True Feints: Samuel Beckett and the Sincerity of Loneliness

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If Company*—with all its evasions and cancelled invitations—is a work of unprecedented unguardedness within the Beckett canon, then a special case may be made for its sincerity: that it resides in the novella's very gambits, decoys and "true feints." To arrive at such sincerity, Beckett may be read as the modernist novelist of voice—of a confessional voice that exposes its speaker without the buffetings character, plot, or self-dramatization. Such deprivations are, paradoxically, the product of a poetics of interiority and the practice of exagoreusis, a confessional mode in which a penitent verbalizes his thoughts without recourse to thematizing arrangement.* Company*'s sincere loneliness is therefore not found in any "congruence between avowal and actual feeling," as Lionel Trilling's seminal definition goes. Rather, it emerges as something inferential: that which remains when the impossibility of company is subtracted from a desire for it.*

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"A voice comes to one in the dark" (3)—famous first words in the loneliest of Beckett's works, *Company*. The fable, as it is told, features a solitary figure whose only companionship comes in the form of voices that turn out to be his own. One voice conjures past scenes in the second-person while another deigns only to speak in a distant third-person. If there are intimations of company—in rekindled memories, social emotions, or the positing of unknown presences—they only delay the truth that *Company* drives toward,

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affirms with its last breath: "Alone" (42). And yet, to tell the story this way is to overlook its gestures outward, its invitations in.

Take again the first sentence. We might entertain the possibility that we are being involved, however faintly, however feintingly. Even as lamplight brightens the page before us, we must hold ourselves in a state of empathetic and imaginative ambivalence, hold ourselves to be in the dark.[1] We will keep alive "one" as an indefinite pronoun that could refer to someone yet ill-seen, or to any person of undefined identity—a person like ourselves.[2] Then comes the injunction to "Imagine" (3), which asks us to conceive not only a voice, but a voice that might come to one and to all. In that very act, we picture ourselves as the apostrophized object, imagine a community of readers imagining. But venturing on, our doubts are soon dashed. The "one" meant is a specific one, singular and solitary. Whatever uncertainty we could sustain during the first two sentences is undone by the third: "To one on his back in the dark" (3). There is something sly, perhaps cruel, about the incompleteness of the sentence.[3] It requires us to loop back to the opening, to find there the operative verb, to suppress the imperative wedged in between, and, finally, to arrive at a more complete, more certain, construction: *A voice comes to one on his back in the dark*; *to one who is not us*. This syntactical closure is performed so easily that claiming "one" as doubly indefinite now seems spurious. We can't come in, even if asked, and we hadn't been.

Company is full of such cancelled invitations. It feigns to draw us in when really it seems bent on exclusion, playing a game of *fort–da* at the level of emotion, allusion, and even genre by which it deepens the solitude of its creature while also keeping the reader at arm's length. And yet, despite this apparent cynicism, *Company* is consistently situated in the Beckett canon as a work of unprecedented unguardedness. The text, it has been said, "offers itself to us more openly" (Pilling 131) than any other prose piece. It creates the impression that Beckett is addressing us in his own voice (Kalb 121). Some have glimpsed in it a "gentleness" (Cohn 354) akin to that of Shakespeare's late Romances, while others have felt that it teases with "lyrical impulses" (Fort 296) or calls on us to "identify a heart behind the mind" (Brater 166). Various explanations for this consensus offer themselves: that *Company* returns Beckett to English (mother tongue, language of the heart); that it announces anew his "novelistic urge" (Boxhall 34); that it is the site of pointed self-writing. Whatever the reason, it is in *Company* that readers have least hesitated to find continuity between the author and his autography.[4]

Far from opposing this tendency, my aim is to make a special if paradoxical case for *Company*'s sincerity: that it resides in the novella's gambits, decoys, and "true feints." The latter phrase refers to one of several homophonic puns in the text. Among these we find "repent amble" (32) doubling for *repentable*, and also the complementarity of a voice that is at once "faint full" (10) and *fateful*. "[T]rue faint" occurs in a passage where the hearer's assumptions about the voice and his surroundings come under attack: ". . . with what right affirm of a faint sound that it is less a faint made fainter by farness and not *a true faint* near at hand?" (21, my italics). The *OED* gives "Faint," nominally used, as an obsolete form of "faintness."

So a *true faint* would be something essentially faint rather than apparently or relatively so. But a *true feint* is a genuine evasion, a sincere sleight.

In what follows, *Company*'s true feints are not read as cynical offerings made for tactical gain. Nor do they serve a more general claim about authenticity, which would hold that an author's "honesty" can be gauged by their refusal of heartfelt avowal, by their resistance to inner truths and unified subjects.[5] Instead, I take them as features of a formal integrity by which emotional sincerity might be deduced. This involves, firstly, considering Beckett's post-war career as a novelist of voice. And not just of voice, but of a confessional voice that disables the buffetings of character, plot, and self-dramatization. A correlation is drawn between Beckett's Protestant poetics (a poetics of interiority, self-accusation, and solitude) and the lesser-known practice of *exagoreusis*, a confessional mode whereby a penitent verbalizes his thought without recourse to thematizing arrangement. From here, I proceed to specific examples of the true feint, instances where the foreclosure of company opens onto the experience of loneliness. *Company*'s sincerity is therefore not found in any "congruence between avowal and actual feeling," as Lionel Trilling's seminal definition goes (2). Rather, it emerges as something inferential: that which remains when the possibility of company is subtracted from the desire for it.

A *VOICE* COMES TO ONE: BECKETT'S EXAGOREUSIS

Approaching a moment of crisis, the third-person voice of *Company* asks whether the merest hint of emotion might make the hearer "more companionable if not downright human" (17). Knowing this to be "Delicate ground," however, the voice issues a caveat: any such addition must occur "Without loss of character" (17). The irony behind the phrase splits in two. It prompts a mirthless chuckle at the idea that the text contains a character in the usual sense, or that further reduction in characterhood is possible. But then "character" designates not just a fictively constructed person but also the stuff of moral fiber. For the voice, tinged by authorial investment, the balancing act thus involves introducing trace amounts of the recognizably human without compromising the text's integrity as a ruthless vocalization of solitude and suffering, of aloneness unto loneliness.

The doubled meaning behind "character" is a useful starting point for considering those formal and theological elements that open Beckett up as a "sincere" novelist, namely his preoccupation with voice over character and the complex confessional apparatus that subtends this preoccupation. Before proceeding to these features, I acknowledge that the very pinching of "sincerity" betrays a squeamishness about treating it seriously in the context of modernism, where it was often used to brand the aesthetically naïve, out-of-touch, or second-rate.[6] This is not to mention its awkward attachment to one such as Beckett, an author known for ironized self-replications and "velleities of self-diffusion" (Beckett, *Letters 1* 188). A third hurdle is that sincerity seems simply ill-fitted to the novel. In his compendious *Sincerity and Literature*, Henri Peyre remarks that the

"novel is doubtless, next to the drama, the literary genre to which the notion of sincerity might appear the most alien" (161). A point is made here about inherent generic affordances. Though Peyre does not elaborate on his claim, he implies that lyric poetry is the literary mode least prohibitive to expressions of sincerity.[7] Drama stands at the other extreme, thwarting any search to find simple congruence between Shakespeare and Hamlet, Fugard and Boesman, Beckett and Winnie. The novel is similarly prevented from an easy accommodation of sincerity. Character has long served the form as an instrument for the exposure of illusion rather than the expression of honesty. While both "Quixotic" and "Bovarystic" are strongly associated with an *authentic* literary practice of representing individuals' capacity for self-delusion, neither offers a direct link to the sincere selves of Cervantes or Flaubert. Under modernism's rubric of impersonality, such a link becomes truly faint.

What permits a tentative tracing of sincerity in Beckett's case, I argue, is that he is a novelist not of character but of voice, perhaps *the* novelist of voice.[8] This is not to say that the voice is Beckett's own, but that his fiction is thematically concerned with voices, and that voice is the source of its dynamism. As the significance of voice increases from *Molloy* onwards, there is a commensurate loss of character in the first sense mentioned above. For this reason, the fiction's primary speakers may be thought of as *anagonists*. The term, proposed by Timothy Bewes, signals a character marked by narratological passivity and blankness. While a protagonist not only acts but serves as a type of structuring device in whom and through whom plot takes shape, an anagonist's experiences and feelings "would not have any organizing function with respect to the narrative" (Bewes 307). This seems an apt description of the "one" to whom narrative happens in *Company*, the one who lies on his back in the dark and has stories wash over him unbidden.

In broader terms, this lack of narrative organization also typifies voices that insist on the honesty of their disclosure. "I will express everything I feel," writes Rousseau, "as I feel it, as I see it, without affectation, without constraint, without being upset by the resulting medley" (qtd. in Coetzee 268). Were it not for the irony directed at another touchstone of sincerity, one might be tempted to see Molloy pursuing a similarly messy directness: "It is in the tranquility of decomposition that I remember the long confused emotion which was my life" (Beckett, *Molloy* 21). But both Rousseau's confessions and Wordsworth's poetic procedures come under suspicion not least because they merely approximate the immediacy of unadulterated language.[9] The voices of Beckett's anagonists, by contrast, are a medium for expression without selection, arrangement or agency. If such deprivations do not necessarily bring about sincerity, they may prevent its opposite. The Unnamable, for example, dispossessed of the means to dissemble, can only "transmit [his] words as received, by the ear, or roared through a trumpet into the arsehole, in all their purity, and in the same order, as far as possible" (*Unnamable* 343).

The correlation between unthematized speech and its "purity" (a word etymologically tied to sincerity) would seem more closely aligned with Emmanuel

Levinas's ideal of ethical sincerity—*saying*. According to Levinas, *saying* is a mode through which "subjectivity [might] signify unreservedly" (143).[10] Whereas the *said* secures itself in explanation, *saying* exposes itself "without excuses, evasions, or alibis, delivering itself without saying anything said" (143). The *said*, one might say, culminates in the clear outlines of character; *saying*, on the other hand, through its ceaseless commitment to passivity and vulnerability, brings about a positive loss of character. Suggestive as this frame might be, it too has little traction in the world of Beckett's "moribunds." For one thing, their saying and vulnerability are often the product of coercion, not the index of a freely pursued ethic. A second problem is that Levinas's *saying* is a secular address to Others; man, as it were, speaking to men. But Beckett's voices turn sharply inward via a pronounced if perverted religious infrastructure. They enact their self-exposure before and to themselves, though never entirely beyond the confines of the confessional.

A long history connects sincerity and confession—that religious practice by which hidden truths are made known and character is revealed. However, it is beyond this essay's scope to add to this history other than by situating Beckett's unthematized vocalizations in relation to two antithetical traditions: one that emphasizes the spoken and communal nature of confession; and another that favors writing as a means for self-scrutiny and self-accusation. Reflecting on the first of these traditions in a wonderfully erudite essay, John Martin demonstrates the significance of the "proper interplay between self and one's words" (1327) in medieval ecclesiastical contexts. He explains that ideals such as *concordia*, *harmonia*, and *consonantia* (forerunners of sincerity) signaled not only an individual's unity of heart and voice, but also a more enveloping communion with God. Thomas à Kempis, one of Beckett's most enduring interlocutors, therefore advocates a "Doctrine of Truth" that would transcend the merely personal: "The more a man is united within himself, and interiorly simple, so much the more and deeper things doth he understand without labour, for he receiveth understanding from on high" (5). To enable such celestial oneness, confession depends on community. The sinner gives a personal accounting of their sins before a confessor and mediates their confession through Psalms, liturgy, or other holy scripture, since the process of purification aspires to a greater cosmological harmony: not to thine own self, but to thy God be true.

The Reformation inaugurated the second tradition, which fundamentally changed confession and prepares the ground for sincerity as a modern virtue. Penitents now had to reveal an inner truth that would prioritize not the potential for divine union but its impossibility. And, stripped of communal protocols and the council of a spiritual superior, they had to bear and confess their sins alone—*to* and *against* themselves.[11] This dynamic is hardly unfamiliar to Beckett's anagonists who abide under the Calvinist-inspired Geulingian imperatives of *inspectio sui* (self-scrutiny) and *despicio sui* (self-despising).[12] Nor is it unknown that Beckett pursued a poetics of solitude and interiority, conceiving of himself not only as a "dirty low-church P[rotestant]" (*Letters 1* 134) but also as one administering his

own last rites, "bending over me in my old dying-bed where I found me early and the last words unending" (*Letters 3* 43).[13]

What warrants a closer look, though, is Beckett's preference for the mimesis of verbal confession over the literary mode most closely allied with early modern penance: the diary. Though not exclusively Protestant, as Trilling grants, the autobiographical genre—whether diary, apology, and memoir—is "predominantly so" (23), particularly as it tends to contract religious experience and personal feeling, the former giving sanction to the latter. This contraction "enforces upon the reader the conclusion that the writer cannot in any respect be false to any man because he has been true to himself, as he was and is" (Trilling 23). But the irony of such inner truth-telling is that it is outward facing. The very need to record what you feel and think underlines the desire to be read and understood, which in turn requires committing yourself to the *said*. And so, despite its claims to sincerity or perhaps because of it, the diary has been viewed with extreme suspicion.[14]

This suspicion peaks in the twentieth century. John Bolin regards Sartre and Gide as the most committed adversaries of Protestant autobiography, since their "ironic fictions represent powerful counters to the religious journal's faith in a sincere or pure language of the heart, and the integral self this language might reveal" (139). Whether Beckett belongs to this anti-tradition, as Bolin suggests, is less certain. It is true that the novels "trouble the boundaries between autographic writing—which is traditionally inspired by a drive towards sincerity—and its ostensible opposite: fiction, and specifically, the modern novel" (Bolin 127). But to see Beckett's process as continuous with that of Sartre or Gide is to overlook his sustained representation of verbal rather than written exposure. Even a novel like *Molloy*, freighted with written pensums, bears witness to the overriding compulsions of voice: "I have spoken of a voice telling me things. . . . It told me to write the report" (170). Later on, writing as a means of self-disclosure becomes expressly anathema. In *How It Is*, the very thought of setting down one's sincere emotions constitutes a forlorn hope: the anagonist is "forbidden" from keeping a "little private book . . . all my own" where he might record "the heart's outpourings" (72).

Given this preference for verbal confession, the fiction's voicings find a closer parallel in the practice of *exagoreusis*. Michel Foucault uses this term in the seminars and writings that make up his final and incomplete project: the "technology" or hermeneutics of the self. What animates the project is a concern with how subjectivity defines itself through "techniques of verbalization" (Foucault, "Technologies" 48). Under modernity, such techniques are affirmative and constituting—modes of disclosure in which truth-saying and self-saying coincide. In pre-modern practice, however, the techniques are marshalled for the purpose of self-renunciation, of saying "not I." Exagoreusis is one such technique.[15] Foucault traces it to a monastic Christian tradition of the fourth Century that required monks to "enunciat[e] . . . the movements of [their] thought" to a spiritual superior (*Confessions* 291). The key word here is "thought," since exagoreusis mandates a spontaneous and relentless verbalization of whatever passes in the monk's mind, whether sinful or not. The result is a rigorous but undifferentiating truth-telling

that resists the occlusions and the affirmations that might be brought on by categorization, narrativization, or even self-condemnation. Foucault explains:

> Self-renunciation thus takes a very particular form: it's a matter of focusing a continuous attention, as detailed and deep as possible, on oneself. Not, however, in order to know what one is at one's core, *not in order to extract the authentic, primitive, and pure form of a subjectivity*, but in order to discern the deceptions of the Evil One in the deepest mysteries of the soul, and consequently to refuse to participate through one's will in all the movements that are just so many temptations, and finally, in order to abandon all personal volition in favor of God's wishes and the lessons of one's director. (*Confessions*, 293; my emphasis)

This description could be glossed by any number of tortured self-reflections in Beckett's work. Anagonists make their confessions endlessly ("it is one of the features of this penance that I may not pass over what is over and straightway come to the heart of the matter" [*Molloy* 127]); under direction bordering on duress ("you must think of [mortifying memories] for a while, a good while, every day several times a day. . . . That's an order" [*Complete Short* 46–7]); and to the detriment of autonomy ("I expiate vilely, like a pig, dumb, uncomprehending, possessed of no utterance but theirs" [*Unnamable* 362]).

Subtracting only the pursuit of God's will, then, the voices of Beckett's fiction perform a post-Protestant, nearly-secular exagoreusis. They verbalize the movements of their thought without organization but do so in unremitting self-relation. The former aspect, as I have suggested, disables the arrangement and selection that would make acts of deception possible. In its turn, the accuser/accused dynamic reinforces not only a Protestant interiority, but also what Max Weber saw as its defining emotion: "an unprecedented inner loneliness" (60). Through this conjunction, Beckett might be said not only to escape the "trap of the diary" (insincerity) but to approach that ecumenical type of fiction in which Maurice Blanchot glimpsed the possibility of modernist sincerity: "We must rather return to a cumbersome jumble of Protestantism, Catholicism, and Romanticism so that writers, setting off in search of themselves in this false dialogue, can try to give form and language to what cannot speak in them" (186).

A VOICE COMES TO *ONE*: THE CERTAINTY OF SOLITUDE

I have argued that both the use of voice and a preoccupation with religious confession make possible a truth-directedness in Beckett's post-war novels. Populated as it is by a solitary "one" who exerts no influence over the narrative organization yet submits to a secular type of exagoreusis, *Company* would seem to extend the project. But what it lacks is the sense of sin—however doubtful, faint, or unearned—that confounds the earlier anagonists and spurs them to atonement.[16] To be sure, there are memories that plague *Company*'s hearer and that impute questionable behavior. But they are governed not by inexpungible feelings so much as a need to create company. This not to say that the text is without the theological hangovers

of old, but that these go from being faint truths to being true feints. By the former, I mean notions of an all-seeing "intelligence" (*How* 120) or an "Omniomni, all-unfuckable" entity (*Mercier* 17)—notions that are largely in doubt and even ridiculed but cannot definitively be ruled out. By the latter, true feints, I mean that these notions are converted into mere motifs stripped of the capacity to signify even a disbelieved godly presence.

To recognize this change is to understand that *Company* distinguishes itself in treating a very un-Beckettian theme: certainty. The entire corpus is marked by doubts and second-guesses, by questions that are never answered. From the early writing that offers a dubious trinity of theological virtues ("Doubt, Despair and Scrounging" [*More* 43]) to the mature work inflected by ontological confusion ("Where now? Who now? What now?" [*Unnamable* 285]), uncertainty is pervasive. Very often this uncertainty centers on the "all-important question" of presences, whether indeed there are "other inhabitants here with me" (*How* 9). But in *Company*, certainty and solitude take root together. The would-be echoes of other works, the half-remembered liturgies, the affective disorientation and the twisted clichés—these are, as I will show, among the true feints that both delay and deepen the anagonist's excruciating sense of solitude. They are *true* to the extent they constitute the anagonist's unthematized and immediate thoughts, the laying bare of a desire to create company. They are *feints* in that this desire is authorially insured against realization, shown up as hope against hope.

Consider the text's most unequivocal assertion that a single entity is the source of both speech and hearing:

> 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. Himself he devises too for company. Leave it at that. Confusion too is company up to a point. *Better hope deferred than none*. Up to a point. Till the heart starts to sicken. Company too up to a point. Better a sick heart than none. Till it starts to break. So speaking of himself he concludes for the time being, For the time being leave it at that. (16; emphasis added)

Apart from calling the bluff on other presences, the passage flags a willful courting of confusion that would briefly allow the possibility of company. It is perhaps not surprising to find this confusion elided with hope, which is not only a theological virtue but an affirmative orientation towards an unknown future—a future which might hold a society of our likeness. But hope may also be, as Terry Eagleton remarks, "a fetishism of the future, one that reduces the past to so much prologue and the present to mere empty expectancy" (44). Beckett's sly self-reference to Vladimir's broken recollection of Proverbs 13:12 ("Hope deferred maketh the heart sick"; see *Complete* 12) invites into the frame a work that is structurally and thematically blessed by uncertainty. Even though Vladimir's quotation signals the frustration of their endless waiting, he and Estragon are spared the shattering knowledge that Godot will not come. But the hearer of *Company* is not so lucky,

suffering as he does a deferral of hope to the point where "heart starts to break" and no change is imaginable.

The unchanging, unquestionable nature of the anagonist's solitude is reinforced by an allusion that has to my knowledge gone unnoticed—the Gloria Patri or Lesser Doxology: "Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen." Beckett had already incorporated the liturgical snatching as part of Winnie's morning routine in *Happy Days*: "For Jesus Christ sake Amen. . . . World without end Amen" (*Complete* 138). Like her other half-remembered quotations, Winnie's Gloria is emptied of referential force; it belongs to the realm of deadening habit rather than the world of living prayer. Nevertheless, Beckett stops short of performing the effacement we find in *Company*, where he lessens the doxology even further by turning out two atheological renderings: "As then there was no then so there is none now" (13); "All at once over and in train and to come" (21). Erasing any mention of the triune God—let alone any hint of praise—the first reformulation enforces the solitude of the anagonist's situation, while the second asserts its unchangeability or, better, "incontrovertibility" (3). Such prohibitive certainty—coupled with ironic religious sanction—inflects the voice that decrees the creation of company to be both impossible and illicit: "You cannot. You shall not" (4).

Certitude also exacts its vengeance at the level of affect. I have alluded to the voice treading "delicate ground" when it thinks of introducing emotion for the sake of companionability. The same ground is already approached and evaded in an earlier mention of embarrassment and uncertainty's "kindling." Due to its social, company-conditioned nature, embarrassment cannot be countenanced without a "loss of character" or a reduction in textual integrity. It is for this reason that a certain "uncertainty" (4) is maintained by the voice. The anagonist is conflicted at this early stage by a self-contradictory impulse: to be sure of his solitude and to hope against it. He resents not being told "you are alone on your back in the dark" (4), since the possibility of others isn't expressly cancelled and therefore leaves him vulnerable to "faint uncertainty and embarrassment" (4). But the next paragraph transmutes the frustration into desire: "Were [the voice] only to kindle in his mind the state of faint uncertainty and embarrassment mentioned above" (5). The abrupt switch to a forlorn subjunctive casts doubt on the preceding claims to uncertainty. If anything, the anagonist betrays a desperation to remain in the dark, figuratively speaking.

And it is in figurative speech—via Beckett's tweaked clichés about doubt and hope—that this desperation is made painfully clear. A conspicuous example occurs when the anagonist for a third time experiences "Vague distress at the vague thought of his perhaps overhearing a confidence," only to have his "*Doubts gradually dashed* as voice from questing far and wide closes in upon him" (29; emphasis added). Idiomatically, one would expect hopes to be dashed, the conjunction of a positive feeling with its violent destruction. An even worse fate is to have doubt substitute for hope, and then to have it dashed. This is exactly

what happens when the voice, "reason-ridden" (21), applies a merciless Cartesian hammer to any inkling of other minds and the emotion that might attend such a thought.

Another cliché involving hope's negation stands in telling relation to one of the homophones mentioned above: "A faint voice at loudest. It slowly ebbs till almost out of hearing. Then slowly back to *faint full*. At each slow ebb *hope slowly dawns that it is dying*. He must know it will flow again. And yet at each slow ebb hope slowly dawns that it is dying" (10; emphasis added). Realization might dawn upon one, understanding and distinctions too. Drawing as it does on a metaphor of increasing light, the usual expressions appeal to sight and the mind, but not to the heart. If any emotion at all is involved in the process, it is the affective chill that attends the grasping of an unpleasant and irrefutable fact: "He must know [the voice] will flow again." And if we are tempted here to hope against hope with the anagonist—to read this "must" merely as the presumed certainty of the "cankerous" (4) voice that suppresses a weakening "surely"—the text urges us to consider the thwarted cliché in tandem with the homophonic play. For the voice keeps coming back to its fullest faintness—fatedly and fatefully so.

Beckett is careful, however, not to introduce anything that might suggest the anagonist is subject to outside ordination, which is why "fateful" remains only faintly heard and why a theologically loaded word like "judgement" (10, 13) is used in relation to the anagonist's own cognitive procedures. On a grander scale, this also explains why so many of the religious and literary allusions are wiped of any hint of transcendental company, even as they gesture towards it:

> Why crawl at all? Why not just lie in the dark with closed eyes and give up? Give up all. Have done with all. With bootless crawl and figments comfortless. But if on occasion so disheartened it is seldom for long. For little by little as he lies the craving for company revives. In which to escape from his own. (36)

Here, the forlorn feeling, embodied in a "bootless crawl," calls to mind Shakespeare's "Sonnet 29"—another overlooked debt as far as I know. In the sonnet, the speaker finds himself disgraced, shunned by society and even by "deaf heaven" to whom he raises "bootless cries" (l. 3). That Beckett intends the parallel is sounded in the partial echo, which further sounds within a perfect iambic pentameter: "With **boot**less **crawl** and **fig**ments **com**fort**less**." The passage also follows this English sonnet's Petrarchan curve of hope. "But if on occasion so disheartened it is seldom for long" seems almost to offer a one-line summary of Shakespeare's poem, which opens with a "When" (a temporal marker of temporariness) that is dwarfed by an implied "then": "Haply I think on thee" (l. 9). What alleviates the poet-speaker's feelings of disgrace and isolation isn't the lover's actual presence but simply the thought of it. He, like Beckett's anagonist, relies on a figment of the imagination, a projection of company. But the sonnet is meant to be an ill-fitting glove. Just as there is no hope of embarrassment or uncertainty in *Company*, so there is no hope of disgrace, since that would "fortiori" (41) imply a society of others. Nor, again, is there any hint of heaven, "deaf" or

otherwise. Granted, the "bootless crawl" figures among the postures of penance (like the "repent amble" mentioned above) contemplated by the anagonist. But could there be a type of movement less suited to repentance than ambling? The aim, of course, is not to signal contrition but to be "diverting" (33).

Diverting, but not a diversion. The function of *Company*'s defunct yet persistent religious infrastructure might be explained by the light of a comparable modernist work: Kafka's *In the Penal Colony*. Ben Robinson argues convincingly that Kafka's novella dramatizes the "decomposition" of religious guilt within a "post-moral landscape" (102). This decomposition explains why the officer in charge of the elaborate torturing device finds himself in a state of "embarrassment" (Robinson 102): his function is to mete out gruesome punishment in a world that has outgrown the religious guilt that would justify such punishment. While Kafka has recourse to a symbol for the remainder of an obsolete yet awkwardly persisting religious infrastructure, Beckett's method is to show how the scaffolding remains only linguistically intact. This has always been so for his lapsed yet never-liberated confessants whose expression is stained by what is no longer believed.

Where *Company* offers a new turning, as I have suggested, is in its utter certainty of solitude—religious, existential, or other. The anagonists of earlier works all abide in a state of doubt as to whether suffering is cruelly inflicted from above. There are denials, protestations and abundant curses, but never is the possibility of some Other completely erased. Even a text like *How It Is*, comparable to *Company* in its voice-hearings and darkness, keeps alive the possibility that the tortures enacted there are done at the behest of an omniscient "love" (*How* 120). But *Company* empties out this possibility, driving its thematic and aesthetic solitude home with pointed consistency. Or, put in terms discussed earlier, Beckett introduces echoes of other works without letting his text suffer a loss of character, of formal integrity. For this reason, *Waiting for Godot* and *Happy Days* are circuitously invited into the frame, much like we are invited by the initial use of "one." We mark these presences only once we have identified the shared biblical or liturgical phrases, which, in their turn, are pared down to the precise point at which they might reinforce the thematic preoccupation with certainty, unchangeability, and solitude without betraying the aesthetic "purity." Company is denied not by sleight of hand, then, but via true feint.

A VOICE COMES TO ALL?

If this seems like textbook disingenuousness or tired postmodern play, it is worth recalling that modernism's polemicists tended to equate sincerity not with simple or direct expression but with the honest use of technique. Ezra Pound identified fidelity to form as the means by which an inner faithfulness is made possible ("technique is the only gauge and test of a man's lasting sincerity" [34]), while Eliot saw artistic self-consciousness as something at once modern and sincere, something "cleansing and purifying" (218). For his part, Beckett owned—in the

same breath as his low-church Protestantism—to being "concerned with integrity in a surplice . . . the integrity of the eyelids coming down before the brain knows of grit in the wind" (*Letters 1* 134). Gnomic as this might be, Beckett seems to suggest that an art that remains true to its processes can bring about reactions that are inevitable, that need not be stated.

What this means in the context of *Company* is that the anagonist's loneliness occurs in response to the textual deprivations, automatic and unregistered as an eye closing upon a flaying wind. His attempts to create company are feints insofar as the feint is a disingenuous attempt to achieve the impossible: "Huddled thus you find yourself imagining you are not alone while knowing full well that nothing has occurred to make this possible" (40–1). But the feint is "true" in that it is an index of the desperation and, indeed, sincerity with which he is made to feel his solitude and verbalize the means by which he would mitigate it. Even if insisting that sincerity's measure is the "congruence between avowal and actual feeling," one need only consider the French text's last word, "*seul*" (*Compagnie* 88). This translates as alone, yes, but also as lonely.

The question remains: why does *Company* succeed in inviting company? Why does it lure readers beyond the very skepticism that late modernism and Beckett himself teaches? A critical detour offers factors such the return to English, the text's biographical reworkings, its limpid expression. Then there are the conditions I've drawn out for a mode of veridiction or truth-saying: the text's continual verbalization and its anagonist's blankness or, perhaps better, defenselessness. But still a more general answer might be ventured: that literature is essentially companionable, regardless of its mimetic ideals. "One immediate challenge for artistic realization of loneliness," writes Christopher Ricks, "comes from the fact that, whatever else art may or may not be, art always constitutes company" (262). This suggests that we cannot help but be drawn in by the feints and decoys, by the half-heard allusions that enlist the echo chamber of our mind by which the faintest resonances are not only fully realized but made possible in the first place.

This also is to say, with Blanchot, that *Company* is a sincerely "false dialogue." By reworking "scenes of the past," Beckett seems to set off in search of himself, though hardly in Romantic fashion. By extending the project of unthematized yet inward-turning exagoreusis, he brings into view something not wholly unlike a trans-traditional confessionalism. And by refusing the narrative comforts of saying "I" while inaugurating a self-estranging mode of expression, he gives shape to the feeling that his anagonist cannot avow but seems to betray through every other gesture: his loneliness. In a special sense, then, *Company* is "false." It doesn't offer equivalence between the thing said and the thing felt but instead invites us to infer a relation between form and feeling, between the poetics of solitude that it so ruthlessly pursues and the emotion that results from it. *Company* is therefore also a dialogue. Leaving the door open to readerly acts of completion, it projects a voice that comes to one and to all.

Notes

1. This possibility of identification with the speaking voice—in the dark—was achieved during a 2017 dramatic production of *Company* at Durham University. Audience members were invited to get into a comfortable, duvet-covered bed before the lights dimmed and a speaking voice came to one and all.

2. Others have also commented on this ambiguity. See, for instance, Tubridy 181–2 as well as Bernini 76–7.

3. In this it resembles what H. Porter Abbott (following Mitchell Marcus) calls a "garden-path sentence" (*Real Mysteries* 67–8).

4. "Autography" is H. Porter Abbott's well-known designation for Beckett's particular form of self-writing, which evinces "extreme vulnerability," and which reveals "an artist seeking to approach unmediated contact" (*Beckett Writing* 21).

5. In "Recent Irish Poetry," Beckett praises those artists who have registered the "breakdown of the object," which for all intents and purposes "comes to the same thing" as the breakdown of the object: "the rupture of the lines of communication" (*Disjecta* 70). Such a rupture would naturally hinder "congruence between avowal and actual feeling" (Trilling 2).

6. As difficulty and indirectness were valorized as aesthetic virtues, simplicity and sincerity suffered commensurate depreciation. For a compelling account of this relation, see Leonard Diepeveen's *The Difficulties of Modernism*. See also De Villiers 58–71.

7. This, of course, is an oversimplification. As Jonathan Culler explains, modern criticism became "increasingly cognizant of the problems of treating lyric as the direct and sincere expression of the experience and affect of the poet" (109).

8. Beckett has also been claimed as the novelist of the image. For an account of the antimoniacal relation between voice and image under the rubric of the "sincerity paradox," see Rose 101–38.

9. J.M. Coetzee, for one, thinks the "immediacy" of Rousseau's language fails as a "guarantee of the truth of the past it recounts" since autobiography necessarily implies a "reflective" and therefore insincere remove (268).

10. Levinas addresses the same opposition in an interview with Richard Kearney and makes a more plainspoken claim about *saying*'s importance for sincerity: "Saying is what makes the self-exposure of sincerity possible; it is a way of giving everything, of not keeping anything for oneself" (qtd. in Kearney 65).

11. For a fuller account of the Protestant journal, see William Paden's excellent article.

12. This dynamic is obvious in the Unnamable's self-accusations: "a dying voice accusing me, accusing me . . . it speaks of my sins . . . it says it's mine, it says that I repent" (Beckett, *Unnamable* 404). For Calvinism's influence on Beckett via Geulincx, see Pecora 27–55.

13. For a fine account of Beckett's "post-Protestant poetics," see Sinead Mooney.

14. Coetzee claims that "insincerity and self-deception are inherent in the diary form and in confessional forms in general" (259).

15. Exomologesis (an act of dramatized penance) is its counterpart.

16. See, for instance, *Malone Dies*: "And without knowing exactly what his sin was he felt full well that living was not a sufficient atonement for it or that this atonement was in itself a sin, calling for more atonement, and so on, as if there could be anything but life, for the living" (233).

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