

Fantasies of the Autobiographical Self: Thomas Bernhard, Raymond Federman, Samuel Beckett

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The recent increase of writings in the autobiographical mode seems to represent both a reaction to the so-called crisis of the novel and a possible artistic solution to the fragmentary nature of human experience. Yet at the same time the autobiographical turn reveals the paradox inherent in this form insofar as it reflects a nostalgia for stability and continuity as well as its constant denial in life. If conventional autobiographies could be regarded as the proper medium for the realistic representation of a self and for the narrative recovery of past events from the perspective of the present, contemporary autobiographical texts stress the illusory nature of such mythopoeic endeavours. Due to the breakdown of a clear demarcation between reality and fiction or reality and imagination, the traditional conception of the autobiographical genre has lost its degree of certainty and truth. Thus Frederick Exley admits in his autobiography, *A Fan's Notes*, that he has “drawn freely from the Imagination and adhered only loosely to the pattern of my [his] past life” and asks “to be judged as a writer of fantasy.”¹ This intrusion of fantasy into reality has equally affected the constitutive parts of autobiographical texts: the representation of a world, the recollection and narration of past experiences and the concept of the self. The recent autobiographical writings of Thomas Bernhard, Raymond Federman and Samuel Beckett elucidate the paradox of the autobiographical form, i.e., its nostalgia for and its denial of coherence, which correspond to the paradox of modern experience, the nostalgia for a lost presence.²

Although Bernhard, Federman and Beckett are known individually, it might be worthwhile to point out their interconnections, which eventually will permit us to speak of a common autobiographical trend in contemporary American and European fiction. For quite some time, the Austrian writer Thomas Bernhard has been considered the Beckett of the German language in terms of his despairingly skeptical world view and his stylistic idiosyncrasies. The French American fictionist Federman has documented his admiration for Beckett in critical studies of the master's fiction,³ in dedicating *Amer Eldorado*, the French version of his novel *Take It or Leave It*, to him, in invoking “sam” in the second line of *The Voice in the Closet*, and in taking the title of his latest novel, *The Twofold Vibration*, from a Beckett quotation. Federman's fiction has been autobiographical from the very beginning, but Bernhard and Beckett have tried to dissimulate their autobiographical references in the fiction of their plays and novels. Bernhard, who has just published a fiction called *Beton* whose artist protagonist resembles in many ways the author's own situations writes about the destructive and self-destructive nature of his life and world in post-war Austria. Beckett starts his career as a critic by turning to the two literary geniuses: Proust and Joyce.⁵ His interpretation of Proust's autobiographical magnum opus, *A la recherche du temps perdu*, showed his early concern for the relationship between memory and “that double-headed monster of damnation and salvation—Time”⁶ which has preoccupied him throughout his life and career. His first poem, *Whoroscope* (1930), is also an examination of time from Descartes's perspective. Descartes shows similar anxieties as Beckett by refusing “to tell his birth date so that no astrologer could cast his nativity and thus predict his death...”⁷ Beckett's first literary attempts represent fictionalizations of his time as a student and aspiring

writer. In the unpublished collection of stories, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, written in Paris in 1931-32, he invariably thematizes his early experiences in life: his relationship to his parents, his love of his cousin Peggy Sinclair in Kassel, his literary and professional ambitions. These autobiographical stories resemble Proust's and Joyce's search for an identity in *Recherche* and in *Stephen Hero* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. They also reflect Joyce's dictum "that a writer must first write of what he himself knows best."⁸ In her recent biography, Deirdre Bair interprets Beckett's classification of these stories as "immature and unworthy" and their ultimate rejection as "his way of dismissing blatant, undisguised autobiography."⁹ Beckett incorporated some of these stories in *More Pricks than Kicks* whose autobiographical nature offended friends and relatives. The Sinclair family especially was upset about "The Smeraldina's Billet Doux," a fictionalized letter from Peggy, because the author had not respected the memory of their daughter who had died of tuberculosis in 1933.¹⁰

According to Beckett's biographers almost all of his works have an autobiographical background, particularly those fictions and plays which deal with the miserable years of wanderings between Ireland and the Continent, the repeated abortive attempts to get published, his strained relationship with his mother, and the war years. So the first three tales of *Stories and Texts for Nothing* relate Beckett's final decision to leave Ireland and to live in France.¹¹ His first novel, *Murphy*, can be interpreted as a fictionalization of Beckett's mental disposition at a time when he underwent psychiatric treatment in London with Dr. Wilfred Ruprecht Bion who "believed strongly in the theories of Melanie Klein, especially projective identification and the interplay between the paranoid-schizoid and depressed positions."¹² Because of the unspecific nature of Beckett's characters, critics have been able to find autobiographical traces in most novels and plays. *Krapp's Last Tape*, however, represents one of the most autobiographical pieces with references to the death of the author's mother, his sweetheart in Germany and the discovery of his creative vein before leaving Ireland for good, and shows a particular interest in autobiographical form. The separation of Krapp's personality into his present self listening to the episodes of his past self, recorded on the day of his thirty-ninth birthday on a tape recorder, foreshadows Beckett's concern with different versions of the self and signals the reduction of human character to voice. Beckett explored this form of presentation systematically in a number of short plays written in the sixties and seventies. They seem to represent a dramatization of the fictional monologues of his novelistic characters such as Molloy, Malone and the Unnamable. Only with the recollective meditation, *Company*, does Beckett render the dramatic dissociation of one character into different voices in a prose narrative.

Beckett's and Bernhard's turn to autobiographical texts seems to coincide with the prevalence of the autobiographical mode in contemporary fictions which explore some aspects of the writer's self in a factual or fictional way and use narration as a form of recollection and presentation of earlier stages in life. This predilection for the autobiographical mode seems to reflect a common crisis in the writers' lives as well as in their fictional craft. Bernhard's six-volume recollection of his childhood and adolescence from his birth in 1931 to 1950 and of his friendship with Paul Wittgenstein from 1967 to 1979, and Beckett's autobiographical *Company* follow an impressive series of novels and plays. While their novels invariably portray the impact of destructive forces on and the resultant disintegration of fictive characters, their autobiographical texts attempt to stay—momentarily at least—the constant displacement of the self, a procedure which, however, is possible only by resorting to fantasy. At the same time this autobiographical mode represents

an attempt to overcome the impasse of their craft Insofar as these texts help to sustain and restructure fiction. In that sense autobiography comes to the aid of fiction and announces a new direction in life and literature. Beckett, Bernhard and Federman underwent similar developmental stages in their lives which allow us to compare their works. All three writers had a very rough time growing up. Both Beckett and Bernhard suffered in youth from their strained family bonds. Bernhard, whose mother was sent to Holland for the birth of her illegitimate child, did not know his father and did not get along with his mother, who blamed the boy for her miserable lot. He, therefore, turned to his understanding grandfather who supported his rebellious, anti-bourgeois attitudes. Beckett's love of his father tied to guilt feelings towards his mother and engendered their life-long love-hate relationship. Federman experienced violent political rallies with his father in Paris. All three authors lived through the turmoils of World War II, Beckett as an active member of the Résistance group Gloria.¹³ Both Beckett and Bernhard suffered from serious physical diseases and psycho-logical hardships which repeatedly brought them to the brink of death. The stabbing of Beckett in the streets of Paris, his operations for tumors on his jaw and for a lingering eye disease are paralleled by Bernhard's operations and treatment for tuberculosis and lung cancer. Since early childhood both have walked the thin borderline between life and death and have seriously considered suicide. Federman narrowly escaped the concentration camps and survived the war. All three of them managed to transform the frailty of their condition and their anxieties into art in self-chosen isolation and thus were able to survive. Indeed, survival, both as an artist and as a human being, seems to be the dominant concern of the three writers, and their texts express the need and desire for company as a stabilizing force in solitary existence.

The constant threats to survival become immediately obvious in Thomas Bernhard's autobiographical worlds. In a blend of fantasy and reality, typical of such recollective accounts, the reader is successively confronted with a young boy's predicament of growing up as an illegitimate and unwanted child who, rejected by his mother and isolated in school, finds solace in his grandfather (*Ein Kind*); the grotesque expedience of the bombing of Salzburg in 1944-45, their responsibility and cruelty of parents and educators, and the irrational mixture of Nazi fascism and Catholicism in a boarding school (*Die Ursache*); the world of workers and social outcasts in Salzburg, whose lives converge in a small grocery store (*Der Keliel*, the shocking conditions in a hospital where the doctors have given up the dying patients (*Der Atem*); finally the medical history of a case of tuberculosis: contraction, cure and relapse, in and out of a sanatorium (*Die Kälte*). While these five volumes cover Bernhard's childhood and adolescence, the most recent installment in the autobiographical mode, *Wittgensteins Neffe: Eine Freundschaft*, takes up the account of the disasters in his life in 1967 when he had a tumor removed from his lungs, and relates the very meaningful friendship with the insane Paul Wittgenstein, equally brilliant nephew of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, up until 1979. The biographical presentation of his friend's turmoils stemming from frequent spells of insanity, amplifies the autobiographical rendition of his own predicaments. All of these worlds represent extreme situations, crisis situations as it were, which objectively and subjectively blur the line between life and death and distort the protagonist's perception of reality to such an extent that he loses control over his own willpower and fantasizes about his suicide, in company with his suicide-prone fellow citizens in Salzburg (*U*, 78). This suicidal obsession recurs in the last three instalments of his autobiography (*Kä, Ki, WN*). The allied air raids and the resultant demolition and mutilation of human bodies reinforce the notion of a border-line existence, so that each time

the autobiographical self emerges alive from an air raid shelter he feels saved as if by “a miracle” (*U*, 67). The grotesque nature and pervasive madness of a world at war reappears during his apprenticeship as a salesclerk in a store in the Scherzhauserfeldsiedlung where low-income people, “*der Abschaum der Menschheit*,” (the scum of the earth, *Ke*, 115), vegetate in their animal-like existence with no prospects for a better future. This section of town is a son of “Vorhölle” (limbo). Similarly, the protagonist lives in a form of limbo, if not hell, during his experience of near-death in the hospital whose careless staff waits only for their patients’ deaths, or in the sanatorium which he enters with a minor case of lung disease and leaves infected with a severe case of tuberculosis. In each instance human life is reduced to a highly dehumanized form of existence. War, social milieu, environment and the institutions of society are nothing but means of human destruction; their purpose is the annihilation of mankind (cf. *U*, 27).

While the process of disintegration is an inevitable one in Bernhard’s novels and plays, he fights this destructive course of life in his autobiographical texts. First by his conscious decision to drop out of high school and by his option for an alternative form of education through experience, he avoids an anti-human education. This process of “Entziehung,” as the second volume is subtitled, is both a withdrawal from the adverse influences of society, resembling his novelistic characters’ behavior, and a deliberate programme of de-education, an attempt at unmaking his former experience. Second, at the age of seventeen, he makes a deliberate decision to live after he awakens from a prolonged coma in the hospital, and starts a new, a second life which is dedicated to the fantastic worlds of literature (*A*, 152f.) and his career as a writer. Literature, then, provides for him, in Philip Roth’s sense, a “passage-way from the imaginary that carries to seem real to the real that carries to seem imaginary, a continuum between the credible incredible and the incredible credible.”¹⁴

Contrary to Bernhard’s novelistic characters, whose isolation is a deliberate withdrawal from society with often suicidal intent, Bernhard’s persona in the autobiographical texts suffers from his isolation, and although he toys with the idea of suicide he rejects it decisively because of his “impudent curiosity” for the things to come (cf. *Kä*, 65). Instead of ending in despair as his characters do, Bernhard turns to writing as a form of therapy. As has been remarked, his monomaniacal rage for writing functions as a substitute for suicide.¹⁵ In this sense, the self-chosen place of the autobiographical mode, the point of real reference, is the act and the situation of writing, which alone can provide a sense of coherence. Thus Bernhard seems to reverse the developmental stages of his novelistic characters in his autobiographical fiction. His point of scriptural departure is the peculiarity of his environment (unstable home, school, grocery store, hospital, sanatorium), which would doom him as it actually dooms his characters to failure and destruction. Yet, in contradistinction to his characters, he decides to counter his condition and conjoins the rare moments of insight, born out of a sensibility heightened by severe illness, into a creative energy. This creative energy becomes the autobiographical impulse which transforms the fragments of experiences into a narrative continuum. The narrowness of space proves to be an open field, a playground for his imagination.

The conception of the text as an imaginary playground becomes increasingly important in Federman’s and Beckett’s autobiographical works, where the reality of the world is seemingly not an issue anymore. Their autobiographical texts are not so much representations of a world past and present, but texts on the problem of writing about the self, “pre-texts” in Federman’s

surfictional terminology. *Double or Nothing*, *Take it or Leave It*, *The Voice in the Closet*, and *The Twofold Vibration* are mostly playful variations on his autobiographical dilemma: the arrival of a young French Jew in the United States after World War II, as the only survivor of his family. Yet since the texts thematize the precarious situation of a contemporary writer, they focus on the perspective of discourse and gradually displace that of story. The central events of the narrative are present only as traces of their erasure. The first two texts sketch the Jewish past—persecution, concentration camps, extermination, and the American presence—in a fragmentary form; the most recent novel, *The Twofold Vibration*, projects these details of his past life into the future. On New Year's Eve of 1999, the protagonist called "the old man" is about to be shot onto a space colony as a punishment for dissenting citizens. Yet he is left behind as the only one of his group. So his survival in the past also determines his future. In *The Voice in the Closet* references to the Jewish past are—except for the mention of the "final solution" and of the star of David—glaringly absent. It is here that the writer's long-displaced voice comes to the fore after years of forced silence and emerges from the solitary confinement of a closet, deploring the loss of its family.

This situation resembles closely that of Beckett's voice in *Company*: "That then is the proposition. To one on his back in the dark a voice tells of a past. With occasional allusion 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 (7f.). This supine position in the dark has been one of Beckett's most important conditions from which—after an initial rejection of the dark element in and around him—he has derived his creative energy and sustaining life-force. As early as the unpublished *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, the protagonist Belacqua/Beckett "persists in his determination to 'womb-tomb' his mind, to withdraw into himself, free of all outside interference. He spends long hours in his bed, curled up alone in the dark, thinking about the best method to obtain nullity of being."¹⁶ While Beckett tries to fight off this darkness in his earlier years because it brings anxiety and is associated with ill feelings, he finally embraces the darkness as his proper source of imagination after his epiphanic vision on the beach in Dublin, which he describes in *Krapp's Last Tape*, more specifically rendered in this earlier version of the manuscript:

Intellectually a year of profound gloom and indigence until that memorable night in March, at the end of the pier, in the howling wind, never to be forgotten, when suddenly I saw the whole thing. The turning point at last. ...What I saw then was that the assumption I had been going on all my life, namely ... clear to me at last that the dark I have been fighting off all this time is in reality my most ... unshatterable association till my dying day of story and night with the light of understanding and...¹⁷

Darkness, therefore, becomes *enlightening* for Beckett. This ties in with his study of the work of Proust, who wrote from his darkened room on the Champs Élysées. "Lying in bed at dawn, the exact quality of the weather, temperature and visibility, is transmitted to him in terms of sound, in the chimes and the calls of the hawkers. Thus can be explained the primacy of instinctive perception-intuition-in the Proustian world."¹⁸ The enlightening quality of darkness also goes back to a remark made by C. G. Jung in his Tavistock Lectures from 5 September to 4 October,

1935, about a girl who ““had never been entirely born.”” Beckett recognized in this psychological dilemma an example of “his own womb fixation, arguing forcefully that all his behavior, from the simple inclination to stay in bed to his deep-seated need to pay frequent visits to his mother, were all aspects of an improper birth.”¹⁹ In that sense the immobile position in the dark resembles that of a newborn baby and implies the wish to return to the womb which rejoins him with the mother and thus breaks his isolation: “With all this darkness round me I feel less alone.”²⁰ In *Company*, the narrative voice proceeding from this position, dispels his Loneliness by recollecting glimpses of a past in a usually very unspecific form: his birth on the Day Christ died;²¹ episodes with his mother and father; a picnic; a love affair; juvenile guilt over the death of a hedgehog caused by his negligence. Thus reality is reduced to a totally private, extremely fragmentary world. Just as in *The Voice in the Closet*, so do discourse and imagination here take the place of the erased events, whose traces are, however, still visible. The fantastic nature of Bernhard’s reality is replaced by the reality of Federman’s and Beckett’s interior worlds consisting of fantastic imaginations about the self.

The different concepts of reality as fantastic realities or realistic fantasies derive from the temporal delay between an experiential situation and its textual representation. Hegel’s distinction between recollection and memory helps to clarify the temporal tension between past and present and the mental activities of the authorial self. This discussion occurs in his *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften* in connection with the theoretical mind, which consists of intuition, presentation and thinking. Presentation itself is subdivided into recollection (*Erinnerung*), imagination (*Einbildungskraft*) and memory (*Gedächtnis*),²² in a process of interiorization (*Er-inner-ung*), the sensory perception of intuition is transformed into a mental concept, which is stored in the unconscious of the mind as part of the intelligence. The interiorized content can be reactivated by combining the general and abstract substance of the former intuition with an adequate presentation in which the intelligence recognizes this recollected intuition as its own.²³ While recollection is basically a process of interiorization, in which the sensory aspects of sense impressions are deleted, memory is an exteriorizing activity of the mind. It is memory that externalizes the formerly found and mentally processed data as language, so that it can be refound in the text.²⁴ Imagination serves as a link between recollection and memory; it is this human faculty which Freud calls the phantasying activity of the mind.²⁵ As unconscious subject in a conscious structure it has a cognitive function and partakes equally in the realms of the pleasure principle and that of the reality principle; eventually it transforms the dynamic forces of the unconscious into language. Due to the structural affinity between fantasies and recollections, they become indistinguishable in the unconscious.²⁶ In trying to communicate these fantasies the writer has two options available: either he represents them indirectly by matching his present sensations with the stored mental concept and thus exteriorizes the fantasies in the text via memory, or he presents the realm of fantasy and interiorized images directly, displaying a spatial mental drama rather than a temporal narrative sequence. Bernhard chooses the first way, Beckett opts for the second, and Federman takes a middle position. Their differences in method become obvious in the different presentation and conception of the self.

Bernhard’s autobiographical texts combine recollection and memory as narration of past events from which emerges a self embattled in a grotesque and dehumanized world. The temporal gap between the past textual self and the present authorial self is taken for granted, because the

writer's aim is directed to the recovery of his past self and its potential reconciliation with the present self. Following Montaigne's example, who next to Pascal and Schopenhauer is Bernhard's main philosophical source, he intends to engage in a candid self-examination and self-depiction which he and Montaigne recognize as the most difficult, yet at the same time most rewarding, enterprise (cf. *U*, 126f.). Since the self is unthinkable without consciousness, as James Olney argues in his discussion of Montaigne, it "comes into existence as it becomes conscious or aware of itself, and self-awareness comes about and advances only as it has an object, the self, to be aware of."²⁷ This phenomenological self-referentiality is unsparing and painful: "Montaigne schreibt, es ist schmerzlich, sich an einem Ort aufhalten zu müssen, wo alles, was unser Blick erreicht, uns angeht und uns betrifft" (*U*, 126).²⁸ Like Montaigne, Bernhard is aware of the temporal and experiential gap between now and then; both know that the recovery of the past is ultimately not possible, for we are forever removed from the singularity of the original experience. Every mental activity in connection with those experiences is necessarily affected by fantasy as the mediator between unconscious and conscious, between past and present stages. Therefore, the representation in language cannot eschew the mythopoic quality inherent in the linguistic medium. Each representation can only be an approximation of the original and by necessity contains deficiencies and drawbacks.

Die Vollkommenheit ist für nichts möglich, geschweige denn für Geschriebenes und schon gar nicht für Notizen wie diese, die aus Tausenden und Abertausenden von Möglichkeitsfetzen von Erinnerung zusammengesetzt sind. Hiersind Bruchstücke mitgeteilt, aus welchen sich, wenn der Leser gewillt ist, ohne Weiteres ein Ganzes zusammensetzen läßt. (*A*, 87)²⁹

Thus the fantastic nature of recollection also carries over into the text and its very medium precludes a truthful representation. In *Der Keller* Bernhard further reflects on this double bind of the fantastic. "Die Wahrheit, denke ich, kennt nur der Betroffene, will er sie mitteilen, wird er automatisch zum Lügner." And the same phenomenon applies to the function of memory: "Das Gedächtnis hält sich genau an die Vorkommnisse und hält sich an die genaue Chronologie, aber was herauskommt, ist *etwas ganz anderes*, als es tatsächlich gewesen ist." (emphasis added, *Ke*, 42, 43).³⁰ This concept of alterity pervades all autobiographical writings. It is particularly obvious in the perception of the self, which can only be grasped as an other or a series of others that eventually add up with the writer to a common existence.

Ich darf nicht leugnen, dass ich auch immer zwei Existenzen geführt habe, eine, die der Wahrheit am nächsten kommt und die als Wirklichkeit zu bezeichnen ich tatsächlich ein Recht habe, und eine gespielte, beide zusammen haben mit der Zeit eine mich am Leben haltende Existenz ergeben, wechselweise ist einmal die eine, einmal die andere beherrschend, aber ich existiere wohlgerne beide immer. Bis heute. (*Ke*, 153f.)³¹

Only in one instance is this double existence expressed grammatically in the text, in the distinction between the personal pronouns "he" (for the past) and "I" (for the present) (cf. *U*,

58). This grammatical split as a sign of a split personality permeates all of Federman's texts and clearly sets off story from discourse.

In his four fictions, the autobiographical self is deconstructed into its narrative and experiential functions. In *Double or Nothing*, four persons constitute the composite figure of the autobiographical self: a recorder, an inventor of events, a protagonist and "an overall looker." The discourse concentrates on the activities of the recorder and the inventor and thus shifts the emphasis from the center of events to the periphery of the text. A similar displacement of the actual events in favour of the ramifications of the process of narration takes place in *Take It or Leave It*. Basically, two persons generate and constitute the text, so that the displaced self and the denied recollections surface only as "a mouth: a voice within a voice" (ch. 14), or as the syntactical unit "Moinous," the combination of the French pronouns *moi* and *nous*, which is one and the same person "(the other in the same one might say or the me in us)," which constitutes the unity of the pronouns with the actual being to prevent "the dangerous void of the self."

MOINOUS therefore singularly plural permits a kind of un-doubling or splitting of the person of the pronominal person now in progress which otherwise would remain anonymous giving the story somewhat of a semblance of realism and of identity providing movement and regularity not to mention its insertion into the real and its ... knot of coherence by the simple accumulation of facts. (ch. 3)

The Twofold Vibration seems to combine the narrative technique of *Double or Nothing* and *Take It or Leave It* by splitting one person into an experiencing, a narrating and a writing function. Namredef and Moinous, "inseparable narrators of my story" (33), narrate the story of the old man to be shot into space because they are "devoted lifelong friends and acolytes of the old guy" (33). This union of experience and narration is completed by someone writing down the narrated events: "my role here is merely that of a scribe, that of a detached reporter... I am only an intermediary figure in the telling of this story, a secondhand teller if you wish, as I have been on several occasions in the past, ...since I have lost touch ... with the old man for many years now" (33). Thus the protagonist himself, "the old man," is absent as a person and only present through his stories. The dominance of the narrating "I" over the experiencing "he," memory over recollection, seems to be broken in *The Voice in the Closet*. It is here that the long-suppressed and bracketed voice comes to the fore, whereas the recorder is reduced to a mere technical device, the "selectricstud" of his typewriter, a simple word processor. Nevertheless, the paradox of the two versions of this one personality remains, the split

between the actual me wandering voiceless in temporary landscapes and the virtual being Federman pretends to invent in his excremental packages of delusions a survivor who dissolves in verbal articulations unable to do what I had to do admit that his fictions can no longer match the reality of my past (VC)

His struggle for existence might just turn out to be nothing but "birth into death," an existence "on paper" only. The voice recognizes this paradoxical trick by which the typist of "the

selectricstud” balls away whirls me in a verbal vacuum pretending to set me free at last in the absence of my own presence” (VC). It is in this text that recollection has taken over and that the unconscious alone becomes the scene of the action, the privileged place for the fantasies of the autobiographical self. Jacques Lacan calls this place of the Freudian unconscious the Other (“L’Autre”) where language originates.³² Thus the self can behold or articulate itself only as an other for another by way of the Other (the unconscious of verbal possibilities with potentials—that is, meanings—that emerge in the gaps which the self cannot control.”³³ This fantastic play of grammatical pronouns and persons between the imagination and the unconscious also rules Beckett’s autobiographical text, *Company*.

In the development of Beckett’s work, we recognize a clear shift from exterior events to interior phenomena, i.e., the reduction of fictional characters to monologizing narrators and unidentified voices. This change in generic form from novels to plays necessitates a change in technique from fictional monologues to a dramatization of the unconscious as several elements of one person represented by different actors on stage. Beckett’s experimentation with modern theatre can, therefore, be seen as slowing down the process of the gradual disintegration of characters into voices and eventual nothingness.

In the short play, *Not I*, Beckett seems to have reached the extreme point of such reductive dramatization where only “a pair of blubbering lips” is seen and heard on stage.³⁴ The autobiographical plays, *Footfalls* and *That Time*, performed in 1976, lead logically to the prose work *Company*, published in 1980. *That Time* takes up techniques derived from radio plays and presents the dissociation of one person into several voices. This dramatic technique conforms with Jung’s theory advanced in the Tavistock series, when he said “that unity of consciousness was an illusion, citing the tendency of a complex to ‘form a little personality of itself’:

Because complexes have a certain willpower, a sort of ego, we find that in a schizophrenic condition they emancipate themselves from conscious control to such an extent that they become visible and audible. They appear as visions, they speak in voices which are like the voices of definite people.³⁵

With its presentation of a Listener and three Voices: A, B, C, who narrate episodes from Ireland, *That Time* can be seen as a dramatic precursor of *Company*, which in turn appears like a scaled down drama without actors, without an audience and without a stage. In this prose version, the fantasies of the autobiographical self revolve around three persons: “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). Again, the actual protagonist and the actual experiences are displaced. Rarely does this first person “I” emerge from behind the discourse: “Nowhere to be found. Nowhere to be sought. The unthinkable last of all. Unnamable. Last person. I. Quick leave him”(24). And with a more forceful voice toward the end of the dramatized and fantasized monologue: “You do not murmur in so many words, I know this doomed to fail and yet persist. No. For the first personal singular and a fortiori plural pronoun had never any place in your vocabulary” (61). Similarly, Voice C in *That Time* asks: “did you ever say I to yourself in your life....”³⁶ The whole text seems to be a playful variation on this metafictional theme with the three grammatical persons as actors directed

by the absent presence of the authorial self. The depersonalized recollections as the unconscious join up with his imagination to break his solitary existence, “Devising figments to temper his nothingness,” and more specifically, “Devised deviser devising it all for company” (46). These fantasies, then, fulfill a vital human need to reaffirm one’s existence in the interaction with one or many others, be it a grammatical pronoun or a past self. Yet the voice is always conscious of the illusory nature of its thoughts and its discourse in fantasy; it becomes obvious in the use of the verb *to lie*, which refers both to the position of the body and to the speech act of not telling the truth: “Or last if not least resort to ask himself what precisely he means when he speaks of himself loosely as lying Supine now you resume your fable where the act of lying cut R short’ (55, 62). For the speaker is always aware that the discourse is a fantastic illusion, that the life-prolonging company will dissolve when the “words are coming to an end” (62), and he will return to silence and be again “Alone” (63). When the voices stop their conversation, the person returns to the Jungian illusion of the unity of consciousness mentioned above. Hence “Alone” might lose its frightening aspect when decomposed into its constituents “all one.” Yet this condition of “all-one-ness” reveals its precarious nature, insofar as the supine position in the dark engenders company of human voices or leads to silence and isolation; it can take the person back to the womb or forward to the tomb. In true paradoxical fashion, Beckett tries to avoid such a state of being and simultaneously longs for it. Similarly, he avoids the personal pronoun “I” and would like to use it, for it also stands for the Roman numeral “one.” As Beckett recognizes early on in *Proust*, this paradoxical dilemma is the precondition of art: “...art is the apotheosis of solitude.”³⁷ Therefore, Beckett will perpetuate the paradoxa, will continue to listen to his voices and to write of his solitude, for, according to Bair, “there is some speculation that Beckett intends, like his narrator in *Malone Dies*, to arrange his writing so that it ends at the same moment as his life.”³⁸ Thus the end of language, the termination of the spoken or written text, reinforces the limits of the fantasies of the autobiographical self, erects the border of finitude to the infinite games of imagination.

Despite the limitations of the autobiographical mode, its search for continuity and stability in a world of discontinuity and fragmentation, it adequately corresponds with real-life experience, which is always open yet eventually doomed to die. Nevertheless, the autobiographical form allows Bernhard, Federman and Beckett to fantasize different versions of a self as the other which will eventually contribute to a better understanding of ourselves; for the fantasies actually intensify our awareness of the surrounding world and our position in it. While critically rejecting the myth-making elements inherent in the autobiographical mode, they employ the cognitive structure of those fantasies for an expansion of knowledge and for the latent belief in a principle of hope in an otherwise despairing world.

NOTES

1. “A Note to the Reader,” *A Fan’s Notes* (1968; rpt. New York: Pocket Books, 1977).
2. Th. Bernhard, *Ein Kind* (1982); *Die Ursache: Eine Andeutung* (1975); *Der Keller: Eine Entziehung* (1976); *Der Atem: Eine Entscheidung* (1978); *Die Kälte: Eine Isolation* (1981); *Wittgensteins Neffe: Eine Freundschaft* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1982). Except for the last volume all quotations are from the Residenz Verlag editions, Salzburg. All references

appear in parentheses in the text with the following abbreviations: *Ki*, *U*, *Ke*, *A*, *Kä*, *WN*. Translations from the German are mine.

R. Federman, *Double or Nothing: a real fictitious discourse* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1971); *Amer Eldorado: récit exagéré à lire à haute voix assis ou debout* (Paris: Editions Stock, 1974); *Take It or Leave It: an exaggerated second-hand tale to be read aloud either standing or sitting* (New York: Fiction Collective, 1976); *The Voice in the Closet/La Voix dans le Cabinet de Débarras* (Madison, WI: Coda Press, 1979); *The Twofold Vibration* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982). *Take It or Leave It* and *The Voice in the Closet* are not paginated.

S. Beckett, *Company* (New York: Grove Press, 1980).

3. *Journey to Chaos: Samuel Beckett's Early Fiction* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1965); R. Federman and J. Fletcher, *Samuel Beckett: His Works and His Critics. An Essay in Bibliography* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1970); T. Bishop and R. Federman (eds.), *Samuel Beckett* (Paris: Editions de l'Herne, 1976). L. Graver and R. Federman (eds.), *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979).
4. Th. Bernhard, *Beton* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1982).
5. *Proust* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1931); "Dante... Bruno. Vico.. Joyce," *Our Examination Round His Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972). Beckett wrote his essay in 1929.
6. *Proust*, p. 1.
7. D. Bair, *Samuel Beckett: A Biography* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1978), p. 103.
8. Bair, p. 147.
9. Bair, p. 146.
10. *More Pricks Than Kicks* (1934; rpt. New York: Grove Press, 1978), pp. 152-157.
11. (1958; rpt. New York: Grove Press, 1980), pp. 9-72.
12. Bair, p. 177.
13. Cf. Bair, pp. 310-319.
14. "On *The Great American Novel*," *Partisan Review*, 40 (1973); rpt. *Reading Myself and Others* (1975; New York: Bantam, 1977), p. 84.

15. Cf. U. Schwelkert, “‘Im Grunde ist alles, was gesagt wird, zitiert’: Zum Problem von Identifikation und Distanz in der Rollenprosa Thomas Bernhards,” *Text + Kritik*, 43 (1974), 8.
16. Bair, p. 148.
17. Manuscript in HRC, Austin, Texas. Cited by Bair, p. 351.
18. *Proust*, pp. 63f.
19. Bair, p. 209.
20. S. Beckett, *Krapp’s Last Tape and Other Dramatic Pieces* (New York: Grove Press, 1960), pp. 14f.
21. According to D. Bair, critics have had difficulties in establishing Beckett’s exact birth date. In an effort to control public knowledge about his private life, Beckett has created his own legend by pontificating: “I was born on Friday the thirteenth, and Good Friday, too. My father had been waiting all day for my arrival. At eight p.m. he went out for a walk, and when he returned, I had been born” (p. 4).
22. Par. 452-454.
23. *Ibid.*, par. 454.
24. *Ibid.*, par. 463.
25. Cf. S. Freud, “Formulations On the Two Principles in Mental Functioning,” *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, tr. and ed. J. Strachey et al., I-XXIII (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-74), XII, 222. Cf. also H. Read, *The Contrary Experience: Autobiographies* (New York: Horizon Press, 1963), p. 19f.
26. Freud, p. 225,
27. *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 65.
28. “Montaigne writes how painful it is to be forced to sojourn at a place where everything our sight reaches is directed back to ourselves.”
29. “Perfection cannot be achieved in anything, let alone in written works and most certainly not in these kinds of notes which are composed of thousands and thousands of potential scraps of recollection. Here fractions are conveyed that can easily be arranged to a composite picture, if the reader is so inclined.’

30. "Truth, I think, can only be known by him who is immediately touched by it; if he wants to communicate it he automatically becomes a liar."

"Memory follows exactly the course of events and chronology, but that which emerges from it is totally different from the actual happening."

31. "I must not deny that I have always lived two existences, one that approximates truth very closely and that I rightly term reality, and a staged one: with progressing time the two have amounted to a life-saving existence; both dominate alternately, but—to state it again—I have always lived both. Up until today."

32. Cf. *Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), p. 9 et passim.

33. M. I. Billson and S. A. Smith, "A Structuralist Poetics of the Autobiography: Notes Toward How a 'Life' Comes to Mean," unpubl. paper presented at MLA Convention (Houston, 1980).

34. A. Higgins, "Beckett in Berlin," *Atlantis*, no. 1 (March 1970), p. 54.

35. Cf. Bair, P. 208.

36. *Ends and Odds* (1976; rpt. New York: Grove Press, 1977), p. 31.

37. *Proust*, p. 47.

38. Bair, p. 639.