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TRABAJO DE FIN DE GRADO

Perceiving the Self in Samuel Beckett's *Company*
and Francis Bacon's Paintings

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ABSTRACT

This Bachelor's Thesis analyses the relations between Samuel Beckett's novella *Company* (1980) and a selection of Francis Bacon's paintings. With the theme of self-perception as its central axis, my study looks at perception from both the writer's and the painter's Modernist perspectives. I have structured it around two poles: one revolves around the fragmented ontology evident in both artists, whereas the other adopts a more aesthetic perspective. Through a comparative analysis that unravels and broadens what the work of both Irishmen communicates, a better understanding of both Beckett's text and Bacon's paintings will be achieved.

Keywords: Samuel Beckett, Francis Bacon, Modernism, self-perception, figure, space.

Este Trabajo de Fin de Grado analiza las relaciones entre la novela corta de Samuel Beckett *Company* (1980) y la pintura de Francis Bacon. El tema de la autopercepción es el eje central de mi estudio, que analiza la percepción desde la perspectiva modernista del escritor y el pintor. El trabajo se halla estructurado en torno a dos visiones principales: la primera gira en torno a la ontología fragmentaria evidente en ambos artistas, mientras que la segunda adopta un punto de partida más estético. Por medio de un análisis comparativo que desentraña y amplía aquello que transmite la obra de Beckett y Bacon alcanzaremos una mejor comprensión tanto del relato del primero como de la pintura del segundo.

Palabras clave: Samuel Beckett, Francis Bacon, Modernismo, autopercepción, figura, espacio.

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Introduction

When one thinks of Modernism, it is not just Modernist literature that comes to mind but Modernism in all its artistic expressions. This movement –unlike those that preceded it– starts from the idea that there is no fixed basis, with an emphasis on experimentation which is carried out in all kinds of artistic expressions. Several names come to mind when looking at English Modernist prose, some figures that had a determinant role in the development of Modernist literature and whose influence continues to be of a vivid significance. In the field of literature in the English language names such as William Faulkner, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, or John Dos Passos stand out as being the main developers of this type of literature. In the following pages, we will focus on one of the milestones in Modernist Literature and Modernism in general: Samuel Beckett¹. Even if his influence is higher in the field of theatre, we will be analysing one of his works in prose, which, though at a different level, left a great heritage as well.

All the arts were intermingled in Modernism –as it has the objective of imbuing life– and every artistic creation was an influence over another. That is to say, the paintings, sculptures and literary works that were produced were not separate creations; quite the contrary, each one constituted an inspiration for others. In this context of continuous creative feedback Beckett has his own place. His relation with art was very intense since he was very young. His correspondence leaves great proof of it. As he would define the effect art had on him in one of his letters to Thomas MacGreevy, he experienced an “Own feeling of helplessness, finally, and of speechlessness, and of restlessness also I think, before works of art” (Beckett 2011, 105). Art has a strong impact on the Irish writer, who was left helpless before it many times. All those visits to museums and art galleries during his entire life and specially during his youth constitute not just a mere influence for some of his writings but an essential part of his way of looking at reality and at himself as well as his way of posing questions about it.

¹ The debate about Samuel Beckett being a Modernist or a Postmodernist is still open. In my opinion, Modernism suits him better, especially with regard to his works in prose. This essay will analyse themes such as the treatment of time or the importance of perception or epistemology as being more important than the ontological insight of reality, which is proper of Postmodernism.

It is difficult to say whether all that modern art he saw in the most important galleries of Dublin, Paris, London, or Berlin² was an inspiration for Beckett's writing process or, on the contrary, it was Beckett's work that inspired some of those artists. Most likely, in some cases it was a mutual inspiration. Be that as it may, I contend that some of Beckett's contemporary artists' work has a complementary relation with his own. They help to understand and shed new light upon each other's work. Undoubtedly, the art that struck Beckett the most was one that rose determining questions about aspects such as life, the subject, and reality issues that will be developed, if not given an attempt to be answered, throughout the Irish writer's texts. For instance, the paintings of Jack B. Yeats, Francis Bacon, or Lucian Freud and their different gazes of a damaged or somehow broken self can add other sensibilities and new angles to Beckett's statements and view. In the same way, those paintings exploring the self will be enriched and made more intricate after the reading of some of the Irish writer's literary production, in particular his novella *Company* (1980), the text we have chosen for this study.

The range of painters we could have selected is huge and various. As it cannot be completely covered here, we will be looking at one of them whose approach to Beckett's vision of the world can be considered as equally terrible, that of the 'I' facing its own presence in an atemporal fight against its shadow. Francis Bacon, like Samuel Beckett, presents existence as a tragedy with no limits. "Es como si ahora llegara a ser posible un combate. La lucha con la sombra es la única lucha real" (Deleuze, 68).

State of the Art

Many scholars have written about perception, the 'I' and the voices of conscience in Samuel Beckett's prose writings. If a representative work has to be selected, Daniel Katz's *Saying I No More: Subjectivity and Consciousness in the Prose of Samuel Beckett* (1999) seems the most suitable one since it illustrates perfectly the type of study we are referring to. On the other hand, the writings on Francis Bacon's conception of the body, the space and the angst of existence form an interminable list, Gilles

² Beckett's experience with modern art is gathered in the collection of essays edited by Fionnuala Croke, *Samuel Beckett: A Passion for Paintings*, especially in the chapter by James Knowlson, "Beckett's First Encounters with Modern German (and Irish) Art" (Dublin: National Gallery of Ireland, 2006, pp. 60-64).

Deleuze's *Francis Bacon: logique de la sensation* (2002) being the most sustained study of Aesthetics in Bacon.

The connection between the two figures of Irish Modernism has also been developed by some critics such as Jane Hale, from whose article "Framing the Unframable: Samuel Beckett and Francis Bacon" (1993) we quote later. To finish with this review, I have to mention Peter Fifield's "Gaping Mouths and Bulging Bodies: Beckett and Francis Bacon" (2009), the only essay which, together with Hale's, explores the relationships between both Irish artists.

All in all, in my readings I have not found a work laid out as the one that follows, which has been conceived in terms of ontological and aesthetical perception at the same time. I intend to expose the analysis with my own insight and selection of Beckett's text and Bacon's work. Even though a lot of papers talking separately about the trilogy *Company* is in, about self-perception in Beckett, Bacon's aesthetics, or even about some relations between the two artists, can be easily be found, none of them talk directly about *Company*'s relation with Bacon's art.

Objectives

The purpose of this essay is to analyse the relation between Samuel Beckett's prose work *Company* (1980) and the artistic production of Francis Bacon. My study will adopt a double perspective.

The aspects covered in the first part of my study will be mainly the perception of the 'I' and the voices of consciousness. Francis Bacon's self-portraits will be central in establishing this relation to Samuel Beckett's ideas on self-perception. This will be the most psychological part of the essay, which will approach the text and the paintings from a Cubist viewpoint. Thus, I attempt to illustrate the way the issue of self-perception in both Beckett and Bacon shares some basic characteristics with a Cubist or fragmented notion of reality.

The second part of this thesis will consist on a more aesthetical³ approach to both the novella and the paintings, aiming at identifying the correlated aesthetics of both *Company* and Bacon's compositions. The lying figures, the eyes, an aestheticized life and a final and paradoxically half-illuminated void, will be the points leading our analysis. Special attention will be paid in this second part to Bacon's blackest paintings, since darkness and light will become central elements of my argument.

The goal of the study will be hopefully to provide a better understanding and appreciation of both Beckett's and Bacon's artistic works as well as to prove that the individual artistic creation of both artists means a considerable feedback for each other.

Methodology

The methodology of this essay will be based, first of all, on a close reading of *Company* in terms of content and aesthetics. In this analysis of Beckett's text in itself, I will focus on the ideas of self-perception and the relation of the body and the space. An exploration of a selection of works by Bacon and a drawing of their existent relations with *Company* will be a necessary step in the process. Other relations with other writers' texts or other paintings will also be traced throughout my paper.

³ In my study, I use the term aesthetics in its primary sense rather than Aesthetics as a branch of Philosophy, which derives from the former. The term comes from the Greek αισθητικός (aisthetikos, meaning 'esthetic, sensitive'). I refer to that primary perception.

1

Self-perception of the Fragmented and Dismembered Self

*La absurdidad primera pone de manifiesto ante todo un divorcio:
el divorcio entre las aspiraciones del hombre hacia la unidad
y el dualismo insuperable del espíritu y de la naturaleza⁴*

Company is a novella written by the Irish writer Samuel Beckett (1906-1989) and published for the first time in 1980. It was later included in the trilogy *Nohow On* together with *Ill Seen Ill Said* and *Worstward Ho* in 1989. *Company* is one of the short prose texts the Irish writer produced in his late period and can be labelled as one of his ‘closed space’ writings, a very appropriate label for our comparative study with Bacon’s paintings.

Company is a very contradictory title for a novella like this one. We do not seem to have anything like company, as it is revealed at the end, when we are left with a bleak picture that has been building up throughout the pages, a picture of isolation. What we observe is a “devised deviser devising it all for company” (Beckett 2009, 30) that never finds it. *Company* is the negation of company:

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 of one with you in the dark. And how better in the end labour lost and silence. And you as you always where.

Alone.

(42)

Company begins by giving us a subject. The subject is within a body, which is within a space that seems a lack of space. If Modernist literature seeks the representation of the inner and therefore ‘more real’ reality, Beckett, as one of the foremost Modernists, explores this inner self. If Virginia Woolf makes use of the special voice of interior monologue that is helped by Free Indirect Discourse and stream of consciousness, Samuel Beckett carries his exploration out through a more complex voice, but equally personal.

⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *El hombre y las cosas* (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1967; p. 75).

Beckett's exploration always takes into account that the subject is framed. As we were saying, it is framed in a body and in time and space. We cannot forget that the exploration and own understanding of time and space are also key themes for Modernist art. Proust had already experimented with time and memory in his *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913–1927) when Beckett started writing, and artists such as Dalí with his *La persistencia de la memoria* (1931) were doing the same exploration with painting at the Irish writer's times. Time seemed to be subjective, linked to the subject's memory and perception. It was not that one is framed in an objective time but that time is one's inner time.

In *Company*, the voice's continuous movements to the past in the shape of autobiographical memories blurred by fantasies make us think that Beckett had an interest in the Proustian concern with time⁵: “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” (Beckett 2009, 3). Real and fictional in time can be confused as all depends on a subject and we as readers do not know what to consider real. Again, Beckett's subject is not within an ‘exact’ timing but it is the voice which frames time:

To confess, Yes I remember. Perhaps even to have a voice. To murmur, Yes I remember. What an addition to company that would be! A voice in the first person singular. Murmuring now and then, Yes I remember.

An old beggar woman is fumbling at a big garden. Half blind. You know the place well. [...] On the way home from kindergarten on your tiny cycle you see the poor old beggar woman trying to get in. You dismount and open the gate for her. She blesses you. (10)

The subject imagines and recalls memories that make him or her who he or she is. ‘I’ am my past, what I remember and what my memories have of real and imagined. The ‘I’ of the past, the present and the future are different ‘I’s. Nevertheless, with a lack of objective temporality, we have three simultaneous ‘I’s or a dissolved or combined ‘I’. Time is confused in a deviser that “speaks of himself as of another” (16):

⁵ Samuel Beckett's connection to Proust finds its greater manifestation in the essay he called after the French writer. *Proust* (1930) contains all the Beckettian preoccupations in aesthetical and epistemological terms, Proust's figure serving as an excuse for their presentation.

On your back in the dark the light there was then. Sunless cloudless brightness. You slip away at break of day and climb to your hiding place on the hillside. [...] So now you hoard it in your heart with the rest. Back home at nightfall supperless to bed. You lie in the dark and are back in that light. Straining out from your nest in the gorse with your eyes across the water till they ache. [...] You lie in the dark and are back in that light. Fall asleep in that sunless cloudless light. Sleep till morning light. (15-16)

A Cubist, Broken Self

Might not the voice be improved? Made more companionable. Say changing now for some time past though no tense in the dark in that dim mind. All at once and in train and to come. But for the other say for some time past some improvement. Some flat tone as initially imagined and same repetitiousness, No improving those. But less mobility. Less variety of faintness.

(Beckett 2009, 21)

It seems clear that the collage of voices *Company* consists on builds a broken self. However, by having several voices, the depiction is wider and more real. Something similar can be observed in Francis Bacon's work. What was introduced by Cézanne and developed by Braque or Picasso is ultimately fostered and brought to maturity by Bacon in a very personal way. After all, both Bacon and Beckett are working with something quite similar to Cubism⁶, maybe a deformed and degenerated one. The self is not just broken or fragmented but also degenerated. At the same time, Beckett's Cubist voice reveals not just that the reality being represented is fragmented, but also that its perception as a whole is not possible. Peter Fifield is the first to have established a connection between the writer and the painter in this respect:

For Bacon the broken body is a striking, multi-textured body, the artist stating, 'I'm always hoping to deform people into appearance' (Sylvester, 146). The shiver one has at the sight of a vivid mutilation is surely an extension of that 'shorthand of sensation' sought by Bacon in his paintings. Without the blood and gore so characteristic of the artworks, Beckett's figures are, of course, notably distorted by injury and bodily malfunction as well as the sort of strange embodiment. (60)

⁶ When referring to Cubism I am using it in terms of fragmentation rather than the multi-perspectivism than defines this style. Nonetheless, multiple perspectives are key to understand *Company* since it is all about a voice unfolding the 'I's the self is formed by. As in a Cubist painting, all the 'I's are exposed at the same level by the narrative voice(s).

If one pays attention to the Irish painter's self-portraits (see appendix, fig. 1-7) one realises the multi-textural composition that produces the deformation of the face, and therefore of the self, in the paintings. Bacon rejects the established way of portraying and tries to apprehend the essence by emphasising flesh. As Fifield puts it,

The repetition of these mutual acts of mutilation and distortion stresses (and distresses) the physical at the expense of conventional bodies and settings, forging a meaty mimesis of the atypical subject. (69)

Funnily enough, Bacon gets the essence of the self by means of distortion. That self is similar to Beckett's, which is broken through a distorting narrative voice. And what we get is that unique sensation in Bacon, that 'shorthand of sensation' recalled by Fifield in his essay.

The multi-texture is clear in Beckett's 'I' as well. The embodiment in *Company* is strange because it is estranged. The reader places him or herself within the body but keeping at a distance from it. 'I' and 'body' are not fully identified. This estrangement is constructed continuously in Beckett's text and perceived at once when we look at one of Bacon's portraits. His self-portraits are particularly close to Beckett's 'I', given the amount of autobiographical content in *Company*'s voice of memory.

Regarding this narrative voice, the reader should not worry about what to take as real or not as all fragments, all voices –all the brushstrokes in the artist's self-portraits– are equally valid in a context that leaves no place for objectivity. What is more, it could be said that the damaged, the deformed, is preferable as it is more human and also more 'real'. An approach to the Beckettian deforming narrative voice can be helpful for the reader to better comprehend the final warping of the self, which has a lot of Samuel Beckett himself.

Bacon's isolated faces and bodies are tangled and messy, warped and sick. So there is tension or distress in the body with itself, its presence in an obscure world because it lacks the harmony of unity.

El cuerpo –en la obra de Bacon– se hace carne, se desacraliza, se presenta como espasmo, rompe con la armonía de la superficie y de la forma en un ser amenazado por su propia indefinición,

esto es, por la dispersión de su identidad. Un cuerpo que se descompone, que escapa por una boca que grita, que se vacía, se prolonga en los torrentes de semen, se dilata, se mezcla con otros cuerpos, se metamorfosea en su reflejo. (Vásquez, 3)

Funnily enough, the coarser his bodies are given to us, the weaker and more human they result. As Peter Fifield puts it, “In Bacon and Beckett the human form is given through emphasis and exaggeration of the curved, the swollen and the bulbous” (58). However, that ‘human form’ is human presence that has to be liberated from the common human form we are used to seeing. The liberation is reached through emphasis of the bended and the bloated. The reader can say it is a human being, life, what is being painted with words or with brushstrokes.

Both artists are talking about what they are not sure it can be talked about as it is even difficult to comprehend. This first chapter opened saying that *Company*’s title was contradictory because the novella is, after all, the lack of company, isolation of the self, who has no company. The subject does not have company even from his own voice, from his own self, as its perception is not clear. There is a lack of content. A subject is being portrayed but that subject is not there.

Nevertheless, for us the question to be considered here is nicely put by Milan Kundera in his essay *Une rencontre* (2009), which I quote in its Spanish translation: “¿hasta qué grado de distorsión un individuo sigue siendo él mismo?” (20). The face is distorted and one beholds the most intimate ‘I’, Bacon’s raw self. But it is difficult to say what one’s identity is when the self has been broken, fragmented into several ‘I’s and memory and imagination are equally valid, as happens in *Company*. There, the subject ends being unnamable: “Let him be again as he was. The hearer. Unnamable. You” (Beckett 2009, 20).

Kundera’s question is somehow answered by means of an element that is repeated in all the self-portraits by Bacon: there is always certain tension that presents the tension of life itself. The tension of a depiction that deforms (almost dissolving) the individuality means that identity is brought to its limit and results in a vibrant and arresting portrait.

Por mucho que legue a la deformación, los personajes de Bacon resultan reconocibles e identificables. El proceso de representación se debate siempre en esa tensión, que busca aquel momento conflictivo en que la presencia parece a punto de disolverse, pero aún no ha perdido del todo los rasgos que la distinguen. (Hunter, 60)

That extreme presence that is about to be dissolved, that pursuit of sensation is not so pictorially represented in Samuel Beckett. Nonetheless, in his work, as in Bacon's, identity is not totally destroyed. There is an attempt to grasp the core element of raw identity, naked existence once liberated from its own skin. Identity suffers a process of abstraction in both Beckett and Bacon. Bacon's bodies and faces and Beckett's metafiction are maintained in that tension that allows the individual to keep his or her own identity. Tension is an essential element for both artists to represent individuals, 'I's, the way they perceive them.

Alienating, Broken Voices

The incapability to communicate as a result of the fragmented self and the consequent alienation of the individual is a chief theme in Modernism in general. Edvard Munch's *The Scream* (1895) portrays the angst that one can feel as a consequence of this alienation. As for American Modernist Fiction, a considerable number of Faulkner's characters embody this inability to communicate, with the clear example of Benjy Compson in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929):

I opened the gate and they stopped, turning. I was trying to say, and I caught her, trying to say, and she screamed and I was trying to say and trying arid the bright shapes began to stop and I tried to get out. (Faulkner, 33)

Benjy struggles to communicate but he fails. As a result, his perception of the world is also damaged, blurred. The lack of communication, the distorted language, limits his perception of reality. *Company* presents the same panorama. Furthermore, just as no one seems to care about whether Benjy speaks or not, Beckett's individual is alienated and inactive, lacking all human contact. His presence does not seem to be relevant for anyone else, at least from the voice's perspective, from what we know through the narrative voice. Beckett and Bacon share that consciousness of triviality of one's

existence. However, that is not where the most distressing part of it lies. *Company* brings the panorama to its limits denying the possibility of communicating with oneself. Both physical and psychical interactions are problematic. Thus, in Beckett, the lack of communication isolates the person even from himself or herself. At the same level, something similar can be observed in Bacon's individuals. The painter does not have narrative voice(s) to express the condition of alienation of the subject and yet his portraits inspire the deepest feeling of isolation and remoteness, which is stressed by the fact that most of the people depicted in his paintings are completely alone and framed.

Additionally, chaos is a shared element in the world Faulkner, Beckett and Bacon –among other many Modernist artists– depict, which is the chaotic view of reality of man in the 20th century, coming with the end of Modernity. Another indispensable example is another foremost modernist, James Joyce, who will be considered again later. In the novel that is considered to be his masterpiece, *Ulysses* (1922), his representation of chaos as an essential part of the broken man is very clear. The polyphonic, stream-of-consciousness voices of Joyce's individuals resounding in the city are, like Beckett's voices, “anonymous, obscure in their attachment to the ‘I’” (Oppenheim 103-4). In Joyce, and especially in Beckett, the reader never knows at which point one voice ends and another starts. “By fragmenting or fizzling voices, by rendering them anonymous yet also attached to the self [...] [w]e cannot individuate them” (*Ibid.* 103). This reflects the chaotic dimension of existence, of bare life, which impedes communication with others and with oneself.

Is there a voice in *Company*? Are there several voices? If so, where is the line separating them? Are they talking only to the body? Looking at this body, this ‘I’ in the dark, we cannot help thinking of possible others, those others that appear in *Ulysses*. In *Company*, the lack of presence of others, or the incapability of meeting other selves, makes us think of those others and the probability of their presence. What is more, the Beckettian subject's own alienation leads him or her to ask about possible others, other ‘I’s:

Beckett leads us to a paradoxical ethics of non-relation that appears very close to the ethics of distance that Emmanuel Levinas was elaborating at the same time, paradoxical because the relation with the other is founded on a non-relation, since the face of the other person always

reveals an infinite distance. The term of 'non-relation' destroys from the outset the humanistic illusion that we are all alike, or that reciprocity is a given. On the contrary, it is because we are all infinitely different that a new rapport can be thought. (Rabaté, 142)

2

Aesthetics of the Figure and the Space

*Open your eyes now. I will. One moment. Has all vanished since?
If I open and am for ever in the black adiaphane.
Basta! I will see if I can see.⁷*

Modernism is a lot about perception, in all its faces. Beckett's *Company* shares this Modernist interest but narrows it down to the perception of the self. When we read the novella we picture a man—or better a body and voices, no clear attachments implied—in the darkness, which means that we do not really picture anything in particular as there is only blackness. Therefore visual perception, sight, which has traditionally been considered as the superior sense in epistemology, is rendered useless and therefore primary sensorial perception is hindered.

Figures Lying in the Dark

We start reading *Company* and all we see is a bulk in the middle of blackness and as part of that blackness. *Company* is dark. There is a body, there is an 'I', and there is darkness, shadow: "Basalt is tempting. Black basalt. [...] If with none then no light from the voice on the place where our old hearer lies. In immensurable dark. Contourless." (Beckett 2009, 21). The author comes back once and again to the black so that the reader can plunge into that dimness in order to feel the same way the body does. The reader has trouble trying to picture a figure lying in the dark, but (s)he soon embodies that same figure. Apparently a specific body accompanied by a voice or group of voices talking to it, but also a body which every human being can 'occupy'. In other words, every person can be within that skin.

⁷ James Joyce, *Ulysses* (London: Penguin Classics, 2000). Taken from the third episode, this epigraph recalls Stephen Dedalus' stream of thoughts. It develops ideas about perception, the relation between reality and imagination, and isolation while he is sitting on the beach – where land (the tangible and permanent) meets sea (the intangible and impermanent).

The same happens with Francis Bacon's representation of people, even in his self-portraits, already discussed in the previous section; they represent specific people but one can see him or herself among the diverse shots building a face or a body as they depict the purest and rawest humanity after all.

Perception of the subject in *Company* is determined by an essential condition apart from this darkness and obscurity: the body is lying, necessarily lying "on his back in the dark" (Beckett 2009, 3). This position leaves the figure in a cognitive relation with the space different from that he would have if he were standing up or sitting down. This condition can recall other cases in Modernist narrative like the one in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915). When Gregor Samsa wakes up in a body that is his but estranged and metamorphosed, he is lying down. He goes through a process of perception of his new physical self from his lying position. And Kafka presents, again, a broken self in his novella. Right before Gregor starts moving, there is a long moment of silence, while lying down, when time is blurred. Gregor's body seems to be detached from time.

It is in his lying position that Gregor starts to fragmentally perceive his body and, later, his new voice with terror. Even if *The Metamorphosis* has a metaphorical or even socio-political connotation and *Company* has a more abstract look, both introduce a lying figure whose voice is apart or estranged, Gregor's being the 'exterior' one. He is shocked when he hears his own metamorphosed voice:

[T]he clock struck quarter to seven. There was a cautious knock at the door near his head. "Gregor", somebody called - it was his mother - "it's quarter to seven. Didn't you want to go somewhere?" That gentle voice! Gregor was shocked when he heard his own voice answering, it could hardly be recognised as the voice he had had before. As if from deep inside him, there was a painful and uncontrollable squeaking mixed in with it, the words could be made out at first but then there was a sort of echo which made them unclear, leaving the hearer unsure whether he had heard properly or not. (Kafka I)

We do not know how long Gregor Samsa is lying down, but it is a fact that he has something in common with Beckett's lying figure: both their bodies are passive. Their only activity, especially in *Company*, is perception; the rest is therefore passivity or lack of movement, lack of life.

Your mind never active at any time is now even less than ever so. This is the type of assertion he does not question. You saw the light on such and such a day and your mind never active at any time is now less active than ever so. (Beckett 2009, 4)

However, “certain activity” (4) is registered in *Company*, a slight one that is perception, hearing the voice, scrutinising darkness. That perception is the so-called ‘company’, “mental activity of a low order” (29). The voice as only and necessary –although never sufficient– company can be observed in the context of isolation of the subject, which is another condition of the body in the dark. As far as the subject is concerned, he or she is isolated, with the only company of voice. The two texts, though quite different, make use of the lying position so that the subject can face himself, both physically and in terms of existence. Or an estranged self, that is.

Something similar can be said about Francis Bacon’s lying bodies. They are passive and isolated in the dark. However, even though they are sometimes sleeping (fig. 11), which could be conceived as a peaceful state, there is no harmonic relation to the figure’s surroundings. The figure is physically confronting himself or herself and his or her own existence. Because of the tension of the body and the inherent violence of the representation, the figure is a misfit in the space, in the world, and it is therefore in agony.

The Eye Straining for Life in the Dark

In *Company* sensual perception focuses on hearing and, later, as light appears, sight. Our sources are an inner ear that hears voices and an eye that ‘sees’ a dark space. The eye is as important element in Beckett as it is in Bacon. In the Irish painter’s *Self-Portrait with Injured Eye* (1972) (fig. 3) his obsession with the eye is patent. He uses a closed swollen eye as the axis that unchains the deformation of the entire face. Thus, from the eye, the whole face is distorted. Samuel Beckett leaves a special place for the eye too:

There is of course the eye. Filling the whole field. The hood slowly down. Or up if down to begin. The globe. All pupil. Staring up. Hooded. Bared. Hooded again. Bared again.

(Beckett 2009, 12)

The damaged state of the sense of sight has already been mentioned in the introduction to this second chapter. The eye cannot work properly due to the lack of light. This can be explained by its connection to traditional symbolism of light and darkness. Traditionally, light means truth and that truth cannot happen in the darkness we find in Beckett and Bacon. Is the eye not the only element that is not completely blurred, that gives a hint of profound and abysmal presence? “Only eyelids move” (Beckett 2009, 29). Is it not its moisturising necessity what shows us life? These questions are here posed with reference to Beckett’s novella but in universal terms as well, being as they are about human beings in general. It is interesting to confirm that the eye in *Company* has the same intensity as the eye in some of Bacon’s portraits. The two artists are communicating the same, life, even if the eyes are closed.

Raw Life in an Undefined Space

Every word said by the voice in Beckett’s novella conveys certain lyricism. The way it talks about the eye, the light, the memories... every aspect of movement and life becomes art in *Company*. Life has an intrinsic beauty in it, even if it is in the middle of chaos. Life should be art. Here we find something similar to the Nietzschean affirmation of life:

Nietzsche estetiza la vida, no en el sentido burgués, sino en el sentido de que la vida misma sea una obra de arte. Sólo así el arte podrá generar novedades y no morir. El arte así pensado no es un fin, sino un instrumento que hay que llevar más allá, puesto que debe estar al servicio de la vida. Una vida que se concibe no ya como una infinitud a alcanzar sino como un finito ilimitado (o sobrepliegue), visible tras la fractura de la visión del mundo unitario. (Álvarez, 11)

What really interests Beckett in *Company* is life, and the isolated condition of the living body. Sometimes that perception of oneself does not go further as it happens with Existentialist authors such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, or the abovementioned Franz Kafka. Even though questions about existence are sown, Beckett sticks to the question of perception. And this perception, although complex, is direct and penetrating as a portrait by Bacon can be. Violently and heartrendingly Bacon’s work gives an insight that utterly moves us. Bacon’s brushstrokes have the power of Beckett’s second person singular voice in *Company*: “use of the second person marks the voice” (3).

They are rough and unrefined as the voice is sharp and undressed. Both artists leave us facing a lying figure in an undefined space. Consequently, they leave us lying on our own, scrutinising darkness. In the case of some of Bacon's paintings, the isolated figure is there, in a space where it does not fit at all. The tension grows between the 'I' and the place the 'I' is, in spite of himself, framed in. As a consequence of that tension, the figure cannot be fully framed. This is very clear in one of Bacon's lying figures, *Sleeping Figure* (fig. 11):

El pintor explota la relación figura/espacio. [...] [E]l personaje aparece atrapado por su actitud, aplastado contra [...] la cama como si fuese un resto de sí mismo, su sola presencia inanimada y moldeada por la presión del espacio circundante sobre ella (Hunter, 33)

There is an obvious tension produced by the relation between the body and the space, and yet the space is unavoidable. Even if the space is undefined, it is needed if a portrait has to be made. Bacon's spaces are essential to frame his portraits.

The same happens with space in Beckett's *Company*. And, I dare say, was this not the same portraying activity carried out by James Joyce, the fellow countryman of both artists? As another Irish Modernist novelist, Joyce made an attempt at grasping just life through "unadorned portraits of the human presence" (Hale, 97) in his writing, especially in his *Ulysses*. Nevertheless, the portrait of humans, of life, is given to us within a different frame: space changes. The city —Dublin as a microcosm—, acts as a constant movement of gyres, where lives are intermingled in an ordered chaos. That clashes with Beckett's darkness and absence of space. And yet it is not so obvious that the contrast is so radical. While Joyce explored the impossibility of communication, the individual within the continuous urban movement, the musicality of the variety of Dubliners living parallel and juxtaposed lives, Beckett writes about the impossibility of communication of the self, blurred multiple voices and so on. All in all, he writes about the complexity of the 'I'.

That 'I' can be whoever, but, at the same time, it's a definite and somehow unique self. As it has already been said, presence in Beckett is extreme and powerful. Aesthetics throughout the text is hence quite strong and unique. A blurred but at the same time determined self embodies that presence, the text itself. It is blurred due to the lack of light, the multiplicity of voices that appears to be coming from that light, the

undefined space or lack of space. We picture a sort of dim room that can be compared to the rooms where some of Bacon's naked figures are drawn. We see this in works like *Study from the Human Body, Untitled (Crouching Nude)* (fig.8-10). All of those whitish bodies are found in a placeless room. Some straight lines form a geometrical, linear but also undefined container for a violently and distressingly curved body that could be said to be fighting against itself. The lack of definition of the space is stressed by the colours black, grey and ochre at the background. In addition, sometimes the angst is reinforced by means of the use of red. It can be stated that conflict is a key point in Bacon's bodies.

Surprisingly, it is a determined self in a specific body, with specific experiences in the past that can be brought to mind, even if everything is blurred. This can be thought if we take that there is just one self, one subject. In Beckett's text, there is a huge part of the discourse, or attempt of discourse, that is memories, Beckett's memories as he left them. The autobiographic elements are clear.

Aesthetically, *Company* is all about that presence, human presence in the dark, what has already been referred to as 'raw humanity'. This humanity conveys a violence and extreme way of being, presence. That violence of being stands out in Bacon's portraits. Each line seems to be fighting against another; the rough brushstrokes were spontaneously made, sometimes with rags, by the artist. The violence can be unjustified or unavoidable. Does the beauty lie in that confrontation? A terrible beauty is born in Bacon's works. The face is full of life and, paradoxically, it is rotting. The same happens with the Beckettian subject: being full of life, being all existence on its mind, being absolute presence for one's own, its death would not mean any significant change in the dark, even if that presence could be perceived as the most important element in that undefined space.

A Faintly Luminous Void

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

(Stevens, lines 13-15)

The white nothingness perceived by Wallace Stevens's snowman is the black nothingness perceived by the beckettian hearer. However, there is a presence that is maintained in the novella thanks to the voice, which keeps talking to the 'I'. Total absence is not allowed. The light in the text brightens the void, 'enclosed' within the undefined space, which we know about because there is an eye looking at what is being lit:

Whence the shadowy light? What company in the dark! To close the eyes and try to imagine that. Whence once the shadowy light. No source. As if faintly luminous all his little void.

(Beckett 2009, 11)

The light is masterly used by Beckett. The voices draw the 'I' and create light. As much as the body is eager for light, he will not get it but for the voice, and for the eye that gives access to the produced light that grows with the voice.

Just as Beckett's 'black nothingness' is briefly broken by this shadowy light, Francis Bacon's monochromatic paintings –see most of the bodies in the Appendix to this Thesis- are also faintly lit by some sort of shadowy light and in some cases by a lamp or a dangling light bulb (fig. 11). In *Untitled (Crouching Nude)* (fig. 10), for instance, this is patent. The combination of blue, grey, black, and ochre -all dark lines- tends to a monochromatic blackness, a "bourneless dark", as Beckett would say (2009, 33). However, in that blurred colour that tends to black in Bacon's work there is a curved line, a violent white that acts as Beckett's light, defining the undefinable. The body in distress is highlighted as it conveys powerful presence. The sensation of the contrasted white that forms a body is made through great tension, as happens with the curvature of all the white lines that seems to be pushing the straight lines that create darkness. The other contrasting colour is red, which just adds fierceness.

Some mention should be made to the lack of adaptation of the body to the space, somewhere in the void. Even in *Study from the Human Body* (fig. 9), in which the figure is slender like a harmonic white sculpture, the body does not fit. The figure is clearly leaving, evaporating after a shaded curtain. As an exception, that body is straight and standing up, whereas the rest are lying down as Beckett's nameless figure, or bending with angst.

Physical darkness on the body's surroundings somehow mirrors the obscurity of perception of oneself going on in Beckett's novella. Indeed, in both *Company*'s body and Bacon's bodies the inner obscurity is extended to the space the body is lying in. "La figura parece surgir de la penumbra del fondo como un espectro" (Hunter, 65). The white wraith is in reality full of life. Actually, it is life itself in a placeless darkness, an "equal remoteness at its most remote" (Beckett 2009, 20). The movement that the figure transmits is a result of the tension, the intrinsic tension of existence. "You were once. You were never. Were you ever?" (*Ibid.*, 12). The nostalgic memories in the novella are counteracted by the inquisitive second person voice asking disturbing questions which do not have an answer.

There is tension in both artists; tension between a white light and blackness, between the body and the space, between real memories and fiction in Beckett's novella, between straight and curved brushstrokes in Bacon's paintings. In Beckett's short novel, there is even tension between the title word, 'company', and the ending word, 'alone'. I think that we can state that the Aesthetics of both artists is one of disturbing tension within an abysmal void.

Conclusions

This essay provides a new approach to Samuel Beckett's *Company* thanks to a starting point which is different from that of other critics of the novella: a comparison with Francis Bacon's work. The comparative analysis has provided the reader with a renewed reading of the novella. The concrete perspective we have been given after this study makes it possible for us to look at *Company* in the same way in which we observe a Modernist painting: we have taken an impression from the text, we have forgotten about a possible story, and we have taken not only an intellectual but also a purely aesthetical insight.

Beckett shows in *Company* his own understanding of the self by means of a man lying down, "on his back in the dark" (Beckett 2009, 3) and a voice or a collage of voices supposedly addressing him. The limited perception of the subject allows the author to express his ideas on the individual and his/her distressing way of existing in the world. The beckettian self is broken and fails to communicate. The voice that the individual and the reader hear throughout the novella draws a broken and alienated self, deficient in communication. That voice is unreliable. Actually, everything is unreliable. If the self, identity, cannot be trusted and everything goes around the 'I', nothing can really be trusted, not even the knowledge about oneself.

On the other hand, Francis Bacon's self follows the beckettian path but his perception is soaked with violence and his fragmentation is brought further to deformation. Bacon's selves transmit that raw dimension of the bulging body in a permanent fight against itself.

Our vision of Bacon's paintings has also suffered a shift after this study. If Bacon's painting adds his own fierceness to *Company*'s perception of an individual, Beckett has enhanced the fragmentation of the 'I' by means of highlighting the impossibility of communication.

Both an intellectual and an aesthetical look on perception are needed in order to get the point of the written and painted material of my study. There are many points where the two artists meet: the isolated 'I', the distorted perception, the all-surrounding void, etc. Many of them have been somehow analysed in this essay. Hopefully, this

exploration has led towards a better understanding of both their individual artistic creation and the condition of art and artists of their times in general.

It is the two artists' terrible tension that generates that unique sensation of extreme, raw life that is as universal as is talking about human condition. If the tension of contrast is very visual and clear in Bacon, it is differently perceived in Beckett's *Company* as it is built up via word relations instead of brushstrokes of colour. Nevertheless, both artists leave us with the same intense sensation every human can feel identified with, sensation of experiencing life itself. This could be put as the most important conclusion of the paper: Samuel Beckett and Francis Bacon make use of extreme existence, the heartrending tension that is necessary to express life. Human existence is suffering, isolation and anguish but still it is an art expression, full of beauty.

As Bacon's paintings, Beckett's *Company* is the expression of that man of the 20th century, living in the degeneration of an era of developments, in the death of Modernity. Because of the clash between the ideas and reality, the concept of the latter oscillates and turns into fragments. There is not unity, or light, or truth any more as it is reflected with the subject's self-conscience, as this Cubist piece by Beckett proves. Both the writer and the painter expose their different faces with the intention of covering the real, which includes now that which is left in the shadow because of the existence of raw life in the darkness. Even if we are condemned by that darkness to void.

Appendix

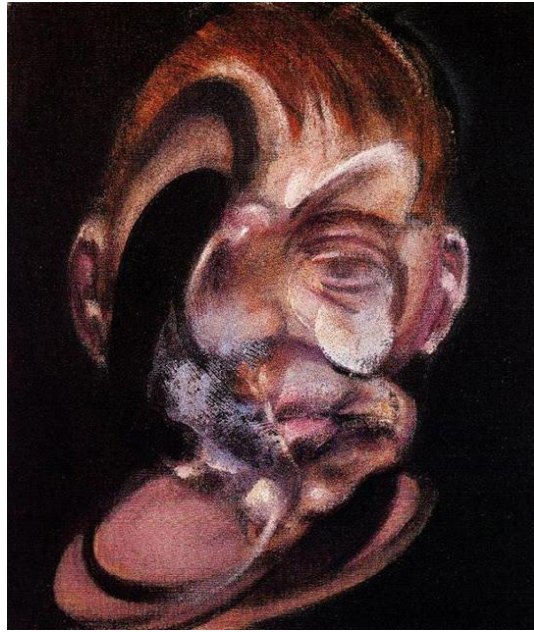


Figure 1: Francis Bacon, *Self-Portrait*, 1973

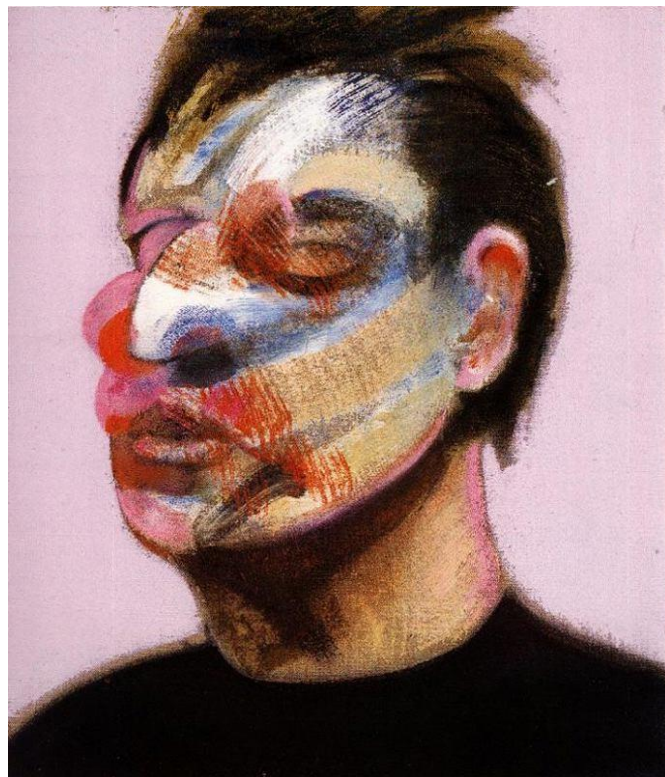


Figure 2: Francis Bacon, *Self-Portrait*, 1970



Figure 3: Francis Bacon, *Self-Portrait with Injured Eye*, 1972

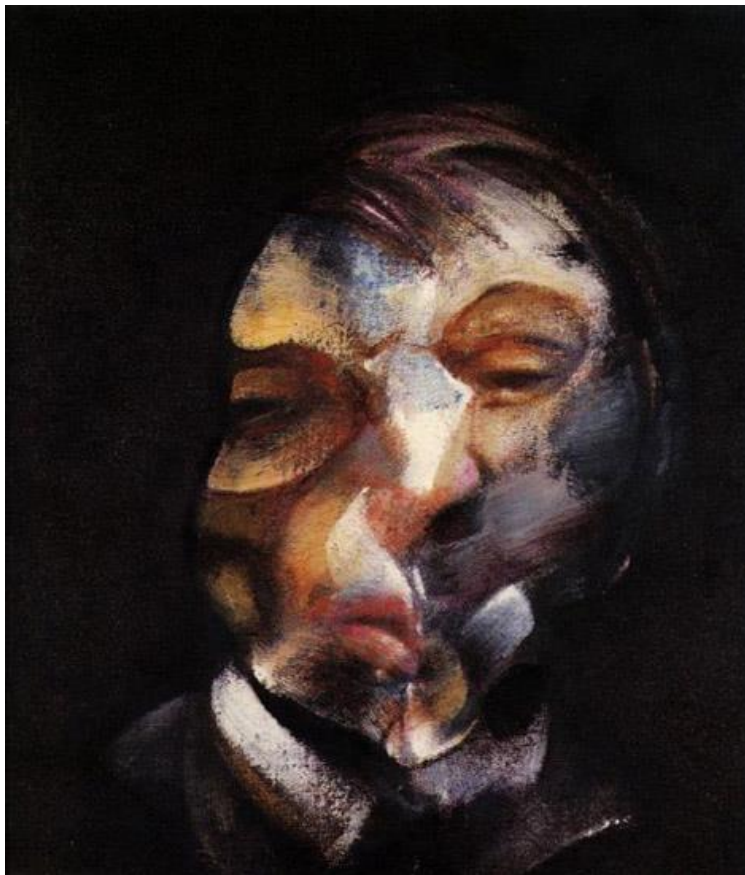


Figure 4: Francis Bacon, *Self-Portrait*, 1971



Figure 5: Francis Bacon, *Three Studies for Self-Portrait*, 1979



Figure 6: Francis Bacon, *Three Studies for Self Portrait*, 1974



Figure 7: Francis Bacon, *Three Studies for Self-Portrait*, 1981



Figure 8: Francis Bacon, *Self Portrait*, 1956



Figure 9: Francis Bacon, *Study from the Human Body*, 1949



Figure 10: Francis Bacon, *Untitled (Crouching Nude)*, c. 1950

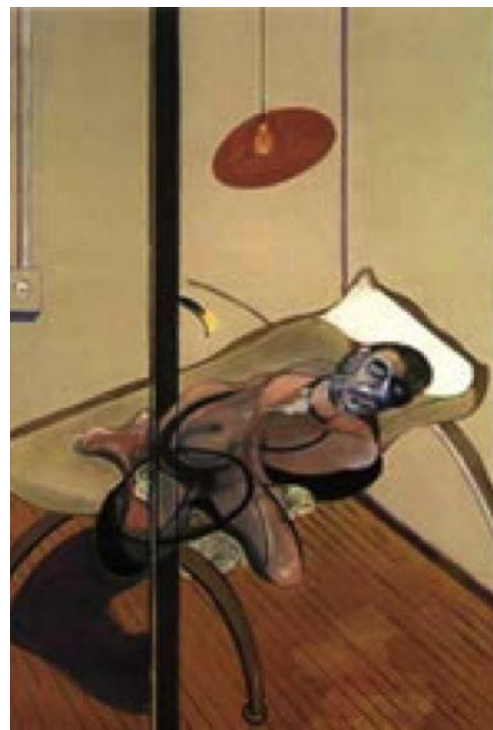


Figure 11: Francis Bacon, *Sleeping Figure*, 1974

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