Samuel Beckett, *Company*

"Devised deviser devising it all for company"

*Company* seems to me Janus-faced, and in the sequence of texts explored here it also faces both ways. On the one hand, its affinities with *Thru* are striking. Like *Thru*, it subverts representation by a reversibility of the hierarchy between narrators and objects of narration, and the sentence that sums up this reversibility in *Thru*—"Whoever you invented invented you too"—has a close parallel in *Company*: "Devised deviser devising it all for company" (46). 1 Similarly, the "disembodied voices" of *Thru* seem to find an echo in *Company*’s pronominal enactment of a Not-I: "The first personal singular and a fortiori plural pronoun had never any place in your vocabulary" (61). On the other hand, as opposed to *Thru*, where the narration may not be associated with any originating consciousness, *Company* finally does come to rest in the mind of the one who is also the many, and the text becomes a dramatization not only of the act of narration but also of a mind narrating or devising. From this quasi-representational perspective, the reversibility of narrative levels enacts different manifestations of the same creative mind, different positions of the mind in relation to itself: the mind talking to itself...
about itself, occasionally perceiving itself as if from the outside, often imagining—even inventing—its own activity.

Thus perceived, the text becomes a fictional autobiography of a “fabling” subject who “speak[s] of himself as of another.” This feature (like the others just mentioned) is double. It points in the direction of a split, dissociated, fragmented subject, showing signs of the alienation dictated by language, even as it suggests a celebration of plurality and a realization that access to one’s own story may require a detour via another.

Janus-like, one face of Company looks toward Thru, toward postmodernism, with its game of reversible levels and disembodied voices, while the other is turned toward novels like Beloved where—in a kind of countermovement—the same strategies are used for a tentative retrieval of representation and rehumanization of subjectivity. This doubleness is at least partly enacted by a rupture between the linear unfolding of the text and the various retrospective insights it yields.

The text opens with what sounds like a typical statement made by an extradiegetic narrator: “A voice comes to one in the dark,” but this is immediately complicated by the following single-word exhortation: “Imagine.” Is “Imagine” a quotation of the voice’s appeal to the “one,” or is it addressed to the reader by the extradiegetic narrator? This ambiguity establishes from the start a parallel between the position of the one and the reader—two listeners, perhaps also (as it later transpires) two creators (or devisers). The distinction between the narrator’s and the voice’s language becomes a matter of pronouns. The narrator speaks about the one on his back in the third person: “This he can tell by the pressure on his hind parts” (7). The voice speaks to him in the second person: “You are on your back in the dark” (ibid.). An uncomfortable feeling of a split is created, but everything still conforms to the rules of grammar and verisimilitude.

The trouble begins on the next page, where “he” no longer seems to be the one on his back in the dark but another: “Use of
the second person marks the voice. That of the third that of the cankerous other” (8). Perhaps the “he” used by the extradiegetic narrator refers to someone else, not to the subject in the dark, a “cankerous other” who in turn conjures up the voice that addresses the “one” as “you.” In both cases, however, the extradiegetic narrator remains at the top of the pyramid of narrative instances. Not for long, though. The activity of devising (by whom?) is soon introduced, giving rise to a dizzying recursive logic that culminates in the possibility of reversing the pyramid: “In another dark or in the same another devising it all for company. . . . 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. . . . Who asks in the end, Who asks? . . . The unthinkable last of all. Unnamable. Last person. I. Quick leave him” (22, 24). So perhaps instead of an extradiegetic narrator who devises a subject on his back in the dark and a voice addressing him as “you,” or alternatively an extradiegetic narrator who devises “one” and a “cankerous other,” who in turn devises a voice that addresses the subject as “you,” perhaps “one” is the deviser of all the others. According to this hypothesis, the whole narrative may be invented and told by the “one”—who, apart from the fleeting moment quoted above, consistently avoids the first person—and it is he who devises the extradiegetic narrator, the voice, and the cankerous other. Self-reflexivity renders the confusing situation even more confusing, and this is true for all hypotheses concerning the deviser’s identity: “Deviser of the voice and of the hearer and of himself” (26). Whoever the deviser is, he is now said to devise not only the others but also himself.

As the text progresses, more narrative instances are introduced, but these can be fairly readily assimilated to those we are already acquainted with. Thus “hearer” (26, 31, etc.) is taken as a synonym for the one on his back in the dark, since he constantly listens to the voice. “Creature” (26) refers to the same “one,” and by implication the “creator,” who may be “in the same dark as
his creature or in another” (ibid.), is identical with the “he” or the “cankerous other” (see also 51–52). The introduction of the devised deviser, however, destabilizes these smooth equations: “Devised deviser devising it all for company” (46). If there is a devised deviser, there must also be a devising deviser, but who is who, and how can we know? A plausible hypothesis would be that the devising deviser is the extradietgetic narrator (some would prefer to say Beckett). He invents the devised deviser, about whom he speaks in the third person, and who is identical with the cankerous other and the creator. This creator in turn devises the creature who is also the hearer and the one on his back in the dark, who is addressed in the second person by a voice that the creator also invents. With an additional turn of the screw, the creator devises not only the others but also himself—all for company. Plausible indeed, except that earlier suggestions prevent this hypothesis from becoming definitive, and future developments, beginning with the gradual fusion of creator and creature and ending with the concluding lines, completely reverse it.

Analogies between the creator and the creature begin to suggest themselves with the image of the beeline. The creature’s walk is described in the “you” mode as follows: “You take the course you always take which is a beeline for the gap or ragged point in the quickset that forms the western fringe” (35–36; see also 38). This image is later transferred to the creator’s crawl, described in the “he” mode: “So he crawls the mute count In what he wills a beeline In what he hopes a beeline” (49). The analogies fuse as Company draws to a close. Segal (forthcoming) convincingly shows that, in the final section, the you mode modulates from addressing the subject on his back in the dark to addressing his fabling creator. As Segal points out, the creator’s physical position gradually merges with that of his creature. After his fall, the crawling creator lies prone, flat on his face. The final section, however, traces his gradual transition from a prone to a supine position: “Supine now you resume your fable where the act of ly-
Samuel Beckett, *Company*

... till the converse operation cuts it short again. . . . Till from the occasional relief it was supineness becomes habitual and finally the rule" (62). The uncanny process of fusion culminates in the concluding statement: "Till finally you hear how words are coming to an end. With every inane word a little nearer to the last. And how the fable too. The fable of one with you in the dark. The fable of one fabling with you in the dark. And how better in the end labour lost and silence. And you as you always were. Alone" (62–63). It now seems that the devising deviser is the creature, who is also the hearer and the one on his back in the dark. It is he who has invented the creator (the cankerous other) as a devised deviser, as well as the voice and himself. If so, narrator, narrated, and narratee are the same, and we are back with the “one” of the opening sentence. The text becomes a fictional autobiography that carefully avoids the first person. Why is the “I” eschewed, and why does the narrator speak “of himself as of another”?

As we have seen, narration in *Company* alternates between sections in the third person and sections in the second. The second-person sections are spoken by a voice and concern partly the present situation of the solitary subject (“You are on your back in the dark”) and partly memories, which the voice wishes to convince the one are his (annoying his mother by a comment about the distance of the sky, being encouraged by his father to jump into the water, unwittingly causing the death of a hedgehog, having an ambivalent relationship with a woman). The third-person sections are partly about the one on his back in the dark and partly about an amazingly cerebral creative process—with its hypotheses, hesitations, and reservations—of someone who “devise[s] it all for company” (8). The sections with “you” have an immediate, straightforward, sometimes lyrical effect, whereas those with “he” operate as a skeptical questioning of the authority of the other voice’s presentation of experience (Jewinski 1990, 147). The logic behind these shifts, as well as the omission they
signal, are a performance, not only a reflection of/upon the conjunction between a "subject without self" and the subjecting aspect of language. The absence of self is explicitly stated in a fleeting paragraph very early in *Company*: “Use of the second person marks the voice. That of the third that cankerous other. Could he speak to and of whom the voice speaks there would be a first. But he cannot. He shall not. You cannot. You shall not” (8). The subject, it transpires, cannot speak in the first person because the first person would be taken as a sign (or illusion?) of self, which is precisely what this subject does not have—he is, one might say, *un-être manqué*. As later, in *Beloved*, the non-crystallization of identity is manifested in a fragmentation of the subject, whose objective correlatives are a dismembering of the body, a dissociation from memories, and a fragmentation of the text. In *Company*, the subject is split into different ways of relating to himself. The body is reduced to a back, a hand, an eye, a knee, feet—all disconnected from each other—and the text is fragmented by the alternating pronominal sections.

Fragmentation also takes the form of a discontinuity between the subject’s present and his past. On this reading, which is not the only possible interpretation, the achievement of the subject’s personal integration is the aim of the deviser: “To have the hearer have a past and acknowledge it. You were born on an Easter Friday after long labour. Yes I remember” (34). By owning one’s memories and establishing continuity with the past, one can gain access to a voice and an I: “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” (16). But the subject is incapable, or unwilling, to own his memories, hence disclaiming the right to an I as well as to a voice that would speak instead of passively being spoken to and about by other voices. The activity of remembering is not only an act of integration, but also a creation of discontinuity: “Remembering is not simply re-
cuperative. It involves processes of cutting and editing. To remember is also to dismember” (Arthur 1987, 142).

The incapacity, or refusal, to claim ownership of himself may also explain the use of the third person as a dissociative evasion of responsibility: “He speaks of himself as of another. He says speaking of himself, He speaks of himself as of another” (26). In a similar rejection of the I, the “Unnamable” paradoxically says: “I shall not say I again, ever again, it’s too farcical. I shall put in its place, whenever I hear it, the third person, if I think of it. Anything to please them. It will make no difference. Where I am there is no one but me, who am not” (355). This passage suggests that being a subject without self is not only an existential predicament but also a consequence of language. “It’s the fault of the pronouns,” says the Unnamable (404), and indeed how can personal pronouns designate specific individuals when, by definition, they are applicable to all individuals (see also Thiher 1984, 132)? In Company, such an uncomfortable insight affects not only the use of “I,” but also that of “you” and “he,” shifters whose reference to the subject cannot be guaranteed: “He cannot but sometimes wonder if it is indeed to and of him the voice is speaking. May not there be another with him in the dark to and of whom the voice is speaking? Is he not perhaps overhearing a communication not intended for him?” (8–9). In more general terms, self-alienation is a necessary result of the subject’s entry into language, where “I” is always translated by something other than itself. “If the voice is not speaking to him 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” (11).

The splitting of the subject, enacted by the interplay of pronouns, is doubled, perhaps even parodied, by the use of initials, another substitute for naming. Evoking the divine fiat, the creator muses: “Let the hearer be named H. Aspirate. Haitch. You Haitch are on your back in the dark. And let him know his name” (31).
An initial, of course, is not exactly a name, but—in addition to evoking the sound of breathing, often referred to in the text—H is the first letter of both hearer and he, thus gaining a certain degree of substantiality. But this is only to be immediately dispelled: “Is it desirable? No. Would he gain thereby in companionability? No. Then let him not be named H. Let him be again as he was. The hearer. Unnamable. You” (32). But the game of letters does not stop here. A few pages later, “Feeling the need for company again he tells himself to call the hearer M at least. For readier reference. Himself some other character. W” (42-43). This time the initial confers an even greater substantiality (M = AM), but it also hints at the interchangeability of the two subjects, both by calling the other “AM” and by using two letters that visually mirror each other (M and W). Moreover, W = “double you” (and the hearer was constantly addressed as “you”), thus reinforcing the doppelgänger motif. And M brings to mind Malone and Molloy of the trilogy, intertextual references within the Beckett corpus, which—together with “the Unnamable” and the crawling creature of How It Is—may suggest an autobiographical dimension that is not confined to the fictional. In a similar vein, Booth says: “The masterstroke here, for me, is Beckett’s reiterated invitation to think about a struggling and suffering someone beyond or behind the three ‘characters,’ not just the ‘cankerous other’ who uses the third-person but the implied author himself or even the career-author: Samuel Beckett, telling us once again ‘how it is’” (1983, 453). In typical fashion, however, all this is soon undone: “Is there anything to add to this esquisse? His unnamability. Even M must go. So W reminds himself of his creature as so far created. W? But W too is creature. Figment” (45).

My intuition that the use of initials may be parodying the use of pronouns is based on the initials’ relatively exaggerated, cruder, less sophisticated nature. The game of initials lays bare the interplay of pronouns, with a characteristically double-edged effect, simultaneously undermining the seriousness of the latter and arming it against irony by dint of an inbuilt parody.
Up to now I have stressed the reductive, dehumanizing effect of the undoing of the traditional self. *Company*, however, is more complex. Even within the deconstructionist framework, this undoing can be seen as a celebration of plurality and freedom. What Carla Locatelli describes as the lack of coincidence of the self with himself gives rise to the plurality of the subject: “In this way, the narrative reflects a conception of the subject that is essentially ‘plural’ and not immediate, while narration also conveys the notion that this phenomenological ‘plurality’ would be obliterated in the figure of a singular pronoun” (1990, 160). One can see the lack of unity that defines the traditional self as a multiplicity of roles, characterizing a subject free from the traps of rigidifying conceptualizations in both language and philosophy. And the discontinuity between present and past can be interpreted as a liberation from a pseudo-sameness. Thus, what was earlier interpreted as the subject’s disowning of his past memories can be reconceived as an emphasis on the independence of separate periods or moments. When the subject is imagined as acknowledging his memories, he also insists on the pastness of the past, on its non-unity with the present: “One day! In the end. In the end you will utter again. Yes I remember. That was I. That was I then” (21; emphasis mine).

In this light, my earlier stress on the subject’s disowning of his past memories is open to question. What if these are not his memories at all, but stories the deviser invents and imposes on the subject? After all, the opening page of *Company* says: “To one on his back in the dark a voice tells of a past,” not specifying whose past. The deviser’s desire that the subject acknowledge the memory of his own birth (34) reinforces such a suspicion. How can anyone remember his or her own birth? Do not such memories always come from the other? Are they not—in fact—memories of the other?

Just as liberation from the chains of time may come at the expense of discontinuity, so can company become the other side of fragmentation. As long as there is unity, there is no company.
Otherness is a necessary condition for company, and when "one" is alone, otherness takes the form of otherness-to-self, namely, split, fragmentation, turning parts or aspects of the subject into separate entities. For example, "Little by little as he lies the craving for company revives. . . . The need to hear that voice again" (55), or "Might not the voice be improved? Made more companionable?" (34), or yet again: "If he were to utter after all? However feebly. What an addition to company that would be!" (21). Similar questions are asked about the hearer—"Might not the hearer be improved? Made more companionable if not downright human"—and, as we have already seen, about the initials considered as possible substitutes for both hearer and subject (32, 42).

In the same half-serious, half-ironic tone, parts of the body (e.g., the ear [34]) as well as physical postures (being prone or supine [26–27, 56]) and sensations (an "unscratchable itch" [55]; the smell of the creator [52]; or the sound of the crawl [50]) are said to be an addition to company. Emotional states, such as confusion (26), sickness of the heart (ibid.), and "a movement of sustained sorrow or desire or remorse" (45), also become sociable entities, as do the darkness (26–27) and some hypothetical creatures that would have been welcome in the empty room (a dead rat [27]; a fly [28]). Although not explicitly designated as company, intertextuality clearly functions as such, the voices of Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, and other past authors populating the text through many direct and indirect allusions (Brater 1983, 157–71; Pilling 1982, 127–31).

"In order to be company," says Beckett’s text about the one on his back in the dark, "he must display a certain mental activity" (9), and the main activity displayed is—circularly—one of "devising it all for company" (8, 24, 26, 27, 33, 43, 46, 60). The act of devising or creating others for the sake of company is reminiscent of Genesis 2:18: "It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helpmeet for him" (King James Version). The biblical "helpmeet" can be reformulated as "companion," and the nam-
ing of figment-companions by Beckett’s character recalls Adam’s naming of the creatures. In association with the intertextual-autobiographical allusions mentioned earlier, a possible analogy emerges between artistic creation and the creation of the world.

Yet *Company* is not only a self-reflexive text about fiction writing. It is also about Everyman, imagining a world, devising company, narrating his own story to himself by inventing others who both are and are not himself. This indirect way of gaining access to oneself is reminiscent of the acts of narration in both *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. In *Absalom, Absalom!* the construction of subjectivity passes through the other in two complementary ways, which I have already formulated semi-epigrammatically: You are what others say about you, and conversely, you are what you say (performatively) about others. In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, whether taken as V’s narration or as Sebastian’s, the subject gains access to his own story through another’s. In *Company* too, it is by telling about “others” that the subject gains access to his own story and his own subjectivity. Otherness is necessary not only for the constitution of subjectivity through narration but for the very existence of a narrative situation. Narration is impossible without a narratee (a “hearer”), and when one is alone, as in *Company*, it is the self-as-other that one addresses. Without company, even the company of projected figments, there is no narration. Therefore the realization that “you [are] as you always were / Alone” ends the text and ends the narration. But the converse is also true: without narration there is no company. In the fashion of *A Thousand and One Nights*, as long as there is storytelling, life and others exist. Once “you hear how the words are coming to an end. . . . And how the fable too,” company is over, and you are alone and expiring.
Toni Morrison, Beloved

story the novel has passed on. Many critics have noticed not only the contradiction but also the ambiguity of the recurrent sentence. “Pass on” can mean both transmit and ignore (pass over). It combines acceptance and rejection, an injunction to remember and a recommendation to forget (see Henderson 1990, 83; Ferguson 1991, 123–24; Wyatt 1993, 484; Perez-Torres 1993, 691; Homans 1994, 11). Phelan suggests that the two meanings of “it was not a story to pass on” not only contrast with each other, but together they form a contrast between stories and reality. Thus, it was not a story to pass on, (my emphasis) “but it was something else, a reality to be confronted” (1993, 720; Phelan’s emphasis). Like the implied opposition between story and reality, Beloved’s stubbornness is seen by Phelan as (among other things) a challenge on Morrison’s part to treat the narrative as a species of history: “not a story to pass on, but a person whose multiplicity transcends any story that can be told about her. And here the importance of the fiction comes back: her story stands in for the millions and millions of other slaves, whose lives and deaths, though not passed on in story, are just as deep, just as emotionally wrenching, just as important—as hers” (ibid., 723). This reading illuminates a double ambiguity, that of the recurrent sentence and that of the title character, relating both to the larger historical dimension. At the same time, it creates a polarity between story and reality, opposites that, in my opinion, the novel renders equivalent and subjects to the same ambivalence. Like the extradiegetic narrator, the characters are conflicted about the possibility and desirability of narration. Paul D’s locked tobacco tin, Denver’s self-defensive deafness, and Sethe’s and Baby Suggs’s tacit verdict that the past is unspeakable are only a few examples of the incapacity to tell (and hear) that characterizes repression. Counter-balancing this, however, are the need and the desire to tell, often equating life and (life) story. Sethe muses: “Her story was bearable because it was his as well—to tell, to refine and tell again” (99), and Paul D finally returns to Sethe because “He wants to put
his story next to hers” (273). The capacity to narrate against all odds is seen in this novel as a therapeutic—even if tentative—access to both self and reality.

No less important than the therapeutic need to narrate is the moral duty to tell, as the epigraph clearly implies:

I will call them my people
which were not my people;
and her beloved,
which was not beloved.
(Romans 9:25)\(^{26}\)

Without diminishing the difficulties attending the enterprise, *Beloved* ultimately affirms narration as both a therapeutic necessity and a moral imperative, a way of constituting a self and protecting a cruel reality against a comfortable amnesia. The novel becomes a complex re-engagement with representation and subjectivity, a claiming of the unclaimed, which, according to Ricoeur, is the *raison d’être* of all storytelling: “We tell stories because in the last analysis human lives need to and merit being narrated. This remark takes on its full force when we refer to the necessity to save the history of the defeated and the lost. The whole history of suffering cries out for vengeance and calls for narrative” (1985, 62).