Introduction

Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* had a substantial impact on Beckett's dramatization of his first-person narrators' search for self in his trilogy of novels, *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*. Numerous studies have cited, as evidence of this influence, not only Beckett's discussion in his early essay *Proust* of the search for self in Proust's *Recherche*, but also his own narrators' Proustian concern with whether or not their words express a self.[1] However, despite the critical importance of the *Recherche* and the trilogy for the twentieth-century novel, and despite the significant impact of the Proustian search for self on Beckett's trilogy, there has been no rigorous comparison of the two novelists' use of first-person narration to construct the fiction of consciousness, or of the critical theme of self-consciousness which structures the search for, and demystification of, self in both their novels.

The present study seeks to fill this gap in the critical literature by exploring the different ways in which first-person narration structures the search for self-consciousness in both the *Recherche* and the trilogy. I will argue that, in these texts, first-person narration takes the form of an interplay between the tropes of allegory and irony as they are defined by Paul de Man.[2] The difference between irony and allegory is succinctly expressed by Beckett. In *The Unnamable*, he speaks of irony as "affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered, or sooner..." He speaks of allegory as "affirmations and negations invalidated...later" (*TN*, 291).[3] Irony presents signs of the subject of discourse as always already negated in the present of narration.

For de Man, allegory and irony are different modes of disclosing, behind signs of the individual difference of a subject, a repetition of the same temporal or spatial structures.[4] In other words, they are different modes of foregrounding the split nature of the subject of first-person narration. Allegory tends to take the form of a linear, narrative process of asserting and putting into question, over time, the story of the subject's search for an original self.[5] This putting into question of the search for self temporalizes

1

the split subject of first-person narration by recounting the subject's dis-
covery that it is always too early or too late to represent or remember a
present or past self. By contrast, irony is a repeated, simultaneous assertion
and negation of self-representation.[6] Irony repeatedly spatializes the split
subject of first-person narration by giving it the form of the coincidence in
a single instant of an assertion and a negation of self. Irony marks words as
saying both too much and too little about a self.[7]

I will propose that in both Proust and Beckett the allegorical development
of the subject as split in time gives way to an ironical constitution of the
subject as split in space, but that this ironically split subject eventually gives
way to the allegorically split subject. It is as if Proust's and Beckett's novels
repeatedly pointed towards the necessary return of allegory.

Besides exploring the interplay between allegory and irony in the
Recherche and the trilogy, I will investigate the roles of repetition and dif-
ferentiation which structure the literary historical relationship between the
trilogy's and the *Recherche*'s first-person narrators.[8] Beckett places allusions
to the *Recherche* into his first-person narrators' discourses in order to set up
multiple literary historical relationships with Proust's narrator, relationships
that are shifting, dynamic, and deceptive. Although the trilogy's first-person
narrators frequently establish seemingly clear resemblances with and differ-
ences from Proust's first-person narrator, sooner or later their discourses put
into question the possibility of such clear relationships. The challenge for
the reader of these shifting literary historical relationships between the tri-
logy and the *Recherche* is to document the signs of historical similarity and
difference that Beckett's narrators seem to posit, to tease out the multiple
ways in which similarities with Proust become differences and differences
become similarities, and to interpret this interplay.

Critics, especially Beckett critics, have tended to posit clear-cut historical
relationships between the two authors' narrators.[9] Some have viewed the
Recherche through the lens of Beckett's early thematic essay, *Proust*, arguing
that the essay makes an unambiguous historical distinction between Proust
and Beckett.[10] Of the few articles and one book that study the trilogy's
relationship to the *Recherche*, most have constructed this relationship as a
clear and distinct historical change from a Proustian narration based on
the overcoming of forgetting and the recovering of lost memories of self
to a Beckettian narration based on the failure of memory and the absence
of self.[11] According to Nicholas Zurbrugg, the narrators in Beckett's trilogy
use "systematically anti-Proustian imagery" and "excremental rhetoric" to
deny the Proustian narrator's claim to remember past selves. In his view, the
trilogy produces a "nihilistic," "existential vision" of the world.[12] Similarly,

James Acheson asserts that the narrator of *Molloy* illustrates Beckett's theory that "the modern artist has 'nothing to express...'."[13] For both Zurbrugg and Acheson, the literary historical relationship between Proust and Beckett takes the form of a linear transformation of the Proustian first-person narrator, who says he has a self to express, into the Beckettian narrator, who says that he has no self to express. The "Beckettian" narrator in this formulation tells stories about himself as a means of diverting himself from the painful knowledge of the absence of a self.[14]

This critical story of literary historical transformation oversimplifies the functioning of the first-person narrators in the *Recherche* and the trilogy. It elides the full interplay between the differentiation of a self and the repetition of conventional signs of self, which structures not only the narrators' discourses in the trilogy and the *Recherche*, but also the dynamic literary historical relationships between them.

In order to explore fully the complex literary historical interplay between first-person narration in the *Recherche* and the trilogy, it is necessary to describe and interpret the interplay between repetition and difference within each of the first-person discourses of Proust's or Beckett's narrators. The best recent studies of repetition and difference in Proust's or in Beckett's first-person narration posit a split between an "I" who asserts the existence of a self and an "I" that negates this existence.[15] The first-person narrators' disclosure of their split nature puts into question whether they are expressing a real self or merely constructing a fictional self by telling a story and calling it theirs. David Ellison reads the *Recherche* as an allegory of the narrator's deconstruction over time of his own assertions that he is remembering or expressing a self. This deconstruction, Ellison argues, invites an ironical reading of the narrator's representations of his self and his own discourse. Thomas Trezise studies the temporal interplay between difference and repetition in the production of fictional consciousnesses within the discourses of the trilogy's split first-person narrators, touching repeatedly, if often indirectly, on allegorical and ironical structures.[16]

This study seeks to interpret the full interplay between allegory and irony within Proust and within Beckett. Not only does allegory in each of these novelists' texts undercut itself and produce irony; irony undercuts itself and produces allegory. The study will argue that Beckett's literary historical allusions to Proust are structured by an interplay between the ironical and allegorical relationships that they establish with Proust's first-person narrator. The first four chapters of this study will interpret the formal nature of the interplay between allegory and irony as that interplay structures the *Recherche*. They will focus on particular ways in which the

Recherche dramatizes this interplay. The last four chapters will explore not only the interplay between allegory and irony in Beckett's trilogy, but also the literary historical interplay between allegory and irony that Beckett's repetition and transformation of Proust creates.

The narrators of the *Recherche* and the trilogy rarely if ever use the terms "allegory" or "irony" to discuss the temporality of their first-person narration. However, they do comment in great depth upon the structures that these terms signify. They discuss allegory and irony indirectly by commenting upon the temporality of their forgetting and lying.[17] The split subject of first-person narration can claim to represent itself truthfully only by presupposing that it can remember itself objectively. But the forgetting and deceptiveness of signs of memory always put this self-representation into question.

Forgetting and lying are different ways in which Proust's and Beckett's narrators mark the split subject of their first-person narration. Forgetting is the erasure of a memory of the past from the present of consciousness. Occurrences of forgetting and commentaries on forgetting in the discourses of Proust's and Beckett's narrators are critical signs of their use of allegory, which, according to de Man, is a discursive mode of disclosing the subject's forgetting of its past and present selves.[18] Lying, in contrast to forgetting, is by definition the explicit assertion of a false truth in order to deceive a reader and the simultaneous negation of that false truth within the liar's mind. Lying, as Kierkegaard notes, has a critical relationship to irony, which, like lying, explicitly asserts and simultaneously negates a truth.[19] But, whereas lying hides this negation in order better to deceive the reader, irony includes irony signals that indirectly reveal this negation to the rhetorically aware reader.[20] Lying becomes irony when a deliberately false statement is accompanied by irony signals which reveal the fabrication and prevent readers from being deceived.[21] These indirect signs invite readers to share in the writer's misrepresentation and implicit negation of this misrepresentation. Of course the distinction between irony and lying becomes fuzzy when it is recognized that the ironical author and his ironically complicitous readers know that some readers will not see the irony signals and will be deceived.[22]

A major goal of this study is to extend the de Manian analysis of the figures of allegory and irony to the literary historical interplay between repetition and difference in Beckett's allusions to Proust. If there is a fundamental distinction between Proust's and the trilogy's dramatizations of the interplay between allegory and irony, then the literary historical relationship between the *Recherche* and the trilogy will take the form of an historical

allegory that discloses this temporal difference. Historical allegory is con-stituted by the opening up of temporal and historical difference. Beckett's allusions to Proust function to construct just such an historical allegory of the differentiation of his narrators' discourses from Proust's. But these allu-sions also undercut this historical allegory ironically and "demonstrat[e]," in de Man's terms, "the impossibility of our being historical."[23]

The result of this allegorical assertion and ironical denial of literary his-tory is a dynamic interplay between allegory and irony in the reading of the trilogy. The interplay can best be illustrated by an analysis of consciousness and first-person narration in those passages of the trilogy that allude to the beginning and end of *Combray*, the first volume of the *Recherche*. At the be-ginning of *Combray*, Proust's narrator appears to constitute the temporality of his remembering and writing by dramatizing his slow awakening from sleep to consciousness during a recent period of his life. He interprets this process of awakening to consciousness as his mind's act of reconstructing a seemingly objective consciousness of the bedroom in which he fell asleep and the self who fell asleep there.[24] The narrator recounts how he became aware of this process of reconstruction when he would sometimes wake up in the middle of the night in his pitch-dark bedroom of his mother's apartment after falling asleep in an unaccustomed position. As he awa-kened, he would have difficulty remembering where, when, and who he was. He would see a myriad of imaginary and remembered bedrooms in which he imagined he had fallen asleep or in which he actually had fallen asleep sometime in the past. His memories of past bedrooms, the narrator tells us, were not objective memories of actual past bedrooms, but only memories of his past perceptions of these bedrooms. In order to awaken fully, the narrator had to decide which of the many remembered and imag-ined perceptions of past bedrooms flowing through his slowly awakening mind coincided with the perceptions he had had of his present bedroom before he had fallen asleep. The narrator would eventually choose what he believed to be the correct memory of his last perceptions of his bedroom in order to construct a consciousness of his present bedroom. Consciousness of a present world and self, for Proust, is thus the remembering of a past consciousness and the erasure of other possible past consciousnesses.

This awakening to consciousness of what I will call Proust's "remember-ing narrator" took the form of an act of mental construction. His mind constructed his consciousness of space, indirectly identified the time of life in which he was waking, and interpreted this consciousness as a metaphor of his present self. The narrator's consciousness at this moment of his life is thus constructed by his memory of where, when, and who he was when he

awakened and by his certainty that this memory is accurate: "Certes, j'étais bien éveillé maintenant...et le bon ange de la certitude avait tout arrêté autour de moi, m'avait couché sous mes couvertures..." (*R*, 1: 8).[25] His remembered perceptions of other past bedrooms also theoretically marked the time in which he had had those perceptions and the different selves who had had those perceptions. By becoming conscious of where and when he is, he becomes conscious of who he is, as defined by the different manner of perceiving the world that distinguishes his present self from past and future selves.

Waking at the beginning of *Combray* appears to produce a full, non-split subject in the form of a fictional consciousness, which can correctly identify the subject's place in space and time and the self to which this subject refers. Until the remembering narrator achieves self-consciousness, his mind remains split between a subject that desires consciousness of a single self and a myriad of mental objects that raise questions about the existence of such a self. The narrator fully awakens only when this "kaleidoscope" of remembered and imaginary bedrooms gives way to the consciousness of a single bedroom, after he chooses a particular memory to represent where, when, and who he is now and where he was when he fell asleep. On those nights when he fell asleep in an unaccustomed position, however, this process of awakening and remembering was deferred by the persistence of the narrator's forgetting who he was when he fell asleep. This persistent forgetting temporarily prevents him from deciding with certainty which of the remembered and imaginary images of bedrooms represents his self and which misrepresents it, which constitutes an objective self-consciousness and which a subjective self-deception. This forgetting and indecision induces his mind to create and recreate a multiplicity of remembered bedrooms in order to find the one that will allow him to wake up. It jogs his memory of large parts of his past, which is why, even after he has chosen which memory represents where, when, and who he now is, he spends the rest of the night exploring memories of his past, all of which are associated with his perceptions of bedrooms other than the one in which he is now sleeping. This conceit appears to explain the "remembering narrator's" entire narrative of his past throughout the novel.

However, Proust's remembering narrator, who theoretically remembers everything recounted in the *Recherche*, is himself remembered. His thoughts are recounted in past tenses by what I will call Proust's writing narrator: "Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure. Parfois, à peine ma bougie éteinte, mes yeux se fermaient si vite que je n'avais pas le temps de me

dire: 'Je m'endors.' Et, une demi-heure après, la pensée qu'il était temps de chercher le sommeil m'éveillait..." (*R*, 1: 3). It is Proust's writing narrator who reconstructs his past remembering of past perceptions of bedrooms and who puts these past remembrances in a more or less chronological, narrative order. This narrative is structured by the protagonist's lifelong search to overcome his forgetting of his past perceptions in order to remember his past and write a novel about it. The *Recherche* thus structures the narrator's life as an initial falling asleep to the temporal diversity of his past and present selves as the growing man forgets his past perceptions of world and self, and a subsequent awakening to conscious memory of these past selves through involuntary memories when he is much older. This awakening appears to culminate in the writing of the story of the narrator's forgetting of his past and subsequent awakening to conscious memory. The writing narrator thus seems to be born when the protagonist in the last pages of *Le Temps retrouvé* and of the novel begins to write the story of his past life and to create the autobiography we appear to be reading. Writing narrator, remembering narrator, and remembered past perceiving selves, all would coincide in the consciousness of a unified, fully awake subject called "Proust," who speaks every moment of his first-person narration.

But Proust's writing narrator never achieves this unified, fully awake consciousness of his life.[26] He must put off indefinitely the moment when his past self, the protagonist, becomes a present self, the writing narrator. Throughout the opening passage of the *Recherche*, there are strong signs that the remembering narrator is "recomposing," rather than accurately remembering, his past and present perceptions of the world. His repeated expressions of certainty that he has become fully conscious of his present self and bedroom are in fact attempts to convince himself that he can remember and represent himself objectively (*R*, 1: 6).[27] These indirect signs of the remembering narrator's error are confirmed at the end of *Combray*, where the writing narrator ceases recounting the story of his childhood summers in the village of Combray and returns to the more recent period, in which he would repeatedly wake up in the middle of the night and remember his past. The writing narrator recounts how, after his long night of remembering his past, the sun would come up and reveal that he was not in the bedroom he had thought he was in. He would discover that he had identified himself with the wrong remembered bedroom and thus with the wrong past or imaginary bedroom and self. When he thought he had become conscious of his present bedroom, he had not overcome his forgetting of who he was nor his indecision over which of his diverse memories of past selves represented him. Rather, he had constructed a

deceptive consciousness of world and self and convinced himself that it was objective.

This revelation of the subject's split between, on the one hand, a re-membering narrator who repeatedly deceives himself into believing that he can represent his past and present selves objectively and, on the other hand, an older writing narrator who knows that he was deceiving himself, brings to the fore how allegory and irony constitute Proustian first-person narration. In the writing narrator's discourse, the story of the protagonist's search to wake up and remember his past takes the form of an allegory of the transformation of a remembering narrator, who believes that he can remember his past and present selves, into a writing narrator, who knows that he cannot. This allegorical transformation recounts the protagonist's discovery that his memories of his past and present selves cannot fully escape his waking mind's indecision over whether he is remembering his past or forgetting and inventing it. The protagonist's search to recapture his different past ways of seeing the world is thus always too late to arrive at self-representation – he has forgotten the past – and too early to arrive at remembering his past. Narrator and protagonist can never coincide in a "here and now."[28] Proust's writing will always be too early and too late to be autobiographical.

Alongside this allegorical writing narrator there is an ironical writing narrator whose existence is revealed by the end of *Combray*. When the writing narrator informs his readers that his remembered representations of his past selves were misrepresentations, he reveals that, at the beginning of *Combray*, he knowingly created the illusion that he was accurately remembering his past selves. This deliberate deception transforms the writing narrator's discourse into an ironical juxtaposition of the remembering narrator's assertion and the writing narrator's negation of the autobiographical objectivity of his self-representations. By revealing this sleight-of-hand at the end of *Combray*, the writing narrator invites readers to reread the entirety of *Combray* ironically, to be accomplices in the narrator's self-misrepresentation and its simultaneous demystification.

The coincidence of allegory and irony in Proust's first-person narrator's discourse splits the narrator, not only between asserting and negating his different manners of perceiving world and self, but also between incompatible modes of relating assertion to negation: an allegorical mode that seeks to narrate the temporal difference between spatial representations of past and present selves, but whose negations put this narrative off indefinitely; and an ironical mode that repeats in time the assertion and simultaneous

negation of such a narrative of temporal difference and constitutes the narrator's discourse spatially. These different modes of relating the assertion and the negation of self cannot culminate in the narrator's conclusion that his discourse is a transtemporal repetition of the same conventional signs and structures of self. They cannot culminate in the rebirth of the narrator's past in the present. Rather, they produce indecision over whether or not his discourse can capture or establish the temporal difference between selves that theoretically constitutes his life, a difference that the conventions of narrative form require him to repeatedly reassert.

This critical Proustian meditation on the temporality of self-remembering and first-person writing, I will argue, takes on a literary historical dimension in Beckett's rewriting of the meditation in his trilogy. Beckett's allusions to Proust's meditation are conspicuous. Three of the trilogy's narrators – Molloy, Moran, and Malone – write in their respective bedrooms and two write in bed, the privileged places of Proust's narrator's meditation on first-person narration. The narrator of the last volume, *The Unnamable*, speaks from a linguistic refuge, the pronoun "I," that tries to close itself off from any representation of a real world or self, just as Proust tried to close off his bedroom with cork from the world outside it. One narrator, Molloy, writes in a bedroom of his mother's house, as does Proust's narrator when he begins writing at the end of the *Recherche*. Ironically, Molloy even writes in his mother's bed.[29] The trilogy's narrators are increasingly ill and nearing death, as is Proust's writing narrator.[30]

The writing situations of Beckett's narrators are, like Proust's, metaphors for the acts of thinking and writing. Just as Proust's waking narrator reconstructs his consciousness of bedroom and self, so too do the trilogy's narrators. Hence the beginning of *The Unnamable*, where the narrator repeats the three questions that are central to Proust's waking narrator: "Where now? Who now? When now?" (*TN*, 291).

The trilogy's methodical repetition of Proust's real and fictional writing situation is striking. So too are the ways in which Beckett's narrators transform this writing situation, seemingly differentiating their narration from Proust's. Beckett's narrators remind us, much more frequently than Proust's, that they are reconstructing an artificial consciousness of world and self. They do so not only during the process of waking, but throughout their discourses.[31] Indeed, the trilogy's narrators often seem to be caught in that moment of waking when Proust's narrator is split and cannot yet tell whether he is remembering his present bedroom or dreaming about other remembered and imagined bedrooms. At one point Molloy says ironically

that he is "virtually bereft...of consciousness" (*TN*, 54). Even at moments when the trilogy's narrators act as if they have arrived at a complete consciousness of world and self, they quickly remember their indecision over whether or not they are or can be conscious: "A and C I never saw again. But perhaps I shall see them again. But shall I be able to recognize them? And am I sure I never saw them again? And what do I mean by seeing and seeing again?" (*TN*, 15). At times, the trilogy's narrators create the false impression that they have achieved consciousness, while fully knowing that their consciousness of world and self is an uncertain construction of conventional thoughts and words. Sometimes they say they lie:

And every time I say, I said this, or I said that, or speak of a voice saying...a fine phrase more or less clear and simple, or find myself compelled to attribute to others intelligible words, or hear my own voice uttering to others more or less articulate sounds, I am merely complying with the convention that demands you either lie or hold your peace. (*TN*, 88)

The trilogy's narrators' reminders that consciousness is a misrepresentation transforms these lies into irony. Proust's allegory of an endless search for difference, which seems to drown out his irony, thus seems to give way in literary history to Beckett's irony, which repeatedly subordinates allegory to irony. The trilogy thus appears to establish a clear literary historical distinction between its and Proust's self-reflective narrators.

But temporal difference in the trilogy as well as the historical repetition and transformation of the Proustian scene of remembrance are always falling back into repetition, as if narration and literary history were caught between difference and repetition. Irony, the apparent mark of Beckett's literary historical difference, is thus paradoxically also a denial of historical difference: "I say years, though here there are no years. What matter how long?...A short time, a long time, it's all the same" (*TN*, 309). The trilogy's irony becomes an indirect sign of both the presence and the absence of literary historical difference between Proust's and Beckett's writing. Ironical repetition transforms parts of the trilogy into a parody of the temporal difference that Proust's remembering narrator posits between the different moments of his life – each supposedly distinguished from the others by its distinct manner of painting the world "de couleurs si différentes de celles qui maintenant revêtent pour moi le monde..." – and between his works and the works of precursors (*R*, 1: 48; 3: 159–60, 248–61). The trilogy's narrators parody the multicolored, historical kaleidoscope of past selves seen by Proust's waking mind by transforming all sensations – past, present, or future – into a uniform gray. This gray world suggests that what we call a