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*\(^1\) 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\(^2\) 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)