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Abstract

In Belgian author Amélie Nothomb's 1998 novel *Mercure*, the multitudes of physical, figurative, and narrative mirrors invite a reflexive reading of the text. While numerous critics have focused on the intertextuality in *Mercure*—its most obvious manifestation of reflexivity—the novel's intratextuality has not been analyzed as extensively, and none of these manifestations has been analyzed specifically as an instance of narrative reflexivity. Guided by the theme of mirrors and mirroring, the purpose of this article is to recast in terms of narrative reflexivity some of the extant critical analysis of *Mercure*, to uncover other as yet unexplored realizations of reflexivity, and to bring them together in a cogent system.

Keywords

Amélie Nothomb, Mercure, mirrors, mirror, mirroring, intertextuality, reflexivity

Mirrors in the Text: Amélie Nothomb's *Mercure*

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Mirrors of all kinds abound in Amélie Nothomb's 1998 novel *Mercure* 'Mercury': not just the physical mirrors in the story being narrated, but also figurative mirrors in the form of characters and embedded narratives, textual mirrors, stylistic mirrors, mirrors of the author and even mirrors of ourselves. In the same way that seeing our reflection in a mirror provokes in each of us an instance of self-consciousness, the thematic mirrors in *Mercure* provoke instances of literary self-consciousness. In fact, literary self-consciousness is just one name for a larger narrative phenomenon also referred to as literary narcissistic narrative, metafiction, or reflexivity.[1] Seen through a lens of reflexivity, the mirroring in *Mercure* is not only representational—creating images of the world and uncovering the mechanics of knowing and showing—but also constitutive—creating discourses and uncovering the mechanics of composing and interpreting. Guided by the theme of mirrors and mirroring, I will begin by recasting in terms of narrative reflexivity some of the extant critical analysis of *Mercure*, especially the criticism focused on intertextuality. With that as a point of departure, this study uncovers several of the novel's as yet unexplored realizations of reflexivity, such as the relationship between Adèle and Hazel up to its culmination in the first ending, the narrator's paratextual intervention, and the relationship between Françoise and Loncours as it develops in the novel's second ending. Finally it also examines a dizzying labyrinth of inter- and intratextual combinations of characters, plots, writers and works, all of which make *Mercure* a reflexive tour de force. Ultimately, it shows how such a reflexive analysis can enrich the reading of this novel.

The typology of reflexivity utilized has its foundation in the

four modes of what Linda Hutcheon calls "narcissistic" narrative. Texts can be diegetically self-aware, that is, conscious of their own narrative processes. Others are linguistically self-reflective, demonstrating their awareness of both the limits and the powers of their own language. Further, each of these modes can be present in at least two forms, what she terms an overt and a covert form. Overt forms of narcissism are present in texts in which the self-consciousness and self-reflection are evident, usually explicitly thematized or allegorized within the story being told. In its covert form, however, this process is realized internally, within the formal and linguistic structure of the text (22-23). The fictional content of the story is continually reflected in its formal existence as text (Waugh 15). Rather than use the terms self-aware, self-reflective, narcissistic, or metafictional, Robert Siegle's term "reflexive," is used, thereby avoiding several limiting implications of the former terms (3-4, 249). According to Siegle: (a) In overt diegetic reflexivity, the text displays itself as narrative; we readers are made aware that we are reading and actively creating a fictional universe. (b) In overt linguistic reflexivity, the text thematizes the power and limits of language to create that fictional universe. (c) In covert diegetic reflexivity, self-reflection is actualized in the text; models include, for example, the mystery plot, games, the erotic, and fantasy. (d) Finally, in covert linguistic reflexivity, language draws the reader's attention to itself; models include riddles, jokes, puns, and anagrams. The terminology is almost exactly the same as in Hutcheon, but the typology differs in that it does not target texts exclusively, but narrative moments or situations as well. In each case, by showing how literary fiction creates its imaginary worlds, reflexivity can assist the reader in understanding how day-to-day reality is constructed.

In fact, many of Nothomb's works display narrative reflexivity in the form of thematized self-consciousness by foregrounding discussions of books and reflections on reading, writing, and literature, such as in *Les Combustibles* (1994) '*Human Rites*' (2005). Another common manifestation is the presence of a writer as a character in the story. In Nothomb's first published novel, *L'Hygiène de l'assassin* (1992) '*Hygiene of the Assassin*' (2010), a journalist interviews a famous author. Similarly, *Le Voyage d'hiver* (2009) 'The Winter Journey' spotlights the writer's craft with the appearance of

an autistic writer, Aliénor Malèze. Both of these comprise examples of overt diegetic reflexivity, in which the act of writing is explicitly brought to the reader's attention in the story being narrated. Taken a step farther, in her 2010 work *Une forme de vie* '*Life Form*' (2013), the very act of writing becomes the story, in a fictitious correspondence between the character Amélie Nothomb and an American soldier, Melvin Mapple. This novel displays diegetic reflexivity, and its epistolary format focuses attention on the boundaries of language to create a fictional universe, giving it an overtly linguistic reflexive nature as well. In addition, a less obvious manifestation of covert diegetic reflexivity can be found in the eroticism of her short novella *Sans nom* (2001) 'Without a Name.' In each of these cases, the narrative moment or situation that manifests reflexivity fits well into our typology. However, the reflexivity displayed in *Mercure* is multifaceted and not always obvious. What some might consider a transparent narrative masks intriguing instances of reflexivity, and for this reason, it deserves closer examination.

Some critics have investigated instances of narrative reflexivity in *Mercur*e as well as in other works of Nothomb, but without categorizing them under the umbrella of reflexivity. Three critics who foreground intertextuality—yet another manifestation of overt diegetic reflexity in Nothomb's works—are Andrea Oberhuber, Nausicaa Dewez, and Susan Bainbrigge. Oberhuber posits *Mercure* and *Métaphysique des tubes* (2000) '*The Character of Rain*' (2003) as metaphorical palimpsests, in which the discourse of the novel overwrites images, words, and themes from other works, which are *Mercure*'s intertexts (112-13). Dewez recognizes that the works of Nothomb in general are populated with characters who love to read, who quote their favorite authors, and who compare themselves to other literary characters (291). These characters constitute an instance of overt diegetic reflexivity in the novel, in that they mirror us, the actual readers of the text in which they appear. Finally, in "'Monter l'escalier anachronique': Intertextuality in *Mercure*," Bainbrigge points out that "books (literally) offer an escape from imprisonment, and the narrative itself becomes a self-reflexive exploration of this thesis, with … discussions about literature in the story foregrounding the theme of intertextuality itself" (114). Several intertexts that Bainbrigge identifies within the

story of *Mercure* include Alexandre Dumas's *Le Comte de Monte Cristo* (1844), Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le noir* (1830) 'The Red and the Black' (1926); Lewis Carroll's: *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, and the *Thousand and One Nights*.[2]

Although much Nothombian criticism focuses on the intertextuality in *Mercure* and in her other works, little deals with the complementary phenomenon of intratextuality. A less familiar term, intratextuality "seems to have been coined independently by a number of critics on the analogy of intertextuality, to refer to relationships *within* a text" (Hardie 225). Alison Sharrock, in the introduction to her article "Texts, Parts, and (W)holes in Theory," explains intratextuality as the way in which parts of a text relate to other parts, or wholes, and even holes found within that same text (5). Nothomb not only finds intertextual inspiration in other literary works, but she also creates intratextual mirroring relationships within *Mercure*. Other critics have shown how pre-existing external texts are worked into *Mercure.* The focus here is on how *Mercure* reflects on itself—just like Hutcheon's Narcissus did.

The storyline in *Mercure* develops around the beautiful Hazel Englert. After her parents are killed in a wartime bombardment, she is kidnapped by Omer Loncours and spirited away to an island named Mortes-Frontières, off the coast of Cherbourg. Loncours— le Capitaine—tricks Hazel into believing that she has been terribly disfigured in the bombing by having her look into a mirror that distorts her features: the reason that she is willing to accompany him. For five years, he keeps her in ignorance of her physical beauty, in a manor house devoid of all reflective surfaces, so that only he can enjoy her loveliness. Françoise, a nurse sent to care for Hazel, herself ends up a captive on the island, but not before she discovers the history of Hazel's predecessor, Adèle Langlais, who had tragically died 20 years before in an apparent suicide.

Adèle-Hazel

Adèle's story constitutes the principal intratext in *Mercure*. It is the hypotext for the endings of Hazel's story.[3] Adèle Langlais was a wealthy orphan rescued from a fire by Loncours, who picked her up and carried her out of a burning building. He convinced her that her

face had been horribly burned. When she wanted proof, Loncours produced a hand mirror that distorted images. When she saw her reflection, she believed herself to be disfigured and begged Loncours to take her away so that nobody could ever look at her. Loncours then purchased the island of Mortes-Frontières and designed the curious manor house, "cette maison très spéciale" (175) 'this very odd house' devoid of reflective surfaces.[4] After ten years of captivity, Adèle committed suicide by throwing herself into the sea.

Dismayed by the monstrous lie that Loncours is now imposing on Hazel, Françoise decides one night to reveal to her the truth. Françoise escapes from her own room on a make-shift staircase made of piled up books—the "escalier anachronique" (134) 'anachronistic staircase'—and makes her way to Hazel's. This moment marks the beginning of the novel's first ending, the first hypertext of the Adèle story. Françoise, performing her role as Mercurial messenger, explains to Hazel that she is living "la même histoire qu'Adèle Langlais" (139) 'the same story as Adèle Langlais.' Hazel accuses Françoise of being a liar, for she had seen her distorted reflection in Loncours's mirror. Of course, this was the same distorted mirror, "un miroir à main le plus déformant possible" (111) 'the most distorting hand mirror' that Loncours had used thirty years previously to convince Adèle of her own disfigurement. Françoise leads Hazel to Loncours's room to access the only true mirror hidden in the house. When Hazel looks at her reflection in the true mirror, she finally (re)discovers her untarnished beauty and is understandably angered, although not for the expected reason. Rather than being upset because Loncours has kept her sequestered and has deceived her, Hazel is angered because she realizes she is not unique: Loncours had deceived Adèle in the same way many years before. In this first ending, Hazel allows herself to be rescued from her captivity by Françoise. They leave Mortes-Frontières and go to make a new life in New York. After their departure, Loncours, mirroring Adèle, commits suicide and leaves all his wealth to Hazel.

Mercure's first ending revolves around the similarities between Hazel and Adèle, each similarity comprising another level of intratextuality. It cannot be coincidence that their names, Adèle Langlais and Hazel Englert, are so similar. The first names differ by only one sound—even Hazel remarks on their similar

pronunciation: "Adèle, ça ressemble à votre manière française de prononcer mon prénom" (68) 'Adèle, that resembles your French way of pronouncing my first name.' Furthermore, each surname evokes the word "English." Susan Bainbrigge points to what is actually an example first of overt and then of covert linguistic reflexivity: "If the reader's attention is drawn to the similarity between their names, the English resonance in both Englert and Langlais and the name Adèle itself are not highlighted specifically" (121).[5] Both Adèle and Hazel were orphaned. Adèle was already an orphan when Loncours met her and then rescued her from a fire; Hazel was orphaned when her parents were killed. The two disasters that rendered the two girls orphans presented Loncours with an irresistible opportunity to deceive them. In yet another instance of covert linguistic reflexivity he jokes that "l'avantage, avec les orphelines, c'est qu'il n'y a pas de beaux-parents" (117) 'the advantage with orphans is that there are no in-laws,' his desire for Adèle and then for Hazel was sparked by their exceeding beauty. Even Françoise remarked upon their resemblance: "La même expression pour autant que je puisse juger d'après une photo" (117) 'the same expression as much as one can tell from a photograph.' In order to realize his deception, Loncours used the same distorted hand mirror, leading each young woman to believe in her disfigurement. That he kept the mirror after Adèle's death implies his desire for history to repeat itself.

Tying together this series of intratextual similarities shows how Loncours is predisposed to regard Hazel and Adèle not just as mirror images, but as one and the same. At one point he exclaims, "Adèle est revenue sous les traits de Hazel" (126) 'Adèle has come back through the traits of Hazel.' Later he explains to Hazel that she and Adèle are "une seule et même personne" (159) 'one and the same person.' For him, Hazel, who was only three when Adèle threw herself into the sea, somehow inherited Adèle's memory. He questions Hazel as to why she always disliked walking near the shore and why she always felt a haunting presence, "une présence … déchirante" (160) 'a heart-rending presence' in that area, and then provides the answer himself: "Parce que tu te rappelles t'y être suicidée il y a vingt ans" (160) 'because you remember having committed suicide there 20 years ago.' Loncours even refers to Hazel as "Adèle-Hazel" (127), turning her into Adèle reincarnate (Amanieux 56).

Throughout the first ending, Françoise keeps Adèle's story from simply repeating itself when she betrays her employer and reveals the truth to Hazel. The identity established between Hazel and Adèle-as-victim ends, although Adèle does not completely disappear; rather her character is absorbed by Hazel. Later, when Hazel leaves the island with her nurse, the Adèle story is seemingly erased and over-written, because in this case Adèle-Hazel reincarnate does succeed in escaping her captivity. The difference between these two intratexts may not be all that great, however: at the conclusion of the first ending, Adèle did not commit suicide after all. Françoise allows that Adèle may have drowned trying to swim from captivity to freedom when she remarks, "Je ne pense pas qu'Adèle voulait réellement mourir. Elle s'est jetée à l'eau face à la côte, non face à l'Océan…. Je suis sûre qu'elle voulait vivre" (168) 'I don't think that Adèle really wanted to die. She threw herself into the water facing the coast and not facing the ocean … I am sure that she wanted to live.' Contrary to committing suicide, perhaps Adèle just did not have the strength to make it to land. In this alternative, Adèle's failure is transformed when she finds her escape in the person of Hazel. Moreover, Loncours's role as captor and victimizer disappears with his unmistakable subsequent suicide. In any case, the presence of Françoise provides the key to how this ending develops. Her intervention allows for the unraveling of the Adèle story and a different ending for Hazel.

Paratext

The conclusion of the first ending in *Mercure*, however, is not the conclusion of the novel. The first ending is followed by an overt authorial intrusion into the text with the "Note de l'auteur" 'author's note.' From a narratological perspective, such an intervention in the story is an overt diegetic reflexivity, an instance of when "fictional writing … self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as artifact" (Waugh 2). Even before the moment in the novel when Nothomb inserts her note, a multiplicity of endings is foreshadowed when Hazel explains that the act of re-reading is the equivalent to a sensual act: "Le même texte ou le même désir peuvent donner lieu à tant de variations. Ce serait dommage de se limiter à une seule…." (83) 'the same text or the same desire can give

way to so many variations. It would be unfortunate to be limited to only one….' Gabriele Neuditschko has noticed that such an intrusive "Note" actively calls to the reader "to step into the narrative in order to decide in which way it should proceed and thus become producers rather than just perceivers of the narrative" (12). Neuditschko's idea echoes that of Roland Barthes, who wrote that the goal of a literary work is "to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text" (*S/Z* 4).

When Nothomb offers her reader the option to choose one ending or the other, the reader becomes a "producer" of the text. Previously in the story, seemingly in anticipation of this very moment, Hazel had asserted that "le propre des grands livres est que chaque lecteur en est l'auteur" (105) 'the nature of great books is that each reader is their author.' In a diegetic allegory, Françoise takes on the role of Barthes's ideal reader, first "reading" the story of Adèle and then twice rewriting it. Françoise thus creates the kind of mise-en-abyme that Lucien Dällenbach talks about in *The Mirror in the Text*: "any aspect enclosed within a work that shows a similarity with the work that contains it" (8). Françoise assumes the storytelling process from inside the story in which she is a character. She re-produces the Adèle story in the first ending, and then dialectically re-produces the Adèle/Hazel story in the second ending. Simultaneously we can discern yet another instance of covert diegetic mirroring, in which the intrusive narrator—Françoise—takes on the role of Sheherazade, and accomplishes what Sheherazade did—she refuses to allow the story to end.

Françoise-Loncours

In the second ending, both shorter and more troubling than the first, Hazel never emerges from her status as victim. Immediately after Françoise escapes from her room via the "escalier anachronique" (134) she is caught by guards, taken to Loncours, and then escorted back to her own room. The next day, Françoise and Hazel go on a walk. Loncours sees them talking and, assuming erroneously that Françoise has told Hazel the truth, throws himself into the sea, committing suicide just like Adèle apparently had. But what the reader discovers is that Françoise never tells Hazel the truth. In a shocking development, Françoise becomes the mirror image of

Loncours: she assumes his role and keeps Hazel in ignorance and captivity. Only 50 years later will she tell Hazel the truth about the deception.

While the first ending focuses on the similarities between Adèle and Hazel, the mirroring in the second ending draws parallels between Loncours and Françoise. As Laureline Amanieux states, "Ce dédoublement des victimes est accompagné d'un dédoublement des bourreaux … Françoise est le double du capitaine" (56) 'this duplication of the victims is accompanied by a duplication of the executioners … Françoise is the double of the captain.' We see the first parallel immediately after the escape of Françoise, when she has been captured and escorted to Loncours's room. Loncours wants to know exactly what truth Françoise was getting ready to share with Hazel. The truth about her beauty, she says: "Sa beauté, sa beauté si fulgurante qu'elle rend fou" (173) 'her beauty, a beauty so dazzling that she drives one mad,' to which Loncours immediately quips: "Ou folle" (173) 'Or mad,' using the feminine form of the adjective *fou*. His changing the adjective to its feminine form indicates he understands that Hazel's beauty indeed has an influence on Françoise, that she is under the spell of Hazel's beauty just as much as he. The statement presages Françoise's future role as keeper of Hazel. Later in the hypertext of the second ending, while out on the walk with Hazel, Françoise is so struck by seeing her beauty for the first time in natural light that any lingering doubts about usurping Loncours and taking his place disappear and she declares to Hazel, "J'aimerais vivre ici avec vous" (180) 'I would like to live here with you.' When Loncours asks Françoise if she has told Hazel the entire truth, Françoise says that she has, "avec sadisme" (181) 'with sadism.' She lies to Loncours and deceives him, much the same as he deceived first Adèle and then Hazel. As a result, Loncours throws himself into the sea at the exact spot where a marker signals that Adèle had done the same. As Loncours was the cause of Adèle's death, so Françoise is responsible for Loncours's. As she tries to console Hazel, who is upset at having witnessed her benefactor commit suicide, Françoise refutes Hazel's belief that Loncours was her benefactor, stating that he was "un bienfaiteur qui a profité de sa protégée" (184) 'a benefactor who took advantage of his protégée.' She hypocritically accuses Loncours, her predecessor, of something

that she is now doing herself. As final evidence of the Françoise-into-Loncours transformation, Françoise moves out of her room in the manor house, claiming Loncours's for her own. As Amanieux puts it, Françoise "se substitute complètement à lui, non comme une simple protectrice, mais comme une meurtrière machiavélique. Elle devient un monstre, prend le pouvoir de force, reprend les affaires du capitaine, son personnel, administre ses biens. Elle s'est identifiée à lui" (56) 'takes his place, not as a simple protector, but as a Machiavellian murderer. She becomes a monster, takes power by force, takes over the captain's affairs, his personnel and his estate. She has identified herself with him.'

Labyrinth of Mirrors

As in the case of the first ending, Françoise instigates the action. It is shocking that in this ending, Françoise betrays Hazel. Up to this point in the novel, and especially given the first ending, the reader has been led to believe that Françoise will always champion Hazel's interests. But, at the same time, the reincarnation of Loncours had been foreshadowed much earlier in the narrative; on one occasion when they were discussing Adèle, Françoise exclaimed to him, "Puisse mon visage vous servir de reflet et puissiez-vous y lire combien vous êtes décati, chenu, combien vous inspirez la répulsion et non l'amour" (121) 'let my face serve as your reflection and enable you to read how decrepit, aged and grey-haired you are, how much you inspire repulsion and not love.' In a wonderful *mise en abyme*, Françoise serves as Loncours's mirror, and he in turn serves as hers, reflecting who he is back onto who she will become in the second ending. Once Loncours believes that Hazel knows the truth, he commits suicide. His role disappears in this ending as well. Françoise, however, decides to withhold the truth and to perpetuate the condition of imprisonment, thereby keeping Hazel—and her beauty—for herself. If we can say that Hazel has indeed absorbed Adèle's character, there is a parallel double absorption in this ending, since Françoise absorbs the Captain's character when she assumes his victimizing role.

The dual endings in *Mercure* reveal one important way in which reflexive narrative creates new meaning. In the second ending, Françoise produces a new text, a new story as she assumes

the role of Loncours. Her character manifests what Hutcheon calls allegorized narcissism, when the semiotic equation of signifier-signified is metaphorically realized in the novel's story. As an overt form of narcissism, allegory "undermines the traditional coherence of the 'fiction' itself" (Hutcheon 28). Whereas multiple endings may "make readers aware of their roles as players and draw their attention to the fact that they have to make a choice in order to be able to go on playing" (Waugh 42), in *Mercure*, Françoise is the one who makes a choice in order to be able to usurp Loncours's position and go on playing. In an extended allegory, Françoise becomes the reader of the story that Loncours—as the allegorical author—had written up to the first ending. Loncours's first novel is Adèle, and his second unfinished novel is Hazel. Loncours, as author, fades away—dies—when Françoise steps in to write a different ending. When Françoise allegorically assumes the role of author, she implicitly invites the reader to assume the same role, and hence to become a producer of the text.

In each ending, besides a relationship of imitation that establishes a degree of identity with Adèle's story, there is also a relationship of transformation that gives rise to a radical revision of her story. In both versions, the stage is initially set for a repetition of history: Hazel could come to the same end as Adèle—she too could ultimately try to swim away from the island or commit suicide. Nothomb, however, does not give simple repetition, but rather two variations—two hypertexts that come out of the initial Adèle hypotext. This recalls Siegle's conception of the reflexive circuit, "something that turns back upon itself in the very process of its getting out again to where it was pointing before it started" (2). This hypertextuality is like the structure of a Baroque fugue: every new thing we see derives from something we have already seen in the embedded Adèle story, either repeating it or counterpointing it. Reflexivity is realized as intratextuality here when each ending is created out of the previous story. But as Gérard Genette suggests: "From variation to repetition, from repetition to variation—one and the same thing. We cannot vary without repeating nor repeat without varying" ("The Other of the Same" 103). In terms of characters and the story in each ending, it is the active intervention of Françoise, who is an outsider to the island and to the Loncours-Hazel relationship, which precipitates

all the changes to the underlying Adèle story. In an instance of linguistic rather than diegetic reflexivity, even the name of the port from which Françoise comes—*Nœud*, or 'knot'—insinuates the effect of this outsider's influence. The knots that she creates in the lives of Hazel and Loncours will only be undone in the dénouement of the endings.

Nothomb's self-conscious wink to narcissistic narrative reveals itself on the last page of the first ending: after Hazel spends hours looking at her own reflection in the mirror, finally Françoise calls her "Narcisse!" (169). In that first ending, Françoise had searched for a hidden mirror in Loncours's room. She looked for titles on the bookshelves of his vast library that make reference to a mirror, including, among others, Carroll's titles *Les Aventures d'Alice au pays des merveilles 'Alice's Adventures in Wonderland'* and *De l'Autre côté du miroir* '*Through the Looking Glass,'* but without success. Françoise was about to abandon her search when she remembered Loncours's favorite quote, the famous dictum from Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le noir*, "Un roman c'est un miroir que l'on promène le long du chemin" (*Mercure* 145) 'a novel it's a mirror being carried along a highway' (Adams 60). She then discovered, hidden behind Loncours's copy of *Le Rouge et le noir*, "une psyché si vaste et si haute qu'un cheval entier eût pu s'y mirer" (146) 'a cheval glass so vast and so high that an entire horse could have been able to see itself in it.' At this point we enter into a labyrinthine game of interrelated texts and reflecting images.

When we examine Loncours's favorite quote from Stendhal reflexively, however, we see that it is not just a plot device to help Françoise find the one true mirror in the text. The first time that quote appears in *Le Rouge et le noir*, it is as an epigraph that Stendhal attributes to seventeenth century historian, César Vichard de Saint-Réal, a writer he admired (Adams 60). Even more interesting, it may be a false epigraph: Robert Adams says that Saint-Réal "probably never made this statement about novels" (60) and Grahame Jones explains that Stendhalian epigraphs are often problematic: "Leur exactitude est fréquemment douteuse; leur source incertaine; leur but peu clair" (238) 'their accuracy is frequently uncertain; their source unknown; their goal unclear.' Critics suggest, however, that Stendhal was indeed influenced by Saint-Réal, and read him in his formative

years (Bassette 248).[6] Josué Montello titles his book on Saint-Réal *Un Maître oublié de Stendhal* (1970) 'One of Stendhal's Forgotten Masters,' and discovers in his writings numerous comparisons with the mirror (Mansau 36). For example, in *De l'usage de l'histoire* (1671) 'The Purpose of History,' Saint-Réal suggests, "Il faut voir dans l'histoire, comme dans un miroir, les images et leurs fautes" 'It is necessary to see in history, as in a mirror, images and their faults' (qtd. in Mansau 36). If history serves as a mirror reflection of humanity for Saint-Réal, then the novel becomes one for Stendhal (Bassette 251). Thus when Stendhal inserts that idea from Saint-Réal into *Le Rouge et le noir*, he opens an intertextual dialogue on the nature of fictive writing. Later in *Le Rouge et le noir*, the quote appears yet again, incorporated into the story and pronounced by one of the characters, though in a slightly different form: "un roman est un miroir qui se promène sur une grande route.…"(Stendhal 361) 'a novel is a mirror moving along a highway.…' (Adams 289). With this second appearance, what was first an intertext attributed to Saint-Réal becomes an intratext within *Le Rouge et le noir*. When Nothomb subsequently inserts the epigraph into *Mercure*, she is making an intertext in her novel of a passage that was already an intertext in Stendhal's novel. In so doing, she adds her voice to the Stendhal-Saint-Réal dialogue. If Saint-Réal is interested in reflecting images and their faults, and Stendhal in accurate depictions of reality, Nothomb is interested in revealing the faults and the distorted images of reality that are reflected in the medium of the novel.

The one mirror in the house that can accurately reflect a subject is accessible only through a novel, and the key to finding it resides in an epigraph that, arguably, turns out to be fictitious: the only reference to this Stendhal novel in *Mercure* is its epigraph that may be falsely attributed to Saint-Réal. (It is the "may be" that is especially intriguing, since within this context of doubt it is the reader who must choose and thereby create meaning.) This foreshadows what happens in the second ending where Françoise continues Loncours's lie, leaving Hazel in ignorance of her true beauty which remains concealed in a distorted reflection. But after all that we have seen in *Mercure*, where every possible reflection is distorted, what kind of true mirror reflection can ultimately be expected? Is the image of Françoise that we are left with in the first ending an accurate

reflection of her? Or is it just another distortion of reality, and the image of her in the second ending, when she replaces Loncours, the accurate reflection?

When we examine the quote's intertextual origins, we see that it can also be an invitation to reflect on the relationship between the novel and reality. For Stendhal, the novel was arguably a faithful reflection of exterior reality. Stendhal took the novel-as-mirror motif one step further in the "Deuxième préface réelle" of his unfinished work *Lucien Leuwen*, published posthumously in 1894, in which he wrote: "un roman doit être un miroir" 'a novel must be a mirror' (89). Explaining that Stendhal has a weakness for word play, Jones points out that even the name Saint-Réal lends itself to a play on words: "*real* serait la traduction anglaise de réel …" (241) '*real* would be the English translation of *réel* ….' The realism of Stendhal is seldom apparent in Nothomb's *Mercure*. Distorted mirrors, made-up histories, and a self-conscious narrative eliminate any illusion of reality. In addition to reflexively commenting on the novel in which she is a character, Hazel may even be making a pun on Réal/realistic, as Stendhal possibly did with Réal/*réel* when she says, "Il ne s'agit pas d'être réaliste mais littéraire" 'It is not about being realistic, but literary'(103).

In a self-conscious instance of narrative reflexivity, Nothomb unites the ideas of literariness and narcissism with an overt reference to herself as an author. She inserts a mildly distorted version of her own name, "lady Amelia Northumb," into the list of authors whose works form the "escalier anachronique" (134) that Françoise builds to escape her room. It is in one sense Nothomb's clear authorial stamp on her own creative work in the making. The reflexivity goes farther, however. Readers of Nothomb's other works will recognize that she habitually writes herself into her novels as a character, often on a larger scale than in *Mercure*, and always with an intertextual twist. I cite just three examples among many: In the 2002 novel *Robert des noms propres* '*The Book of Proper Names*' (2004), a character named Amélie Nothomb, who happens to be an author, engages in a dialogue with the novel's protagonist Plectrude, and asks her how after so much personal misfortune she has not become a murderess. Plectrude's response is to pick up a gun and shoot "Nothomb" dead. The scene is immediately recognizable as a

covertly reflexive realization of Barthes's notion of the death of the Author. Several years later, in the 2009 novel *Le Voyage d'hiver*, the protagonist looks up his name, Zoïle, in *Robert des noms propres*, which plays on both the title of Nothomb's 2002 novel and the title of the encyclopedic *Le Petit Robert des noms propres*. On the first pages of *Tuer le père* 'Kill the Father,' the narrator Amélie Nothomb attends a magic club, ostensibly in disguise; one of the other people at the club recognizes not her, but the distinctive big hat she is wearing, and remarks "Habile, votre déguisement d'Amélie Nothomb, me dit quelqu'un…. Porter un grand chapeau dans un club de magie, ce n'était pas assurer son incognito" (9) 'Clever, your disguise as Amélie Nothomb, someone says to me…. Wearing a big hat to a magic club did not assure one's anonymity.'[7] Compared to this variety of overtly reflexive references to herself as a writer, Nothomb's insertion of "Lady Amelia Northumb" into *Mercure* may at first seem gratuitous. But in the context of the novel's plot, the slightly different name maintains the theme of distorted mirror reflections. And intertextually, Nothomb situates herself in the company of other prominent authors such as Hippolyte Taine, Jonathan Swift, Charles Baudelaire, Gustave Flaubert, even Miguel de Cervantes.

The many and varied manifestations of mirroring in *Mercure* all comprise, in some way, realizations of narrative reflexivity. Some instances of mirroring, such as the references to literary texts and to people reading, realize forms of representational reflexivity, creating images of the world and laying bare the mechanics of how we know and represent the world. Other instances, such as the dual endings, the linguistic playfulness, and the reduplication of characters within and between texts, realize forms of constitutive reflexivity, forming new discourses and revealing the way we interpret the world and create our reality. When we read *Mercure* through the prism of reflexivity, we arrive at an alternative way to understand the novel. We take on the role of Barthes's reader and become not simply consumers of the text but creators of the text's meaning. Although we may not go to the extreme of killing the author, we do at least free the text from the interpretive limitations of authorial intention, and comprehend the invitation to co-produce new meaning by engaging in an interpretive dialogue with *Mercure*, Nothomb, and

all the texts and authors that are reflected in the novel. If we extend this invitation just a little farther, and recognize how the novel's characters' reality is linguistically and narratively constructed, we may begin to examine the way that our understanding of everyday reality is similarly constructed.

Notes

1 The concept of reflexivity, as described by Robert Siegle in *The Politics of Reflexivity*, includes and goes beyond what I would consider the narrower concepts of literary self-consciousness, narcissistic narrative, or metafiction (see, for example, Robert Alter´s *Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre*, Linda Hutcheon´s *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*, and Patricia Waugh´s *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*).

2 In addition to the texts in *Mercure* that she lists, Bainbrigge names an intertext written by Nothomb herself, *Les Combustibles*, and mentions its characters' discussions about the books that they are going to burn. These discussions include an overtly diegetic questioning of the cultural processes by which fictional texts are classified as great or ordinary or deficient works of art. Ultimately, in *Les Combustibles*, books are ranked in a sliding relationship between their literary value and how much warmth they will produce when burned. In a parallel situation in *Mercure*, the books used to build the "escalier anachronique" (134) 'anachronistic staircase' are chosen for their relative size and for how well they stack, and questions of their literary merit do not even come up.

3 Gérard Genette calls a hypertext "tout texte dérivé d'un texte antérieur par transformation simple … ou par transformation indirect …" 'any text derived from a previous text by simple transformation … or by indirect transformation…' (*Palimpsestes* 14). The hypertext rewrites and thus transforms an underlying and preexisting original text that Genette calls the hypotext. In *Mercure*, the hypotext ultimately shows itself to be an immensely rich intratext: it is the erasure, it is Sharrock's "hole" re-written and transformed into a new hypertext.

4 All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

5 In her analysis, Bainbrigge builds an intertextual bridge between *Mercure* and the English novel *Jane Eyre*, in which Adèle Langlais has a counterpart, a young French orphan also named Adèle. Bainbrigge develops this connection, and suggests that it is in *Mercure* that Brontë's Adèle is given the voice that she never had in *Jane Eyre*.

6 For a more detailed analysis of the relationship between Stendhal and Saint-Réal, see Victor del Litto, *La vie intellectuelle de Stendhal*; Louis Bassette, "Sur une épigraphe du *Rouge et le noir*: *Stendhal et Saint-Réal*"; Josué Montello, *Un maître oublié de Stendhal*; and Grahame Jones, "Réel, Saint-Réal: une épigraphe du *Rouge* et le réalisme Stendhalien."

7 Amélie Nothomb the author is known for wearing a big conspicuous hat when she appears in public.

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