

# The Paradoxical Structure of the Double: A Study in the Work of Nathalie Sarraute and Fiodor Dostoïevski

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## ABSTRACT

By privileging the singularity, Fiodor Dostoïevski and Nathalie Sarraute carry out a double operation: they seize the history in its singularity - so as to make evolve their characters and the forces which they incarnate inside a double reality - and the singularity in their history - so as to deliberately differentiate themselves from most of their contemporaries mainly by the use of new methods to translate the dualism of a new reality. Their poetics of the double gave us the possibility of understanding it as a complex intercultural phenomenon.

**Keywords:** Dualism, Marginality, Singularity, Transmission, Paradoxical Structure, Intercultural Phenomenon.

## INTRODUCTION

We propose to study the double image of Fiodor Dostoïevski and Nathalie Sarraute which appears as the result of their originality, even artistic marginality. It is no coincidence that we choose to ask ourselves how and to what extent the artistic and personal marginality of Nathalie Sarraute and Fiodor Dostoïevski refers to logic of narrative vectorized by a particular relationship to duality in literature. A marginal writer means an artist alone, alone in a great universe of books, characters, critics, alone in his way of seeing things, alone in breaking the established common order. Alone, because different and different because other. And even more alone Dostoyevsky and Sarraute, because they manage to illustrate and illustrate the singular but inevitable presence in itself of another, of a double, of a split

consciousness. By privileging the singularity, Fiodor Dostoïevski and Nathalie Sarraute carry out a double operation: they seize the history in its singularity - so as to make evolve their characters and the forces which they incarnate inside a double reality - and the singularity in their history - so as to deliberately differentiate themselves from most of their contemporaries mainly by the use of new methods to translate the dualism of a new reality. The essential originality of the two writers therefore consists in their conception of a new reality divided between the exterior and the interior as well as in their relation to the transcendence of the methods of writing and thought representative and significant of their time. It is in this difference and this artistic marginality that we find a first source of bringing together the two writers as precursors of a modern literature concentrated around the ideas and dramas of modern man.

Two great authors who lived in different countries at different times, in different backgrounds and wrote in two different ways. A deviation of a century of course justifies the difference in their styles and their literary traditions. Fiodor Dostoïevski conceives his novel according to the idea of a complex reality restored as faithfully as possible through the relationship of the social, political, religious, philosophical and historical elements of the actual events, with the aim of developing and understanding them the essence and the functioning. Therefore, we can object that this is wrong and that it is hardly prudent to claim to connect Sarraute, applied to empty

his story of characters, intrigue, social, etc., to a Dostoevsky fed by ideologies, characters, violent dramas. To this, we argue that this objection would be valid if in the Sarrautian work, which may seem at first glance entirely opposite to that of Fyodor Dostoevsky, one could not guess the same need for the other, for a double, both omnipresent and elusive, and the same ambition to prevent the laws of stereotypes (social or other) from governing the character's inner life, as well as the same concern for ensuring an authentic reading of the slightest inner movements of being underground. More precisely still, these are two poetics which are linked to each other under the sign of a triple encounter with a double. First this meeting is staged at the text level. But, it is also valid at the reading level, as a meeting of Sarraute-lecturer with Dostoyevsky-author. The third meeting is that with the reader during which the performative rather than referential language of the two authors endeavors to communicate, instead of representing, secret, ambiguous and fleeting movements. The reading pact implemented here stems from the exceptional energy of the author / reader relationship, immediately perceptible on reading. To study the literary work through this close relationship between the author and the reader is to discover and exploit different representations of the double with these two authors, which will effectively lead us to return to this subject many times throughout our study.

In addition, other elements can reinforce the attempt to link Dostoyevsky to Sarraute such as, for example, the same mother tongue, the same status of artistic marginality, the same conception of the duality of the human being and the importance of the other for self-awareness. It is precisely these hypotheses that we will develop in order to pursue our questions on the path leading from Fiodor Dostoyevsky to Nathalie Sarraute. Bringing Sarraute into comparison with Dostoevsky aims to create links which are first recognized by Nathalie Sarraute herself in the collection *L'Ere du*

*suspçon* and in particular in the essay *From Dostoevsky to Kafka*. Later, during an interview, the novelist talks about the influence that the Russian writer may have had on her:

*Dostoevsky, for example, had a very big influence on me [...]. I think that Dostoevsky showed me that a lot of disconcerting feelings, which seem abnormal and which have been removed from the literature exist, quite naturally, in every man: we can talk about it.*

[Cranaki, M., Belaval Y, *Nathalie Sarraute*, Gallimard, Paris, 1965, p. 215]

The decision to describe Sarraute in this way by choosing a great appearing person is part of an attempt to link his artistic research to the sources of his literary inspiration and to situate the problem of the modern double at the heart of a filiation between Sarrautian and Dostoevskian texts. The notion of literary descent will cover a considerable conceptual extent in our study insofar as it refers to a movement, to the structuring of a sense in which less ascendants and heirs are chosen, that transmission and creation operate. It will therefore raise the questions of influence, association, recognition, but also dissonance and deviation, because if Fiodor Dostoïevski seems to be one of the closest to the precursors of Nathalie Sarraute, he remains however the most distant in time. The present work will focus on implementing a principle of "differential comparison" to explore the complex way in which Sarraute's texts "dialogue" with Dostoevsky's texts. Our purpose is to understand how, by a game of repetitions and differentiations, Sarraute operates a "reconfiguration" of the motif of the double.

Linked to duality and polyphony, these two literary creations still have very different aspects of the double and this because they reflect the effort of each author to go in a personal direction determined by countless social factors, geographic, political, cultural, etc. For this reason, our research attempts to establish and untie the link in order to refuse a deadly equivalence

between the two authors and to affirm their authenticity. In this way, by means of parallelisms, we will try to show that the originality of this Dostoevsky-Sarraute relationship lies in the singularity of the literary project of each of the writers taken apart. This singularity consists above all in the will of the two authors to transgress all rectilinear filiation, to invest their relationships.

With the work of their predecessors of personal significance and to assert, very often in reverse of the opinion of the moment, their own creative aspirations. In this regard, Nathalie Sarraute commented on the existence of the elements of filiation and dissimilarity between her narrative poetics and the poetics of Fiodor Dostoyevsky as follows:

I have been given privileged links with Dostoevsky, firstly because he is Russian I think, then because I tried to show in one of my texts that Father Karamazov's movement looked like a tropism. I love Dostoevsky very much, but he wrote at a time when he had to build characters, show them, make them act. What he writes is remarkable, but has little to do with my current concerns.

[Pardina, M., "An interview with Nathalie Sarraute", *Le Monde*, February 26, 1993]

There comes the requirement of radical otherness between the two writers that we will study through the analysis of the literary and artistic processes that they use in their work. The construction of the originality of each of them requires the suspension of any comparison which would function as an equity method with its predecessors. Margins of a deliberate, chosen marginality, these two writers have never ceased to challenge ordinary philosophical and literary structures. Tirelessly, they organize their thinking and their creation in a new direction, in search of a new reality and a new word. These are built, however, thanks to their powerful ability to synthesize existing values and forms. Indeed, to create their marginality, the two novelists knew how to first

dominate certain successive cultural influences and, from there, to build a personal and unique world. The problem of the double is inscribed in a representative way, although differently conceived and expressed by the two writers.

The paradoxical structure of the double: being both oneself and the other has been a theme that has been present since ancient times in a very large cultural space. We know the philosophical dualism which is based on classic oppositions such as matter / spirit, good / bad, the psychological dualism which deals with dissociative identity disorder, or even the metaphysical dualism according to which everything knowable is only the double of an unknowable model: the appearance of being. Placed at the crossroads of various disciplines, sciences and arts, the double remains a vague and indefinable notion: it "is not an innocent figure whose meaning would be immediate" says Michel Morel. It is not surprising then that the motif of the double takes various forms in literature as well as in the other arts: from duplication in its simplest form to obsession with the double in the form of a shadow, a fantastic vision, a dream, a double, a reflection in the mirror, antagonistic and reciprocal beings, masked characters, substitution, replacement, transfer. Thanks to its paradoxical character, the interest in the double is inexhaustible in literature, because a literature which speaks of double, speaks in an ambiguous way and thus accounts for what is conceived both as irreducibly same and other.

Nathalie Sarraute's work is no exception to this observation. More specifically, it is particularly exemplary of the original treatment of a motif which was also very dear to Fyodor Dostoevsky. What seems common to the works of these two authors. Indeed, as soon as the double involving the interrogation of the essence of the individual is grafted the question of an otherness founding of all language and constituting of any subject, that of the relationship between the subject and

thought, the subject and speech, that of the relationship between speech and thought as a mirror of being, this double is part of a project where ethics and aesthetics are articulated. This allows us to analyze the double as a theme of ethical-philosophical reflection and at the same time as a literary figure whose manifestations are progressively part of the linguistic, rhetorical and poetic functioning of the works in order to operate on the universes of representation readers. More specifically, it involves considering a model of poetic interpretation of the double. Such a perspective offers the possibility of understanding the double in the text and the evolution of its artistic manifestations through an interpretation of the codes and modalities of communication, the study of extra / intratextual instances, of the hybridity of genres, the perception of the dialogue that is established between different cultures and the stereotypes, symbols and patterns provided by them. Seen from this angle, the figure of the double appears, moreover, as the converging effect between the experience of the author's personal duplication, as an empirical personality, and his imaginary duplication, as a creative personality. In both cases, the duplication implies the desire (the need also) to become other. In this sense, the texts studied here appear as the very manifestation of the incessant dialectic of the same and the other, because they practice it at the very level of their textual dynamics, illustrating at the level of the development of meaning the paradoxical functioning duplication.

## CONCLUSION

Establishing parallels between the Sarrautian and Dostoevskian poetics of the double gave us the possibility of understanding it as a complex intercultural phenomenon. During the process of the interaction of different cultures, the literary figure of the double is subject to many

metamorphoses and therefore claims new forms of expression. Enriched in this way, the literature of the double "metamorphosed" proves to be particularly difficult to interpret and translate, since it requires of us a considerable intellectual effort and an opening to diverse cultural models. On the other hand, it certainly offers us the joy of new discoveries.

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