

## SAMUEL BECKETT, CLAUDE SIMON AND THE *MISE EN ABYME* OF PARADOXICAL DUPLICATION

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*In his seminal study of novelistic mise en abyme structures, The Mirror in the Text, Lucien Dällenbach identifies a type he calls the mise en abyme of paradoxical duplication. Characterised by an extreme self-reflexivity, Dällenbach explores the operations of this literary trope in the later novels of the nouveau roman, particularly those of Claude Simon and Samuel Beckett. This article explores how Simon and Beckett employ this device with radically different results, Simon's forming part of a textual poetics that engages with the material and social, while Beckett's tends to a privileging of the self-reflexivity of language.*

While many thematic commonalities exist between the works of Claude Simon and Samuel Beckett, in particular their preoccupation with existential themes such as the suffering of humanity and the struggle to maintain an ethics in a chaotic, fragmented world, there are also significant formal points of comparison, not least the of which is their innovative use of the *mise en abyme*.

In this essay, I will use as my methodological framework the most comprehensive study of the *mise en abyme* to date, Lucien Dällenbach's *The Mirror in the Text* (1989), in order to examine some of ways Beckett and Simon use this literary device in their novels. In particular I wish to argue that there are significant differences in how they employ the *mise en abyme* as a compositional device, differences that have a profound impact upon the thematic implications of their respective oeuvres, with the Simonian *mise en abyme* forming part of a textual poetics that has a tendency to engage more with the material and social, while Beckett's leans towards a privileging of the self-reflexivity of consciousness and language. Despite these differences, however, I also wish to suggest that the strategies used by Beckett and

Simon lead the *mise en abyme* to its very limits as an ordering principle, and bring it to the threshold of its own dissolution. Their work also points to certain limitations of Dällenbach's paradigm, particularly its reliance on a structuralist methodology that tends to omit important aspects of *the mise en abyme's* expressive capabilities.

For Dällenbach it is the new *nouveau roman*<sup>1</sup> that is particularly rich in what he terms the type III *mise en abyme*, or the *mise en abyme* of paradoxical duplication, in which "the degree of the analogy between the *mise en abyme* and the object it reflects" (1989, 110) grows ever closer. For such a *mise en abyme* structure to function, there must be a kind of isomorphism between the reflected and reflecting elements of the text. Thus the Type III *mise en abyme* is characterised by texts that are mimetic of themselves not in part, but as a whole. Their mode of reflection is no longer that of resemblance (Type I), or enunciative self-reference (Type II), but complete identification with themselves. De Nooy pithily sums up Type III as seeming "to contain the work that actually contains it" (1991, 19). But how can a literary text be truly imitative of itself? If it were an exact copy of itself, wouldn't the entire function of duplication, of copying and mirroring, become redundant, because, replicated in its entirety, the work would have dispensed with the very moment of reflection? It is for this reason that Type III has been given the name of paradoxical duplication, because it is precisely this total identification with itself that it tries to achieve.

It is typical of Samuel Beckett<sup>2</sup> that he would successfully capture such a paradoxical structure with the simplest of materials: a pencil. In *Malone Dies*, the unnamed narrator, confined to bed in a small room, writes himself into existence in a small exercise-book. It is not immediately obvious to the reader, however, that this is what is happening.

I fear I must have fallen asleep again. In vain I grope, I cannot find my exercise-book. But I still have the pencil in my hand. I shall have to wait for day to break. God knows what I am going to do till then.

I have just written, I fear I must have fallen, etc. I hope this is not too great a distortion of the truth. I now add these few lines, before departing from myself again.

(Beckett 1976, 209)

As in Cervantes and Gide, it is once again on the level of enunciation that the reflection takes place. But unlike them, Beckett has extended the duplication to the very act of writing itself. Throughout *Malone Dies* Beckett makes great use of this pencil, turning it into a gruesomely comic prop whose various aspects throw light onto the mode of reflection itself.

My pencil. It is a little Venus, still green no doubt, with five or six facets, pointed at both ends and so short there is just room, between them, for my thumb and the two adjacent fingers, gathered together in a little vice. I use the two points turn and turn about, sucking them frequently, I love to suck. And when they go quite blunt I strip them with my nails which are long, yellow, sharp and brittle for want of chalk or is it phosphate. So little by little my little pencil dwindles, inevitably, and the day is fast approaching when nothing will remain but a fragment too tiny to hold. So I write as lightly as I can.

(223)

The writing act takes place under the most tenuous of conditions, with a pencil so short that not much can be written, by a man who is dying. What suspense there is in the narrative comes from seeing which will give out first: the lead or the narrator. The alternation of the two pencil points, punctuated by the sucking of the narrator, combine to make a mocking portrait of the artist hero; there is no polo-necked Sartre here leading radical students into riots, only a dying consciousness that writes itself into, and finally, out of existence. Beckett's pencil also evokes the Ouroboros motif, this image of the serpent biting its own tail one of Dällenbach's favourite symbols of Type III. Although the end result may be the same, with the text devouring itself, Beckett's motif is at the same time both more elegant and frightening: the very pressure of the writer's hand, the very words he writes, ensuring the text's conclusion, and the writer's very own fingernails agonisingly tear at the wood in order to sharpen the pencil that records his own end.

Compositionally, however, the overall structure of *Malone Dies* is less sophisticated than the enunciative procedures contained in it. The narration of the act of writing takes the textual form of episodes

interspersed between the stories invented by the narrator to amuse himself, the darkly funny tales of the Saposcats, the Lamberts, and Macmann. Thus, in *Malone Dies*, the writing does indeed produce itself, the characteristic most important to Dällenbach's Type III. The text has reached a level of self-identity not seen in its earlier forms, and it is this kind of extreme linguistic self-referentiality that Dällenbach's terms the transcendental *mise en abyme*, a subcategory of Type III (1989, 101). But even if the *mise en abyme* is here self-generating, it also, in Beckett's example, guarantees its own abolition, an aspect crucial to the theme of *Malone Dies*. As in Melville and Simon, the device is not used gratuitously, or merely for the love of its *trompe l'oeil* effects (as it is in much of the *nouveau roman*, for example Robbe-Grillet). Rather it embodies a theme that could not have been achieved in any other way: the manner in which self-creation and self-abolition form the twin face of the Janus mask.

By the time Beckett comes to write *Company*,<sup>3</sup> the gap between the sophistication of the enunciation procedures and the stories and characters represented by it is significantly narrowed, and a text of great complexity is produced. *Company* presents the reader with an inversion of the relation between form and content as manifest in *Malone Dies*. The consciousness of the narrator shatters as it is put through a process of multivocalisation, but one where the enunciative flows are subject to paradoxical duplication. Previous efforts in the history of literary theory to explicate the relations between who speaks and sees – “point of view” in the Anglo-American parlance, and “focalisation”, in the French – can barely accommodate the self-reflexive processes that traverse the consciousness of Beckett's character lying in the dark. These flows of voices, memories and persons (second, third, and later mentioned, but only mentioned, first), configure and reconfigure, their discreteness an illusion as the narrative progresses and we find that each is dependent on the other in a such way that no single hierarchy can be established:

A voice comes to one in the dark. Imagine.

To one on his back in the dark. This he can tell by the pressure on his hind parts and by how the dark changes when he shuts his eyes and again when he opens them again. Only a small part of what is said can be verified. As for example

when he hears, You are on your back in the dark. Then he must acknowledge the truth of what is said. But by far the greater part of what is said cannot be verified. As for example when he hears, You first saw the light on such and such a day and now you are on your back in the dark. Sometimes the two are combined as for example, You first saw the light on such and such a day and now you are on your back in the dark. A device perhaps from the incontrovertibility of one to win credence for the other. That then is the proposition. To one on his back in the dark a voice tells of a past. With occasional allusion to a present and more rarely to a future for example, You will end as you now are. And in another dark or in the same another devising it all for company. Quick leave him.

Use of the second person marks the voice. That of the third that cankerous other. Could he speak to and of whom the voice speaks there would be a first. But he cannot. He shall not. You cannot. You shall not.

(1989, 5-6)

The voice that designates the “you”, the person lying in the dark, and that speaks his memories, will start to tell stories in a way reminiscent of *Malone Dies*. There are, however, significant differences. No longer are the “stories” explicitly stated as being self-conscious reflections, the product of a unitary consciousness. Via the use of person, predominantly second and third, Beckett subdivides consciousness into linguistic flows that are suspended in a voice that cannot be directly identified.

But little by little attempts at identification are made, rationalisations that endeavor to establish the relations between the branches of this manifold subject diffused among the faint glimmerings that emerge between darkness and memory. Soon the voice claims to be its own “deviser”, its own self-creating instance.

Deviser of the voice and of its hearer and of himself. Deviser of himself for company. Leave it at that. He speaks of himself as of another. He says speaking of himself, He speaks of

himself as another. Himself he too devised for company.  
Leave it at that.

(20)

Here we can clearly identify a kind of radical reflexivity of enunciation, a nearly pure Cartesian moment that empties consciousness of all its contents in order to build up the external world from nothing, from the void. Only, in this case, the foundational moments short-circuits. The primary flow of enunciation refuses to act as a substratum for communication, instead collapsing life and memory into itself, into a whirlpool of flows and persons that can't be stabilised. Again and again Beckett tries to find, if not a central point of reference, then at least some clear patterns of relationships. But he fails. The narrative voice hovers at the limits of naming itself, defining itself, categorising itself, but refutes these attempts in a moment of aporia, returning to one of Beckett's central themes, the unnamable.

For why not? Why in another dark or in the same? And whose voice is asking this? Who asks, Whose voice asking this? And answers, His soever who devises it all. In the same dark as his creature or in another. For company. Who asks in the end, Who asks? And in the end answers as above? And adds long after to himself, Unless another still. Nowhere to be found. Nowhere to be sought. The unthinkable last of all. Unnamable. Last person. I. Quick leave him.

(19)

Emerging out of this field of instabilities is a dialectic that runs throughout Beckett's work, the unnamable/I dialectic, a nodal point on which the maze of relations of consciousness converges, but only temporarily, only conditionally. For at the heart of this maze is an "I" suspended in a void, a void suspended in an I. Here we also see, in this second Beckett trilogy, a definitive inversion of the use of the I. In Beckett's early trilogy the I is foregrounded, it acts as a Cartesian consciousness in which all else is suspended, even if Beckett's end goal is to decompose this hierarchy. In the second trilogy the I is nearly completely effaced: in *Company* in particular it is utterly subordinated to the second and third persons. Such a progression has important implications for the *mise en abyme* of paradoxical duplica-

tion: it points to a series of inversions and mirrorings that are not only internal to specific works, but to Beckett's work as an oeuvre. The I that stands at the forefront, and in which all other voices are suspended in the earlier trilogy (the stories made up to keep the narrator amused), now takes an inverted position, is relegated to an indeterminate coordinate, has narratively become the unnamable, and, in a perfect mirroring, gazes through the layers of memories, stories and persons back at the Cartesian I of the earlier trilogy.

By the end of *Company*, the unnamable will have spoken itself to its final state, that of absolute solitude: "alone" is the last word in Beckett's text. Thus the conclusion, provisional as always, and typical of Beckett, is to leave the narrative agency utterly separate from other consciousness. Yet it is inside this "alone" that the manifold voices swarm, multiply, factor themselves out of themselves. Inside this "alone" a kind of pure self-reflexive movement of consciousness is enacted, a paradoxical *mise en abyme* of voices that create themselves, abolish themselves, and recreate themselves all over again in a Sisyphean movement that embodies, in a near pre-linguistic domain, Beckett's attempt to render the process of the production of meaning.<sup>4</sup>

Simon's *Triptyque* is also an example of a type III *mise en abyme*, but one that employs different techniques to create its effects of implosion of frame and miniature. In *Triptyque* Simon once again refuses to employ simple enunciation procedures in order to further develop his use of the *mise en abyme*. Instead, he embarks upon an experiment that, even as it builds on his love of metaphor and analogy, involves taking two steps back in order to take one forward. In his works of the 1970s, Simon tends to abandon the long lyrical sentences that typified his earlier style, heavily influenced by Proust and Faulkner, and which attempted, through often overly complex sentences structures full of subordinate clauses and parentheses inside parentheses, to exploit the metaphorical power of language and image at every possible moment. With *Les Corps Conducteurs* his style becomes increasingly disciplined, with the metaphorical level displaced to one where images breed out of one another in striking ways. In *Triptyque* his style becomes simpler again, with an accompanying increase of complexity in the novel's compositional schema.

Replacing *Les Corps Conducteurs*' single story line and single level of action is a series of three tableaux that are arranged sequentially. *Triptyque*'s first part is set in a village, the second in the coun-

tryside, the third in an urban zone. Each of these chapters constitutes a separate mirror, each reflecting the other in such a way that there is now no longer any hierarchy between framing narrative and subordinated miniature, between the subject and object of reflection. By multiplying the actual number of *mises en abyme*, and making each of the same importance, Simon has begun to solve the problem of an originary text that is mirrored at all: the first term has been abolished, and there is now only an infinite series of reflections amongst multiple mirrors, all of which “produce” one another. In *Triptyque* frame and miniature have finally imploded, the macro level now truly only the pretext for the general organisation of the novel. These larger chapters have been eaten away from the inside by the micro-movements of mirrorings, embeddings, duplications and metaphorical breedings that are no longer anchored to a *ground* of originary meaning, but have been allowed to break free. Thus, somewhat differently to Beckett’s *Malone Dies* (whose self-generating aspect reflects the writing act itself), Simon demonstrates how a text can be self-producing on the image level: it is thus given the name of the productive *mise en abyme* (Dällenbach 1989, 162).

Simon achieves this productive *mise en abyme* by choosing elements that lend themselves to extreme mirroring effects. Of course his work has always featured such elements, such metaphors of origin (Dällenbach 1989, 181-3): paintings, statues, ornate façades and motifs of all kinds dominate even his earliest novels. But in his middle and later periods he abandons some of the more traditional metaphors of origin associated with *mise en abyme* novels, and explores the layer of reality we can term second nature, the dense field of images and communication events thrown up by media culture in the postwar period. Both *Les Corps Conducteurs* and *Triptyque* were written in a period (the late 1960s and early 1970s) when media culture was rapidly expanding, and are full of advertising imagery such as billboards, posters, newspapers and magazine spreads, as well as cinema images and urban landscapes full of designed, blueprinted, networked objects and image systems. It is as much his exploitation of this kind of imagery – the layer of what Jean Baudrillard termed simulacra (1983, 10-11) – as the compositional dimension of the text, that makes *Triptyque* the unique novelistic *mise en abyme* it is. Simon, however, is careful not to let these images float free in Baudrillard’s space of the hyperreal (1983, 23). In *Triptyque*, as in *L’Herbe* and *Les Corps Con-*



*ducteurs*, he goes to great lengths to show how human perception is inextricably linked to what it perceives, and how there is a recursion between the world of consciousness and the world of things. It is the exploration of this margin, this threshold between perception and things, in which Simon's work is largely situated.

But if Dällenbach has recouped the *mise en abyme* for textual self-reflexivity and shown us, exhaustively, that Simon has passed the poststructuralist test of knowing that his representation of reality is refracted through the medium he uses, then perhaps it is time to focus on the insights about the material world that are presented in his work. One such sequence from *Les Corps Conducteurs* provides a good example. The extract below is taken from a section where the main character is looking down from an airplane as it flies low over a busy city, preparing to land.

Peering down into the darkness from the airplane, the eye can discern puzzling patches of light scattered here and there over the surface of the dark earth below. As these patches come closer, one can make out branching points of stars, tentacles, incandescent crosses, like cracks in the dark crust of earth through which trickles of lava appear to be pouring, expelled by some cataclysm far below the surface. Flaring up like little forest fires, looking ridiculously tiny in the immense dark expanses of the night beneath the cold, slowly wheeling constellations, the artificial flames, in which the names of movie stars, petroleum products, perfumes, whiskeys, and tires blaze up, go out, and flame up once again, drift slowly past, fighting an insane battle against the shadows attempting to engulf them. Rent for the space of an instant, driven back for a moment by the blindingly bright force of millions of volts, these shadows then close in again, inexorably advancing and receding with each of the pulsations produced by huge invisible machines whose motive force has been provided by gold mines, by virgin forests swallowed up in darkness, by blacks lashed with whips, and by millions of tons of water roaring down over the edge of wild cataracts.

(Simon 1975, 68-9)

Just as Beckett metonymically reduces writing to the simple tracing of a pencil across the page of an exercise book (invoking the complexities of signification), Simon suggests an entire system of material processes in the space of a pulse of light. In a single image Simon unites the near and the distant, the banal and the cosmic, the sensuousness of things and the abstractions that allow us to perceive them. In this single blink of light, we see a series of inversions of the Symbolist *abyme*: the shadows that threaten to engulf the cityscape are the void, the *gouffre*, but one formed by interstices created by material processes, in this instance the enormous organic and human forces harnessed by the creation of electricity. The stars in the sky, studded in constellations against the blackness of the night, become the names of film stars that blink on and off in the neon tubing of street signs. The analogical level here is also exploited, not only linguistically or compositionally, but also in the series of natural forces: the flowing lava of the volcano, the invisible machines that drive the power-station turbine, the forests burnt up to fuel them, the exploited workers who provide the labour in the first place. Such a series also describes a kind of backchaining, one that demystifies capitalist operations, and that takes us beneath the reified surfaces of the industrialised world and into the labyrinth of forces that creates it.<sup>5</sup>

It is precisely Simon's interest in material processes and the implications it has for the development of the *mise en abyme* that Dällenbach seems so reluctant to engage with. For Dällenbach, what is important about pioneering novels like *Triptyque* is the way they "break away from the realm of ontology and truth [...] and promote the age of reflexion and language that Mallarmé and Roussel had heralded" (1989, 163).

Such conclusions are inevitable given Dällenbach's structuralist (and to a small degree poststructuralist) methodology. Two critical observations are important here. Firstly, any conception of a literary work whereby it becomes totally reflexive of itself will also entail an extreme self-reflexivity of language. The outcomes of such an analysis lead naturally to the Symbolist, Mallarméan tradition of self-reflexivity, which reaches its culmination in the famous "Sonnet en X", a poem that tries to be reflexive of language itself (Mallarmé 1994, 217-8). The second tendency of Dällenbach's analysis is that the sign will dominate over the referent, and literary works that are rooted in the reference function of language, that try to exploit the

*mise en abyme* in order to render, by analogy, patterns in the material world, will be near impossible to theorise. Analysis of Simon's work becomes extremely partial if it is interpreted only from the point of view of this more transcendental, Symbolist conception of the *mise en abyme*.

It is not for nothing that Simon has used the *chosisme* of the *nouveau roman* to depict these phenomena: through the narration of things,<sup>6</sup> the exploitation of both the metaphorical power of language and material processes, he develops the device in a way that any notion of language as productive of itself cannot. This development of the generative *mise en abyme*, this proliferation of mirrors and the concrete potentialities embodied in them, and which, in a double movement, also transform the mirrors themselves, is in many ways the exact opposite of a Beckettian paradoxical *mise en abyme*, whose concerns, at least as evidenced in novels of the first trilogy (*Molly, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*), *How it Is*, and *Company*, are more linguistic, textual and existential than directly occasioned in the social, historical and material.

Yet even if Simon shows us that the relationship between words and things, between signs and referents, is a complex one, it is Beckett who explores similar complexities in the relationship between language and consciousness. Simon's emphasis on material processes can make it difficult for the *mise en abyme* to explore the complex nature of subjectivity, the nuances of consciousness, and how consciousness relates to its own perceptual machinery as well as the world of other consciousnesses. In Simon's work, matters of focalisation and the positioning of the subject (both intra- and extratextual) often rely on either the kind of stream-of-consciousness techniques of high modernism, or the demetaphorised *chosisme* pioneered by Robbe-Grillet. In comparison to much of Beckett's prose from *How It Is* onwards, such schemas represent relatively fixed perceptual modes, which, even if they form a kind of surface across which the mind and the nervous system can trace their chaotic paths, do not achieve the polyvocal intensity of a work like *Company*, or, to take an example from Beckett's later work for the theatre, *That Time*.

Thus we can also see how Dällenbach's model of the *mise en abyme* of paradoxical duplication also runs up against certain limits in respect to Beckett. By emphasising the non-referential aspect of language in the Symbolist tradition, that is by emphasising the relation-

ship between words and other words, it becomes difficult to explore the rich permutations of Beckett's use in *Company* of self-reflexive structures in terms of polyvocal enunciation strategies and the workings of human consciousness. It is this attempt to grasp the operations of consciousness and its relations to sense and memory that wreaks such havoc on the unitary meaning of words, not simply the attempt to problematise any direct relations between words and things.

The attempt to categorise a form as manifold and complex as the hyper self-reflexive *mise en abyme* could perhaps only have created a situation where its textual embodiments – works such as *Company* and *Triptyque* – lead to its undoing. If this is the case, it puts the theorisation of the Type III *mise en abyme* in a thankless position: the very portal of discovery it created is closed behind it once we have been given an entry to the works only that structure could provide. Yet, in my view, there is a sense in which the *mise en abyme* of paradoxical duplication lays the groundwork for its own abolition, because once the hierarchical relationship between frame and miniature, either between mirror text and whole, between the I and its subordinated voices and events, completely implodes, we are left with an open-ended textual entity that resembles a fragment of a pattern in which no motif can dominate. It is to this very threshold that Beckett and Simon take the development of the *mise en abyme* of paradoxical duplication.

### Notes

1. A new phase of the *nouveau roman* that Dällenbach claims begins in the 1970s. See Dällenbach, 1989, Chapter 10.
2. Dällenbach illustrates this point with the circle image from Beckett's *Watt* (Dällenbach: 102-3).
3. The version of *Company* referred to was published with two other prose works from the 1980s, *Ill Seen Ill Said* and *Worstward Ho*, under the title *Nohow On* (1989), and is often called the second trilogy.
4. This, of course, in no way concludes a discussion of Beckett's use of the *mise en abyme*. Krapp's *Last Tape*, with its ingenious use of

recording technology and its implications for identity and memory, is a particularly rich use of the device, but would require an analysis of the semiotics of performance that a study of the novel cannot comprehensively include.

5. In his notes for a film of Marx's *Capital*, Sergei Eisenstein (1987) intended to use a cinematic form, employed by Vertov in his *Man with a Movie Camera*, known as the "hysteron proteron," which "depicts the process of production in reverse" (129).
6. See Goldmann (1975), particularly the chapter "The Nouveau Roman and Reality", for an account of how the narration of things lends itself to depicting new layers of reality out of the reach of traditional realist discourse.

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