains some comfort from literature — from reading and writing — where she can find some doubling fulfilment not offered by society. "J'ai toujours été étonnée de voir mon ombre se profiler sur un mur, sur le sol. J'avais donc une ombre. Des empreintes digitales uniques au monde. . . . J'essaie de les nommer, de les cerner, sur ce papier. . . . En cessant d'exister, je ferai mon premier choix de vivante. Exit Hélène." Hélène projects her shadow on a wall and a dramatic role upon herself thereby splitting herself into an acting self and a recording or observing self.

Caught between past and future, Hélène recognizes her dual personality: "Vieillarde prématurée. Fausse jeune fille prolongée. Voilà mes deux faces." Her destiny lies *en abyme*: "Je serai double jusqu'à la fin. J'hésite entre l'amour et la haine. L'Ancien et le Nouveau Testament. Parjure aux deux." Even her mar-

riage to Claude, a homosexual, thwarts any desired fulfilment; instead it provides her with another doubling role: "Il incarnait un rôle. Volontairement, je donnais ma réplique dans cette mauvaise pièce de boulevard." Her awareness of this re-plication, (deux-pli-cation), and role-playing occurs at the very centre of the novel in a series of short sections, "cette farce que je répétais" and "mon simulacre de rôle." "Le passé est passé. J'ai tort de m'acharner envers ce double d'autrefois, ma soeur d'hier. . . . On ne se refait pas." Abundant references to novels within the narrative further contribute to the *mise en abyme*; Proust, Kafka, Dostoievski, Sartre, and Simone de Beauvoir provide Hélène with examples "d'y retrouver le reflet de mes angoisses." Literature, books, words, transform life and reality for her as she depicts her own metamorphosis from girl to woman; contrasting life and art, she states her purpose in creating *La Femme de Loth*: "Je n'écris ce roman que pour éloigner l'échéance de la vérité." Writing alone saves her from committing suicide by the end of the novel: "Pauvres pages. Preuve dérisoire qu'en fin de compte tout est littérature. . . . Simulacre et dérision." Through parody she deconstructs her own portrait.

Bosco transforms Pierre, the doctor, in *La Femme de Loth* into the protagonist in *Charles Levy, m.d.* (1977), and continues her earlier preoccupations, only now she portrays a bleak world through male eyes instead of from a feminine perspective. Dying of cancer, Dr. Lévy laments his past failures in life through first-person narrative and interior monologue. Gloria Escomel has noted "un effet d'écho" between Hélène and Charles: "ce chassé-croisé de personnages produit un effet de mise en abyme des deux romans."[6] In other words, the *mise en abyme* found in individual novels may be carried over to Bosco's entire oeuvre marking a central preoccupation in her fiction. In this latest novel, however, she carries thematic *dédoublement* and repetition one step further by adding an obsessive, stylistic double entendre.

Like David Canaan in *The Mountain and the Valley*, Charles Lévy has an incestuous relationship with his twin sister, Sarah, more satisfying than his marriage. Bosco introduces the doppelgänger motif near the beginning: "Ma moitié. Ombre de notre ombre. Double cruel d'Edgar Poe. . . . la soeur perdue, le vrai double, ma précieuse jumelle."[7] Twin phonemes echo each other and stress thematic and imagistic concerns at all stages. Like Bosco's other Jewish protagonists Charles complains about his racial identity: "Libre Lévy, sauf de la vie. O les vies non vécues de tous ces gens de ma race. Lévites. Toujours plus vites." He places orthodox Jews *en abyme*, "Ghetto dans le ghetto," and regards his personal past in similar terms, ontogeny recapitulating phylogeny: "Je ne suis jamais vraiment sorti du ghetto d'enfance."

Paronomasia pervades every aspect of his life as linguistic and existential elements fuse. The moribund physician of language diagnoses his condition *en abyme*: "ces mots creux qui prolifèrent comme mon cancer. Un mal, des maux. J'ai des maux à l'infini. Et des most aussi." Sexual distinctions also proliferate through echoing homonyms in clipped sentences with absences of verbs. "La maleheure. L'heure des mâles. Du mal." "Femme. *Fame*, faim en italien. *Fame*, en anglais." "Ombre. Ombre. Hombre! Voie des voyages. Voix. Vois. Vois l'âge." The surgeon who dissects language to this extreme ultimately loses his way and his voice in a never-ending labyrinth, "L'énorme grotte. . . . Tuyaux d'orgue à l'infini. . . . Un vide sans écho." Words turn upon themselves in imitation of the egos of introverted narrators and protagonists who stare into a series of shattered mirrors.

Thus, each of Bosco's novels reveals her preoccupation with various forms of doubling, echoing, and repetition *en abyme*. Bosco seeks shelter behind cloistered walls pierced by windows, mirrors, shadows, and the echoes of ancestral voices haunting her prose and pulling her back from the brink of a contemporary abyss. The same notes resound in her prose poem "Jéricho" (1971): "Je n'irai jamais à Jéricho. Je renonce à l'héritage. J'accepte qu'au bruit de ma voix, nul écho ne réponde. Que les autres entonnent leurs trompettes, faisant crouler les murs humains. Je reste sagement à l'abri d'un pauvre présent. Le passé est mort. Et je récuse, d'avance, l'absurde futur incohérent." And as the walls of an individual ghetto close in on Charles or Hélène, so the four corners of the earth disseminate and encompass the diaspora: "La loi de la dispersion est respectée aux quatres coins de la terre. On honore l'héritage du juif errant" (*Schabbat* 70-77).

NOTES

[1] Gilles Marcotte, *Une Littérature qui se fait* (Montréal: HMH, 1968), pp. 62-76.

[2] Gloria Escomel, "Monique Bosco ou le miroir brisé," *La Nouvelle Barre du jour*, no. 65 (avril 1978), 90-97.

[3] See Eva-Marie Kröller, "La Lampe dans la fenêtre: The Visualization of Quebec Fiction," *Canadian Literature*, no. 88 (Spring 1981), pp. 74-82; and E. Blodgett, "Prisms and Arcs: Structures in Hébert and Munro," in *Figures in a Ground*, ed. Diane Bessai and David Jackel (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1978), pp. 99-121.

[4] This and subsequent references are from Monique Bosco, *Un Amour maladroit* (Paris: Gallimard, 1961).

[5] This and subsequent references are from Monique Bosco, *La Femme de Loth* (Montréal: HMH, 1970).

[6] Escomel, p. 93.

[7] This and subsequent references are from Monique Bosco, *Charles Lévy, m.d.* (Montréal: Les Editions Quinze, 1977).