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UNFINISHED SENTENCE: ON THE COMPOSITION OF *WHAT IS THE WORLD*[1]

This paper is an account of my approach to *what is the word*, the last literary text written by Samuel Beckett. Although it does not reveal referential elements or a clearly defined communicative situation, the poem, I believe, utilises literary strategies, themes and conventions that are typical of Beckett's entire *oeuvre*. Needless to say it is done in a concise, if extremely generalised and completely abstract way. What is of crucial importance for the following study is that the composition interweaves aesthetic and semantic functions. The deliberate fragmentation of *what is the word* as well as the elliptic nature of its verses force the reader to explore all the fleeting insinuations of signal arrangement that might contribute to the recreation of a systemic pattern that would enable analytical elucidation of the poem. Typically for Beckett, the addresser encourages the addressee to participate in a literary game that requires – prior to any analytical, not to mention interpretative attempts – breaking through the issue of its idiosyncratic super-organisation. In Roman Jakobson's terms, the encoder projects the strenuous experience of communication. The decoder, in order to get fully involved in this process, is expected to recreate a complicated network of codes. Of course, the above-mentioned phenomena are characteristic of the literature in general. Still, the complete dominance of compositional principles over motifs and themes that (dis-)appear here, as well as the engagement of these principles in overall semantics is manifested in *what is the word* to such a degree that it requires investigation. And this, in brief, is the main objective of my analysis.

[1] Previous version of the paper (*How the unfinished sentence was created*) was presented at the conference: *Re-Reading the Ruins: Samuel Beckett's Short Drama, Prose & Other Fragments* (May 31st 2003, Westminster University, London).

0. ***what is the word***
1. folly –
2. folly for to –
3. for to –
4. what is the word –
5. folly from this –
6. all this –
7. folly from all this –
8. given –
9. folly given all this –
10. seeing –
11. folly seeing all this –
12. this –
13. what is the word –
14. this this –
15. this this here –
16. all this this here –
17. folly given all this –
18. seeing –
19. folly seeing all this this here –
20. for to –
21. what is the word –
22. see –
23. glimpse –
24. seem to glimpse –
25. need to seem to glimpse –
26. folly for to need to seem to glimpse –
27. what –
28. what is the word –
29. and where –
30. folly for to need to seem to glimpse what where –
31. where –
32. what is the word –
33. there –
34. over there –
35. away over there –
36. afar –
37. afar away over there –
38. afaint –
39. afaint afar away over there what –
40. what –
41. what is the word –
42. seeing all this –
43. all this this –
44. all this this here –
45. folly for to see what –
46. glimpse –

47. seem to glimpse –
48. need to seem to glimpse –
49. afaint afar away over there what –
50. folly for to need to seem to glimpse afaint afar away over there what –
51. what –
52. what is the word –
53. what is the word[2]

The English version consists of 53 lines. Repeated eight times, the title becomes a refrain for the poem and its evolving semantics balances between two feasible connotations[3]. On the one hand, the interrogative aspect of the phrase evokes the main theme of the poem – the quest for an appropriate word. By expressing uncertainty concerning the selection of suitable vocabulary and constant dissatisfaction with suggested solutions, the refrain defines the speaking persona as a self-conscious individual who is responsible for the shape of the poem. In line 4, for instance, the 'what is the word –' phrase challenges the 'folly for to –' variant so as to bring out new alternatives – 'folly from all this –', 'folly given all this –' or 'folly seeing all this –'. As elsewhere, the refrain punctuates the former suggestion and announces its transformation. In this way the refrain divides the text into seven coherent parts. The semantics has been somehow evolving, as if to testify to the incomplete attempt at creating a sentence. Just as, for example, *The Unnamable* (the final part of Beckett's trilogy), *what is the word* appears as a record/notation of a literary struggle with language. Both the final part of Beckett's major trilogy (published in 1952) and his final literary utterance (published in 1990) challenge the assumption postulating contiguity of semiotic reality and the phenomenal world. For Beckett language, just as other codes, remains exclusively a modelling system. Thus it facilitates 'imitation' rather than 'representation'.

Yet English grammar enables indicative reading of the title/refrain. In this sense, the question reveals the answer: 'what' is the word that has been searched for. Such an ambiguous reading is especially prominent in the final repetition that appears in line 53. Here the phrase is deprived of a hyphen, which graphically accentuates the dynamism of the ending. Not for the first time does Beckett play on such polysemy of the word 'what'; the most obvious examples are *Watt* (a novel) or *What Where* (a play). Such capacious, if discrepant, semantic potential must have been tempting for a writer engrossed in detection of the paradoxes of human reasoning[4]. In brief, the 'what is the word –' phrase is endowed with a similar function as the so-called Waiting Points in *Waiting for Godot*[5], the Auditor's gesture in *Not I*,

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[2] After: Samuel Beckett, *Stirrings Still*, London, John Calder Publishers 1999, pp. 23–28. Lines numbered so as to facilitate analysis.

[3] Cf: Antoni Libera, *Ostatnie słowo Becketta*, in: Teatr 1996, 6, p.18.

[4] For an analysis of Beckett's employment of paradox see: Ralf Breuer, *Paradox in Beckett* in: *The Modern Language Review* 1993, 3, pp. 559–580.

[5] See: James Knowlson and Dougald McMillan [eds], *The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett*, London, Calder 1993.

black-outs in *Footfalls* or Listener's knocking in *Ohio Impromptu*. Repetition of a fixed phrase/silence/gesture/lighting-pattern/sound divide the text into coherent parts. Significantly, the elements that are being repeated gradually enlarge their own ambiguity. Each time they penetrate various fields of association and, by the very fact of being repeated, they transform their semantics.

So much for the explanation of the constructional role of the *leit motif*. In general, the title/refrain in *what is the word* divides the text into seven coherent parts. These parts are devised as subsequent stages in the creation of an incomplete sentence. In addition, I believe they indicate succeeding phases of creative struggle with language. Let us have a closer look at particular units.

The first one – I will refer to it as an introduction – consists of three lines ('folly –/folly for to –/for to –') whose extra-linguistic composition is remarkable. All of the words appear twice. Most of them alliterate. In terms of notation, every single word contains 'o', while 'l' is doubled in 'folly'. Each letter is repeated: 'f' four times; 'o' six times; 'l' four times; 'y' twice; 'r' twice and 't' twice. Obviously, phonetic realisation of these lines results in orchestration. Back to numerology, though. Altogether there are 20 letters. Their symmetric distribution (line1 – 5 letters, line 2 – 10 and line 3 – 5) is echoed by the proportional allocation of the syllables (line 1 – 2 syllables; line 2 – 4 and line 3 – 2). Such a strikingly cautious composition, based on repetition and symmetry, provokes the question concerning semantic justification for this highly elliptic and enigmatic unit. As it initially seems, the entire introduction can be basically summarised by its second line ('folly for to –'). The understatement resembles a dictionary entry ('folly for (somebody) to (do something)') so that it provokes questions such as: what is the folly? folly for whom? to do what? The convention of a riddle shapes the reader's expectations concerning the following passages. The introduction resorts to the strategy of delayed decoding. Undoubtedly this is typical of a huge body of Beckett's works. Such is the function of the opening tableau in *Endgame*[6], the without-words part of *What Where* and – to finish this brief enumeration – the opening paragraph in *Company*.

However, the novelty of *what is the word* in this matter cannot escape our attention: the introduction does not even touch here the question of communicative situation. There is no description nor is there any narration. The only piece of information concerning the speaking persona has been revealed by the pejorative evaluation of an undetermined phenomenon, 'folly'. There is a commentator. It is however unclear on what he is going to comment. And where.

Now, once we set together the extreme lines of the introduction, we can see that they form the second verse. On the other hand, they divide the

[6] For a more detailed discussion see my paper *Theatrical Conventions and Endgame by Samuel Beckett*, in: Andrzej Zgorzelski [ed.], *Conventions and Texts*, Gdańsk 2003, Wydawnictwo UG, pp. 140–159.

central line into two symmetrical parts. Somehow, they disorganise and distract the train of thought, they decompose the introduction. Undoubtedly, any redundancy in literature should be suspected of creating additional meanings. What about the super-organisation of the passage in question? Firstly, when it appears in the first line, the word 'folly' has not yet been classified as a synonym of 'absurdity', 'foolishness' and 'nonsense'. Therefore, the notion of an 'architectural folly' (a decorative baroque building) seems feasible at this stage. Though rejected already in line 2 by addition of the pronouns, the connotation seems to be maintained by its metaphoric affiliation with the construction. It is to say that the aesthetic values dominate the functional (communicative) ones; the question: 'how is the poem constructed?' is prior to 'what does it mean?'. The elaborate construction clashes with semantic emptiness – the 'architecture' of the introduction is nothing but yet another 'folly'.

Secondly, when the added prepositions reappear in line 3, they not only constitute an emphatic echo (pseudo-rhyme?) but also a semantically awkward, still compositionally distinct, unit. The elliptic cluster is repeated seven times in the poem (i.e. when 'to' appears it is preceded, even though cohesively unjustified, by 'for'). Is any additional information conveyed in this way? Both 'for' and 'to' bear homonymic qualities. Strikingly, on the phonetic level both equal the numerals 'four' and 'two'. Coincidence? Even if we disregard Beckett's life-lasting obsession of exploiting numbers in his artistic texts as an extra-textual fact, we are faced with the compositional significance of the numbers for the introductory passage. I have already pointed out that particular words are doubled (not tripled for example); particular letters appear twice, four times or, as is the case with 'o', six times (never once, three or, say, five times). Moreover, the allocation of the syllables is based on the same numerology: there are respectively 2, 4 and 2 syllables in subsequent lines (followed by 4 in line 4!). These numbers are echoed in the title – it consists of 4 words, the first ('what') being a 4-letter one and the second ('is') comprising two. Proven: in the introduction, the numbers contribute to the semantics.

To sum up, the first part of the poem reveals compositional strategies and, despite its conciseness, elliptical nature and remarkable a-referentiality, it hints at various literary conventions. First, the process of creation is in the centre of attention – the theme of the quest for the word acquires a predominant role. Second, the metaphoric juxtaposition of the apparently inferior semantic level of the opening line ('architectural folly') with the overtly extra-linguistic (literary) construction of the introduction (hardly anything is said in a grand manner) emphasises the irreducible correlation between the semantics and the construction. Third, the dynamic interplay between diverse textual levels (e.g. intersection of the linguistics and the construction as the basis for the 'architectural folly' metaphor) underlines a tendency towards equitation of all textual realms (a sign may undergo semantically valued connotations with any other sign regardless of their

apparent constructional remoteness), which determines the reader's search for answers to the questions provoked by the text (e.g. what is the folly?, for whom?, to do what?) on various levels. Additionally, the introductory part reveals authorial strategies: 1. abstract generalisation; 2. ambiguity; 3. incohesiveness; 4. understatement and 5. disregard for reader's expectations. Moreover, the homonymic nature of line 3, together with refined orchestration of the passage, enlivens the phonemic aspect of the text and thus announces awareness of a rudimentary literary convention: a written text as being the notation of a spoken utterance. The spoken is juxtaposed to the written[7].

Part 2 (lines 5-12) and Part 3 (lines 14-20) elaborate on the variants that may be schematically abridged to: 'folly [from][given][seeing] all this this here –' so as to resume finally the 'for to –' phrase. There appears, for the first time, a spatial category that characterises undefined surroundings (communicative situation?) as basic 'here'. Notably, it is associated with an abstract generalisation marked by the hyperbolic precision of the double determiner ('all this this'). The final reconstitution of 'for to –' exposes a compositional decision – while creating the sentence a variant equating 'folly' with 'all this this here' that has been given and can be seen (meaning: phenomenal reality?/the text of the poem itself?), though taken into consideration, is dropped. Still, it remains in the semantics of the poem as a rejected option that establishes a point of reference for later variants.

In Part 4 (lines 22-27), 'seeing' is reduced to 'see' and subsequently echoed by 'seem' and 'need'. On the other hand, the sensory aspect of 'see' is specified as 'glimpse', which significantly reinforces fragmentation, incompleteness and temporariness of vision. One receives: 'folly for to need to seem to glimpse –', a version that anticipates the final one. It is worth noting that the sequence 'folly [...] to need to seem', when contrasted with 'folly all this this here', multiplies the impression of the futility of the glimpse, its elusive, entirely potential character. Finally, in line 27 'what –' precedes the title/refrain in a separate line – for the first time our attention is focused on the word as such.

Part 5, the shortest one, (lines 29-31) counterpoints 'what –' with 'and where –' (line 29) so as to deliver yet another variant: 'folly for to need to seem to glimpse what where –'. The question of space appears at this point for the second time to be further scrutinised in Part 6 (lines 33-39): 'afaint afar away over there what –'. The striking contrast with laconic 'here' resolves the 'where' question. The notion of distance, remoteness and, once again, fragmentation linked with incompleteness of the vision prevails. In this way, I assume, the spatial structure of *what is the word* mirrors, in a most generalised and abstract way, the typically Beckettian concept of

[7] *Comment dire*, the title of the French version in which a similar juxtaposition appears, is discussed in detail in: Mary Lindon, *Beyond the Criterion of Genre: Samuel Beckett's Ars Poetica*, in: *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui*, 1999, 8, pp. 59–72.

space where *locus* (i.e. communicative 'here'; in theatre it covers the fragment of fictional reality that is presented on stage) is contrasted with *spatium* (i.e. 'there'; in theatre it covers everything that is off-stage). As a case in point, the contrast is manifested in *Endgame* where the bare interior (indoor *locus*) is separated from unattainable open space outside (outdoor *spatium*). While in the drama, Clov's desire to leave 'all this this here' (i.e. the world monopolised by Hamm's tyranny) foregrounds the unexplored *spatium* as a possible 'promised land', in *what is the word* the tension between 'here' and 'there' is marked solely by the aspiration of the speaking persona. In other words, in both texts spatial arrangement is built on analogous binary opposition ('here' vs. 'there') but its semantic realisation in each case varies. In *Endgame* Clov may possibly overcome the unbearable stasis of the stage situation by his departure, which – after all – implies continuity of spatial categories. In *what is the word*, on the other hand, compositional decisions of the speaking persona deride the futility of his own aspirations. Hence, the suggestion that there is no direct link between the two extremes of the opposition.

In *what is the word* there is no physical borderline between 'here' and 'there' as these 'spaces' are separated in terms of their accessibility. Neither of these abstract categories bears any referential qualities. However, the former, though it eludes any form of expression (it is simply 'unnamable'), might be at least internally experienced. The latter remains, as a question, 'afar away over there'[8]. The former cannot be expressed. The latter cannot be experienced. The model of the world that emerges in this way sanctions separateness, solipsism and failure of communicative effort as its principles.

Finally, Part 7 (lines 42-50) is further subdivided. The variant presented in parts 3 and 4 re-appears (lines 42-44: 'seeing all this this here –' to be transformed in line 45 into 'folly for to see what –', which enlivens the juxtaposition I have just described. Then, the accepted variants combine into the most complete fragment of the sentence that appears in line 50:

'folly for to need to seem to glimpse afaint afar away over there what –'.

Its composition exposes poetical devices such as alliteration (folly for; afaint afar away); assonance (need-seem) and the almost obsessive syntactical multiplication (to need to seem to glimpse). Still, it discloses an elliptic and repetitive nature. The main fields of association can be best summarised as: 1) potentiality ('to need to seem'); 2) fragmentariness; 3) obscurity ('glimpse afaint' as opposed to 'see') and finally 4) spatial remoteness ('afar away over there' as contrasted with 'all this this here')[9]. I hope it is clear at

[8] See also Chapter 6 in Beckett's *Murphy* and its analysis in Marek Kędzierski, *Samuel Beckett*, Warszawa, Wiedza Powszechna 1990, pp. 185–214. Cf. James Acheson, *Murphy's Metaphysics*, in: *the Beckett Studies Reader*, S. E. Gontarski [ed.], Gainesville, University Press of Florida 1993, pp. 78–93.

[9] In *Beckett and the Apophatic in Selected Shorter Texts*, Brigitta Johansson draws somehow different conclusions from the final lines of *what is the word*: "The recurring term in this prose poem, 'the word', is ambiguous. It alludes both to the Johannean

this point: the fragment of the unfinished sentence, as it is presented in line 50, enlarges its semantic potential through both syntagmatic and paradigmatic interrelations within the entire structure[10].

When combined with the indicative aspect of the title/refrain as well as with the presented analysis of the composition, 'what' at the end of the fragmented sentence becomes a counterpoint to 'all this this here'. I believe the fragment is an account of the moment of an inexpressible vision. Semantically, the fragment echoes one of the mimetic episodes taken from *Company*:

> The light there was then. 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. A nook in the gorse. East beyond the sea the faint shape of high mountain. Seventy miles away according to your Longman. For the third of fourth time in your life. The first time you told them and were derided. All you had seen was cloud. 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 close them while you count hundred. Then open and strain again. Again and again. Till in the end it is there. Palest blue against the pale sky. You lie in the dark and are back in that light. Fall asleep in that sunless cloudless light. Sleep till morning light.[11]

Both fragments present the moment of an intimate vision that might be regarded as a folly. Both express longing for revelation. Both operate within the juxtaposition of 'here' and 'there'. In both cases the observer aspires to the remote, even if it is obscure and hardly visible. The poem *what is the word* functions as a conclusion without extra-textual premises. Despite its biographical context (Knowlson claims it was written immediately after Beckett's recovery from a coma[12]), the poem does not contain any straightforward interpretative clues that would contextualise abstract notions. This poem does not simply express authorial anxiety. It is not only an account of a failed communicative attempt. It is not exclusively about the autonomic nature of literature. The text of *what is the word* simultaneously activates all of these associations. To use a mathematical analogy: algebraic rules, and not arithmetic examples, are in the centre of attention.

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metaphor 'the Word' as Christ – one aspect of a triune God – and to the secular meaning of language and the notion of the creative word. The sacred aspect of the question 'what is the word' involves the idea that God is absent, unknown, and unnameable from a human perspective." (in: *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui* 2000, 9, p. 65.)

[10] Cf. George Steiner's remark on language in general: "Each word in either an oral or written communication reaches us charged with the potential of its entire history. All previous uses of this word or phrase are implicit or, as the physicists would say, 'implosive' in it." George Steiner, *What is Comparative Literature?*, in: George Steiner, *No Passion Spent: Essays 1978–1995*, Yale: Yale UP & London: Faber & Faber, 1996, p. 143.

[11] Samuel Beckett, *Company*, London, Calder, pp. 19–20.

[12] James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, London, Bloomsbury 1996, p. 700.

The final literary statement of Samuel Beckett – *what is the word* – constitutes an abstract model of the world based upon polarisation of binary oppositions. Ultimately 'all this this here' – touchable everyday experience - is a folly. But everything that eludes the sensory experience remains inaccessible, unknown, so its semiotic description is doomed to failure. Fragmented, abstracted, deformed, any communicative attempt is yet another folly. For two: an encoder and a decoder.

These are follies, however, worth describing in a grand manner.