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Keeping Beckett's Company

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Samuel Beckett's writing is not one that builds up toward some dramatic climax – the first paragraph of *Company* says it all: "A voice comes to one in the dark. Imagine."⁵¹ There is, however, a dose of formal dexterity in these two simple sentences, because what they describe seems to be anterior to the very act of description: the scene of writing itself. They also present us with some problems concerning the identities involved in the text. Apparently, there is the voice, therefore the speaker; also "one on his back in the dark," that is to say, the hearer. These are the patent presences but, since they are obviously narrated, there is the third identity, the narrator, whose narration is directed towards yet another presence, some addressee – hence the injunction: "Imagine." These nine words already seem to bring to life quite a company. The next paragraph develops the scene:

That then is the proposition. To one on his back in the dark a voice tells of a past. With occasional allusions to a present and more rarely to a future as for example, You will end as you now are. And in another dark or in the same another devising it all for company.

5–6

The last sentence introduces some confusion into the quartet we seemed to have detected as well as into the original scene. Above all, there is yet another identity here – the deviser, "another devising it

¹ My quotations come from the collected edition: S. B e c k e t t: *Nohow On: Company, Ill Seen Ill Said, Worstward Ho*. London: John Calder, 1989.



all for company,” – but who is he? The author? The narrator? Or yet another presence whose imagination brings everything to life? What is more, the stage gets multiplied: apart from the original scene in the dark, there might be yet another dark, which would be the place where the deviser abides. As we can see, the matters get more and more complicated, so in order not to widen the domain of confusion, it would be advisable to stick to the rudimentary question: who is talking to whom and about whom? Bearing this in mind, we can delve into the narrative in order to find more clues. But what we find is not very promising – neither the sender nor the addressee can be definitively ascertained:

If the voice is not speaking to him [the hearer] it must be speaking to another. So with what reason remains he reasons. To another of that other. Or of him. Or of another still. To another of that other or of him or of another still. To one on his back in the dark in any case. Of one on his back in the dark whether the same or another.

8–9

And, further on, we find similar uncertainty about the speaker:

For why or? Why in another dark or in the same? And whose voice 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.

19

Although there seems to be nothing strange in the multiplicatory power of imagination – imaginary objects can be multiplied *ad infinitum* – this process has always traditionally been conceived as working only one way: the imagined can divide itself without end, but the source of the imaginings, the subject, in order to multiply itself in the imaginary act, has to remain one and stable. In spite of that, the above fragment opens the production from the “subjective” end, too. If it is possible to ask “Who asks, Whose voice asking this?” and then “Who asks in the end, Who asks?” Then nothing can stop the narrator from pursuing in this vein: “Who asks, Who asks,

Who asks?" and so on.² What happens then is that the site of imagination or discourse gets emptied by such an operation and the deviser recedes into infinity.

But all the self-reflexive gestures in the text, the gestures that try to locate the source and the destination of the voice, take place outside the voice proper. Addressing the unspecified "you," the voice itself speaks of "a past" and large parts of the narration are devoted to "tableaux" evoked by remembrance – memories of a birth, childhood, adolescence, maturity that are interspersed with the self-reflexive parts of *Company*. Such a situation, however, brings new questions to the surface: whose past is that and for what reason does the voice relate it? The second of these seems to be the easier one to answer, since some pages into the "story" we find such a characteristic of the voice:

Another trait its repetitiousness. Repeatedly with only minor variants the same bygone. As if willing him by this dint to make it his. To confess, Yes I remember. Perhaps even to have a voice. To murmur, Yes I remember. What an addition to company that would be! A voice in the first person singular. Murmuring now and then, Yes I remember.

12-13

The voice is, apparently, trying to force the hearer into acknowledging that the related memories are his (the hearer's). It all comes down to the meaning of the pronoun "I," or, rather, since "I" is a shifter,³ to the matter of its

² L. B e r s a n i, U. D u t o i t: *Arts of Impoverishment: Beckett, Rothko, Resnais*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993, p. 68.

³ Roman Jakobson's term, whose work on pronouns was developed in the late 1950s by Émile Benveniste. According to him, personal pronouns differ in a very substantial way from words designating objects such as a tree, because "tree" always refers to the same signified, the same concept no matter who utters the word. It is not the case with "I" or "you"; the pronoun "I" refers at the same time to any individual whatsoever and a particular individual who utters it. The shifters become identified only **temporarily in the act of discourse**: "I refers to the act of individual discourse in which it is pronounced, and by this it designates the speaker [...]. It is in the instance of discourse in which I designates the speaker that the speaker proclaims himself as the 'subject.' And so it is literally true that the basis of subjectivity is in the exercise of language. If one really thinks about it, one will see that there is really no other objective testimony to the identity of the subject except that which he himself

distribution, to an identity or identities the pronoun relates to. Such knowledge would, moreover, pave our way to putting into focus the deviser of what the narrative, in a few places, calls a “fable” (51 and *passim*). The already quoted fragment continues:

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.

19

The one who “devices it all,” the one who always comes last – because it is the vanishing point of the infinitely receding succession of devisers – is the consolidated figure of the I-subject. Such placing of the originator of the “fable” may also allow us to understand better the positions of other “identities” within the narrative. At the very beginning of the text the “actors” are located with respect to each other:

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

6

The situation would seem easy to grasp if it was not for one “presence.” We would be able to represent the scene as one in which the originally split deviser of the voice and of the voice’s hearer tries also to devise himself as a whole, a self-present entity. This deviser in order to devise himself as present would have to devise the voice and the hearer as the two that could identify each other as one and the same. Such identification would enable the reverse movement, that is, the production of the deviser as one, to start. But this neat structure is ruined by the existence of yet another “actor” on the memory scene – the presence of the narrative voice breaks the feeble equilibrium of the self-identifying subject. And this is precisely its function: in

thus gives about himself.” (É. Benveniste: *Problems in General Linguistics*. Trans. M.E. Meek. Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1971, p. 226).

Beckett's text, such an identification is impossible and this very impossibility, which is not a stable concept but just a (lack of) movement of identification, in order to be presented at all, is represented in the **figure** of the narrating voice which is **the very movement of representation** back to the deviser but which is stalled since it cannot speak to and of the hearer as the "you"-voice can. The reason why the communication between the narrator and the hearer is impossible remains to be discovered.⁴

Apart from being essentially staged, the voice that speaks to one in the dark has multiple other characteristics: it is flat, it is faint, it unexpectedly changes places, etc.; but, apart from everything else, it also seems to possess a quality that places the whole manifestly aural scene in question:

From ranging far and wide as if in quest the voice comes to rest and constant faintness. To rest where? Imagine warily.

Above the upturned face. Falling tangent to the crown. So that *in the faint light it sheds* were there a mouth to be seen he would not see it. Roll as he might his eyes.

38; italics mine

The voice sheds the light that the hearer is able to see – the hearer **sees** (or, at least, might see) the voice as it speaks in the dark. What we can observe here seems strangely familiar and the familiarity is of a very old date. Actually, this kind of scene may take us back almost as far as it is possible to

⁴ Jacques Lacan explains the origin of the subject in similar ways. The illusory dyadic identification with the other as one's mirror image (*méconnaissance*/misprision) is only possible in the realm of the Imaginary (images, figures, the same) before the ego is formed. Whenever a speech act happens (the "no" of the father) a signifier appears, which opens the Symbolic and splits the wholeness of the image in the mirror, introducing the decentred subject ("sentenced" to desire) of triadic interaction. This way, the subject is produced by the incorporation of the other (the father – the figure that prevents the movement of identification) within itself. (J. L a c a n: "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience." In: *Écrits*. Trans. A. S h e r i d a n. London: Routledge, 1977).

travel – to one of the founding scenes of the western civilisation, a veritable origin of sorts.

In Plato's metaphysics the sensible world, as mutable, cannot be considered real and, therefore, much cannot be gained, in terms of knowledge, by the direct practice of the senses. There is, however, one agency that is able to provide us with knowledge that is certain and which does not originate from the sensual reality. This infallible source of wisdom is everyone's soul which is without a beginning and immortal. A quality of being eternal is precisely the source of the soul's claims to knowledge because everything that really exists, by the very definition, has to be changeless and eternal and cannot be perceived by our senses. In our perception we only get the semblance of the real reflected in the imperfect world of mutable matter. The reality or what actually exists is the world of Ideas of which the highest is the Idea of Good. The Ideas are colourless and shapeless, imperceptible for the eye of flesh, but **visible** to the soul by means of the mind.⁵ The soul that collapses into the mortal body forgets what it has seen, but this knowledge never gets erased completely. There is always a certain inner voice present at our disposal which is the voice of the soul's memory, and it is this voice that is able to take us back to the scene on which the Ideas are presented. The **voice**, if we listen to it in an appropriate manner (and such listening is called *anamnesis* by Socrates⁶) can take us back to what our soul has already **seen** – the Ideas which present themselves as *eidos* (from *eido*: to see). It is sight, therefore, that is the domain of absolute knowledge and the intricate scene of hearing is posited only to be converted, through the synesthetic detour, into the scene of a seeing: the scene of listening and the scene of seeing are simply **identical** – “There is of course the eye,” says the narrator of *Company*, “[f]illing the whole field.” (16)

In *Company*, darkness as well as voice belong to the same order, the order of the seen. This darkness is clearly visible and gradable:

⁵ Plato: *Phaedrus*, 247 C.

⁶ Plato: *Meno*, 81 D.

The temptation is strong to decree that there is nothing to see. But too late for the moment. For he sees a change of dark when he opens or shuts his eyes.

41

Is, then, the scopic inevitable? And if so, what is the reason? The answers to these questions seem to lie in the very staging of the scene of knowledge: the scene of listening cannot by-pass the scene of seeing for the very simple reason that the most important element of the former – the voice – is already a **figure** and as figure it is accessible only in a seeing.

The voice by re-presenting the idea in the sensible, that is to say, by being the figure of the idea leads one to the presentation proper of the idea as imageless, immutable and present. This presence is presented in an (in)sight that permits access without help of the senses, that is to say, the insight is enabled in all its ideality by what we can call, after Immanuel Kant, the “forming force” of reason or transcendental imagination,⁷ which are categories “empty” of any content, categories as that which allow us to perceive an entity as a separate entity and not as just an aggregate of its sensible qualities. Yet such a presentation called “presence” is already a **figure produced by reason** because these categories, that is, what allows reason to perceive something as present, the means by which reason installs its object as present to reason, are necessarily the product of reason. In such a way, reason installs **itself** and becomes its own producer: there is a double mirror within reason in which reason reflects itself as reflection. Ultimately, and paradoxically, it is the mirror that produces everything including the mirror itself. Therefore, what is intelligible and present because seen as *eidos* is already a figure, that is to say, **fiction** – and, accordingly, the scene of listening/seeing, in both *Phaedrus* and *Company*, is the one that has been or has to be “imagine[d] warily.” (38)

⁷ P. Lacoue-Labarthe: *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*. Ed. Ch. Fynsk. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989, p. 70. This article is greatly indebted to the work done on **mimesis** by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy. Although the relevant material will appear in the notes, I must stress my debt to their work in general – the moments of specific influence are too numerous to be specified every time.

As we have already noticed, the region of seeing is also the domain of knowledge: what is seen is the (re)presentation of the essence, which is pure knowledge itself. In this sense, representation does not only belong to the field of the optical but to the theorised as well; or, rather, the optical is at the same time always already the domain where theorising is taking place – **any figure has its source in the figure of reason**. The point of this proposition can be clearly grasped in the double meaning of the above genitive: reason produces figures (e.g. categories) but, in producing the figures, it, by producing them, also produces itself; in such a two-way process reason, to be itself, cannot only be reasoning, it also has to reason (or produce) itself as reasoning. And this concept of reason as theorising in figures, that is to say, bestowing meaning, or as the presence present to itself in its presence is obviously also the figure of the Cartesian human subject who thinks and knows himself thinking. Therefore, taking this homology into consideration, we can be justified to say that **every figure as such is ultimately the figure of humanity** – and in this sense, but only in this sense, man *is* the only figure that is the source of meaning. Such a situation, at least, takes place in a history of philosophy that valorises the pre-expressive, pre-representational presence, that is to say, the whole history of western thinking from Plato to Edmund Husserl, and maybe beyond...

Yet, this original scene of philosophy may also be regarded in a different and more sinister light. If we read further into *Phaedrus* we find out that it is also the scene where the **dead** come to speak – the voice or voices that one hears in the dark are also the voices of one's previous incarnations. Therefore, it is the dead that lead one to the figure (as the idea) and who present themselves as figure (the immutable knowledge). We come here to the unexpected and portentous juncture – could it be that the figure of reason is the figure of dead humanity or the subject as dead?

As we have already mentioned, the scene of *Company* is the scene of an agon, the struggle in which the existent-subject devices the voice which tries to force the hearer (the non-reflexive “level” of the subject that cannot be turned into figure) to acknowledge the past the voice relates as the past of the hearer. The voice, by presenting the past as figures, cannot help theo-

rising (that is, fabricating) it. The hearer listens to/sees these figures but is not able to recognise them as representing himself. And the very process of non-recognition, of **being unable to see the theorising that is taking place**, is presented as the narratorial voice – the narrator is the very obstacle on the way to engendering of the subject by the subject itself. Because the narrator cannot speak to and of the hearer at the same time, because the speaking self and the self that is spoken⁸ struggle to oust the opponent from its place, the subject is not permitted to freeze itself in the narcissistic self-speculation – if it was not for the fight that is figured in the obstacle of the narrator, the subject would represent itself to itself and, by doing this, become fictional, stable, **dead**.

This is precisely what happens on the scene of autobiography and this is also why such kind of writing, in spite of all its claims, cannot avoid being fictional. The narrator suggests that: “You lie in the dark with closed eyes and see the scene. As you could not at the time.” (30–31) In order to evoke the scene as a scene of memory, that is, as stable and present one has to make oneself absent from it, one has to put oneself out. Therefore, remembering oneself is actually imagining oneself as other who is present within the scene, also imagined as having taken place for this other. Remembering is, then, devising oneself as other and, necessarily, also as the other remembering this other. Here again, we come across the infinite regression.

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 of another. [and: He speaks, He speaks, He speaks of himself as of another, etc.]

20

But the other of memory is not only fictional but also, as the figure which is intelligible, that is, immutable and whole, he is not a living other. The subject that is present to itself, the subject that knows and means, is nothing other than the voice from beyond the grave. In this sense, autobiography, as the narrative in the first person, is strictly speaking impossible to be writ-

⁸ D. Wesling, T. Sławek: *Literary Voice: The Calling of Jonah*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995, pp. 12–13.

ten, and what passes for it takes in all its actuality the form of an agony⁹ – a tortuous and hopeless struggle between the author and the dead to the death of the former, when (after the body is buried) he remains in the world only as a figment, image: stabilised, theorised, himself dead.¹⁰

But, how is the self other than figure, other than death itself, possible? Or, rather, – since this is precisely what Beckett shows – how is the self as figure impossible? And what is the meaning of such an impossibility? In order to elucidate these matters, we have to go back again to the problem of “presence” – a founding concept of our originary scene.

As we have already noticed, presence is a double “phenomenon” – it is **at once** the presence of the object of consciousness to consciousness (reason, self, mind’s eye – whatever we call it), and the presence of consciousness to itself. The present object of consciousness is necessarily ideal, since, in order to appear in consciousness (in order to present itself), it has to be rid of all empirical diversity – it has to be identical with itself as the same. And it is precisely the very ideality of such an object that makes possible its being infinitely repeated as re-presented as the image of the immutable same. If this is the case, then we can say that the sensible re-presentation is the return of the pre-expressive presentation of the ideal object of consciousness. But there is a flaw in this understanding of representation (although such an understanding is the history of metaphysics) – the very pos-

⁹ Ibidem, p. 179.

¹⁰ The above mentioned book by Donald Wesling and Tadeusz Sławek very often moves along similar (though not exactly) routes. Especially interesting in the light of my analysis of biographical subject is the fact that they discuss the Celanian subject as “belittled by memories which do not perform an act of determining one’s location” and that bring up “a place which immediately begins to shrink, thus changing into an opening, a chasm.” (57) The authors of *Literary Voice* also discuss the production of the subject (not only autobiographical) as an agon: “The speaking subject is an in-process, dialogic relationship between whoever speaks and whoever is spoken, theorized in full consciousness that there will be baffles, multiplications of imaginary selves and voices, diacritical distances, slippages of meaning, problems with pronouns. These troubles arise because each of the fraternal internal antagonists, the speaking and the spoken, wishes to interfere with, silence, and finally kill off the other, even as both must know that the continuous mutual interference is what creates the effect of literature.” (13) What is more, the quotation to which this fragment refers is the extract from Beckett’s *Texts for Nothing*.

sibility of the return of presentation as re-presentation is what makes presentation as such impossible: re-presentation would not be possible, if presentation would not already allow its own absence. That is to say, the repetition of the same of presentation would be out of the question, if this same were not originally other than itself.¹¹ The above would therefore bring us to the conclusion that it is not the same which is the matrix for repetition or re-presentation, but that it is precisely repetition or the split origin of the same that produces the same – that, originally, the same is always other to itself. What is more, this primal differing from itself is obviously also the point where the originary deferring¹² takes place, as the identity of the object is always deferred in the chain of representations the object is. (The object is always already a representation, a repetition which can lead only to another repetition.) Therefore, the originary repetition is also the site where time and space originate, but **not as presence** – if time meant just presence, if the source of time were not already split, if time did not originally defer itself, if it were identical with itself, time would already be still-born at its very source, or, in other words, there would be neither time nor space since there could not be any difference between the points of time or space.

Thus, as we have said, the origin of consciousness is split, is always already repeated. In terms of our discussion, this means that, since it is always at once present and absent, it can never be stabilised enough to be seen (as either present or absent) and, therefore, it can never be made into a figure. Moreover, for the very reason that the split is anterior to consciousness, or, rather, that it is what produces consciousness, it is irrecoverable for consciousness – the subject cannot see (theorise, figure) its own conception. And here we have come to the point that might provide us with an explanation why the process of self-constitution by the subject in *Company* is impossible to be accomplished: the subject cannot be present to itself because it cannot theorise its own conception and engender itself in seeing itself do

¹¹ Th. T r e z i s e: *Into the Breach: Samuel Beckett and the Ends of Literature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990, pp. 19–20.

¹² J. D e r r i d a: “Différance.” In: *Margins of Philosophy*. Trans. A. B a s s. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1982.

so.¹³ All attempts at self-production as presence have to fail because the subject cannot act as its own author/father, and all experiments to become one have to end up in bringing up a figure of the author-deviser who, as a figure, has to be devised by yet another deviser who also becomes a figure and so on *ad infinitum*. Beckett's innovation here is not that he splits the consciousness into separate "identities" (this has been done often enough), but that he uses figures in ways that go entirely against the grain of tradition – the figures are there to provide company (they are the figures of humanity, after all, but, as the figures of humanity, they are also the figures of the same and, therefore, not very companionable), but the function of, at least, some of them is not to elucidate, to provide knowledge, but **to confuse and obstruct** – "Confusion too is company up to a point," says the narratorial voice (20). This makes of the narrative voice especially a particularly ambiguous junction – on the one hand, his figure is there to sabotage any possibility of neat categorisations within the narrative, but, on the other, the narrator is, at the same time, also the very figure of such confusion and obstruction. It makes for a very strange literary feat indeed – the veritable figure of the stranger. But this stranger is not just an other – since it is not the figure of knowledge, it is not the figure of the same and, therefore, also not the figure of humanity and its reason. What we have come to touch upon in this place seems to be lying outside the domain of man and within the realm of the monstrous. It seems that, in the stranger, we have encountered the figure of the properly **inhuman**, and – since, in spite of all, it actually is a figure – also that which we could, hesitatingly, call a sense of the inhuman, or the inhuman as sense, using the word "sense" here in an appropriately monstrous way, that is to say, stretching its signification between English and French, as meaning at least all of these: the sensible, the intelligible and **direction**.

¹³ Ph. Lacoue-Labarthe: *Typography...*, p. 127.