Chapter I

Veluti in Speculum (As in a Looking Glass)

We have surprised him
At work, but no, he has surprised us
As he works.

John Ashbery

1. To See or Not to See

Mirrors are mesmerizing. Due to their double nature they evoke fascination as well as fear. They reflect the self, which can be, but is not always a pleasant experience; they reflect others, who can be both like one’s self and different; and they reflect the world, an agreeable garden of delight at times, a frightful and hostile forest at others. They are ambiguous in the sense of the word’s “admitting of two or more meanings,” as Webster says. It is no wonder that Alice’s adventures occur in “wonder” land. To “wonder”: a verb meaning to cause astonishment and admiration or the feeling of being aroused by something strange, unexpected. Looking in mirrors makes one wonder. Narcissus saw his reflection, reacted in wonder, and then fell in love with what he saw. The word miroir comes from the popular Latin mirare, “mirer,” “regarder attentivement,” or from the classical Latin mirari, “s’étonner,” as the Robert states. Both can occur when one is gazing at a looking glass, a painting, or a text.

The double: to look into a mirror is both a reflective and a reflexive experience. J. Baltrusaitis claims that the mirror is an allegory not only of precise vision, but also of profound thought, of examining a problem attentively. Reflectere, he asks, does it not mean “to send back...” and “to reflect,” does it not mean “to meditate”? The verb, in Latin, according to D. Colin, means to “curve backwards,” or “re-curve.” When we see our reflection in a mirror, he says, we are projected “backwards,” as it were, into our past; it is an action that has to do with memory. A “reflection,” a “reflex,” the verb “to reflect,” all of these expressions have the same etymology. Hence our ancestors, says Colin, believed that to look into a mirror was equivalent to looking at one’s past or to return to one’s past. The mental process of retrogression for the sake of reconsideration is designed in terms of optics. Baltrusaitis states that a mirror is an instrument of self-knowledge. It alone reveals persons’ images, their doubles, their phantoms,
their perfections as well as their physical deformities. Sighting mirrors is a science of the illusions of science. And as K. Scheibe says, in his book on Mirrors, Masks, Lies and Secrets, “a reflected visual image looks simple enough, but it presents a considerable interpretive challenge.” He also points out that mirrors are key elements of the intelligence community, and that many technical devices used in that profession fall into the category of mirrors.

“To sight” is both a transitive and an intransitive verb. Sightings made in this book have to do with inspecting, with scrutinizing chosen texts for their reflective and reflexive properties, with comparing connective threads in texts for their chiastic and interlocking structures. Archeologists refer to “polythetic types” when they draw a line or delimit a “site,” when they establish boundaries around what they intend to study. I intend to “sight,” to draw a boundary line around a series of chronologically arranged texts that have structures in common, and note what relationships exist between these structures, between the meanings of texts chosen, the contexts in which they were written, and French prose fiction in general. That such an exercise is not an easy one is expressed, in relation between the delineation of persons and social events by Henry James, in his preface to The Awkward Age: “…though the relations of a human figure or a social occurrence are what make such objects interesting, they also make them, to the same tune, difficult to isolate, to surround with the sharp black line, to frame in the square, the circle, the charming oval, that helps any arrangement of objects to become a picture.”

There is one trope, in particular, that forms that “sharp black line,” the frame that helps define the “arrangements of objects” herein. It is the chiasmus, a figure of speech that comes from the Latin form of a Greek word meaning to organize in the shape of the letter Chi (X = a cross), that is, to cross over. The Greek verb χωρέω begins with the letter chi (X). Inversion, or reversal, is graphically inscribed into the visual as well as linguistic make-up of the syntagm. The term denotes, primarily, a two-part sequence, the second part of which repeats the two main elements of the first in inverted order:

$$a-b—b-a$$

Chiasmus goes beyond being a simple figure of speech. It is a rhetorical structure that applies to syntagms, to sentence structure, to prose and poetic phrases, to musical motifs, to images depicted in paintings, to film, semiology, syntactical configurations, political rhetoric and even in advertising. As E. Souriau describes it, “the chiasmus sets off in one