

BECKETT  
DIGITAL  
MANUSCRIPT  
PROJECT

VOLUME

01

The Making of  
Samuel Beckett's  
*Stirrings Still /*  
*Soubresauts*  
—and—  
*Comment dire /*  
*what is the word*

DIRK VAN HULLE

## 2.3 *COMMENT DIRE / WHAT IS THE WORD*

When the English translation of *Comment dire* appeared in the *Sunday Correspondent* on 31 December 1989, it was accompanied by an article by John Calder, explaining that ‘the original came out of a notebook that Beckett began in 1988 and which it was hoped might turn into another short novel, but it is unlikely that any more of it will see the light of day’ (Calder 1989, 32). In this last text, Beckett presents the product as a production process: an attempt to write a single sentence.

But this presentation or re-enactment of a composition process may give the false impression that this is actually how the text came into being. The genesis of *Comment dire* proceeded differently. For instance, it did not start with ‘folie’ but with the word ‘mal’. In the first version the ‘comment dire’ motif was already present, but differently formulated: ‘quel est le mot’.

After briefly wondering what might be the word for ‘ce ceci’ or – as the addition in the left margin specifies – ‘ce ceci-ci’, the conclusion is that there is no word for it, ‘il n’y a pas de mot’ (Fig. 19). Yet the text goes on, until a few lines further two deleted lines indicate a temporary deadlock. They are followed by a blank line and the start of the second version, again with the words ‘mal de ce –’. In the fifth line the words ‘quel est le mot’ are substituted by ‘comment dire’.

Fig. 19: UoR MS 3316 f. 2r

mal de ce -  
 depuis -  
 mal depuis ce -  
 quel est le mot -  
 le mot pour ce -  
 ce celi -  
 il n'y a pas de mot -  
 mal donc depuis ce celi -  
 pas de mot pour ce celi -  
 mal donc depuis ce celi -  
 croire voir -  
 croire voir -  
 mal donc de ce celi -  
 depuis -  
 mal donc depuis ce celi -  
 mal de ce - depuis - mal de ce -  
 mal de ce -  
 depuis -  
 mal depuis ce -  
 ce -  
 quel est le mot comment dire -  
 la chose pour ce -  
 ce celi -  
 ce celi -  
 il n'y a pas de mot -  
 pas de mot pour ce celi -  
 mal donc de -  
 depuis -  
 mal donc depuis ce -  
 mal donc depuis ce -  
 ce celi -  
 ce celi dans le mot -  
 ce celi dans le mot celi -  
 mal donc depuis ce celi -  
 voir voir en fin -  
 mal, donc depuis ce celi -  
 croire voir -  
 mal donc depuis ce celi -  
 croire voir -  
 croire voir -  
 croire voir -  
 comment dire -

Repertoire Pastoral  
 10.4.88  
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Fig. 20: UoR MS 3316 f. 3r

~~can  
cost CAT -  
not done at point to cost-ci~~

3

*maat de ci -  
het maat de co -  
benen oc -  
deur open, en  
bevestigings-  
stuk -  
aan de deur -  
Cocci -  
~~Cocci~~*

~~home~~

~~domie~~

~~va~~

~~domie b~~

on at the cell -  
the young  
and the old ones ca-  
the night  
one night the first -  
the night - the  
the last night domie  
the night - the  
the night the ca-  
the night the ca-

folie 1

~~tanze~~  
ce =  
comment déjà -  
caci -  
caci - i  
ce caci - i

dome  
Val

folie

[illegible]

à  
à comment déjà -  
à voir -  
croire voir -  
quoi déjà -  
quoi est déjà  
ta-ta -  
am-bon  
ta-ta-suffoier-toin  
dormé ce -  
va ce -

The lines ‘il n’y a pas de mot – / pas de mot pour ce ceci-ci’ are crossed out. When the verb ‘voir’ is introduced, it is immediately followed by the meta-reflection that finally there is a verb: ‘verbe enfin’. This verb is nuanced when it becomes ‘croire voir’ and is repeated several times, until it is ‘enough’ (‘assez’). The subsequent ‘repos...’ is crossed out and followed by the pressing question ‘comment dire –’, the last line of this version.

The next recto page of the same notebook (UoR MS 3316 f. 3r; see Fig. 20) starts with the repeated exhortation ‘on –’ and ‘ON –’, followed by the hyphen or ‘trait d’union’ insisting on continuation. The immediate result is a 9-line partial draft, followed by a more extended (fourth) version, still opening with the word ‘mal’. On the left hand page Samuel Beckett seems to be asking himself the question whether it would be better to leave out the hyphens (‘sans traits?’), but instead of using the standard French term ‘traits d’union’ he calls them ‘traits de désunion’ (UoR MS 3316 f. 2v). In one of the other paralipomena on this verso, the idea of omitting the hyphen is applied to the words ‘comment dire’:

comment dire –  
comment –  
comment dire                      (sans trait ni point)

This way the closing lines of *Comment dire* were prepared in the paralipomena on the verso, which strictly speaking do not belong to any particular version – unlike the following cluster of notes on the same verso page (UoR MS 3316 f. 2v). This 8-line cluster (hidden by the piece of paper pasted on top of it at a later stage) opens with the word ‘folie’ and substitutes the opening of the fourth version on the right-hand page. This is a remarkable version because it bifurcates after line 18: ‘comment dire du mal <sup>folie</sup> donc vu ce ceci-ci à –’. The attempts to find out what follows after ‘à’ are divided into two columns, the left one starting with ‘à voir – / croire –’, the right one more hesitantly with ‘à – / comment dire – / à voir – / croire voir – / quoi – / où – / quoi où – / là – / où ça là – / là-bas – / (...)’ (UoR MS 3316 f. 3r; see Fig. 20). With the question ‘où ça là –’ the text takes the form of a dialogue.

On the piece of paper pasted on top of the ‘folie’ cluster on the verso (UoR MS 3316 f. 2v), Beckett started a new draft (version 5), combining all the new elements that are scattered over folios 2v-3r. It opens with the word ‘folie’ and ends with the triplet ‘comment dire – / comment – / comment dire’

(ending without a hyphen). The questions ‘quoi’ and ‘où’ are pressing. The topography of the document suggests an answer to the latter question. After the question ‘où ça’ Beckett writes:

comment dire –  
là-bas –  
au delà  
au loin –  
loin là-bas

Between ‘loin’ and ‘là-bas’ Beckett subsequently added a forward slash to indicate an addition in the right margin:

loin / là-bas                      / là

The addition of ‘là’ creates an intratextual reference to Beckett’s short poem ‘Là’, which he sent to James Knowlson on 21 September 1987. The poem’s first line ‘là où jamais avant’ is more explicit, but the omission of ‘où jamais avant’ makes the place ‘where never before’ all the more haunting. Its ‘undoing’ has the effect of phantom limb pain. Moreover, Beckett insisted on adding the same word ‘là’ between ‘comment dire –’ and ‘là-bas –’, this time using an arrow: ‘→ là’

It is remarkable that Beckett simultaneously crossed out the words ‘~~au delà~~’. The arrows, forward slashes and other metamarks<sup>25</sup> situate the ‘ineffable departure’ within the topography of the page. The importance of these metamarks is the materiality of their marginal reference. Beckett does not cease to look for the limits of the empirical, but he refuses to go beyond; postulating an hereafter or speculating about a great beyond (‘au delà’) would only be a bogus solution.

In the sixth version, the final triplet is replaced by the couplet ‘comment dire – / comment dire’ (UoR MS 3316 f. 3v). Beckett changed ‘voir’ into ‘entrevoir’ (‘to glimpse’). All the additions of the verb ‘entrevoir’ are inserted

25 In French, these metamarks are called ‘becquets’ (see Grésillon 1994, 241). A further analysis of ‘Les becquets de Beckett’ is part of the *SBT/A* selection of papers from the Cerisy colloquium ‘Présence de Beckett’ (August 2005).



between the lines, suggesting again that the materiality of the document may have had an influence on the composition process of this highly metafictional text. The topography of the document also plays a role in the next version (UoR MS 3316 f. 4r), where Beckett adds one line by means of an arrow pointing to the word 'loin –' in the left margin.

The text on folio UoR MS 3316 f. 4r(2) (pasted in the notebook on top of UoR MS 3316 f. 4r) is the last handwritten version, and is dated by Beckett: '29.10.88'. The physical proximity of these two versions on f. 4r is misleading, for chronologically they are separated by the handwritten version in the Barbara Bray correspondence (TCD 10948-1-707-1v and 1r), which has an extra 'folie' and an 'extra -e in 'vouloire' [sic] on line 31. Like the version in the Bray correspondence, the version on UoR MS 3316 f. 4r(2) has a title ('Comment dire') and a blank line between the penultimate and the last line. The typescript (UoR 3317 f. 1r) was subsequently translated into English (UoR MS 3506 f. 1r).

In his copybook, in the top margin of the first version (UoR MS 3316 f. 2r; see Fig. 19), Beckett has written a few enigmatic words that are difficult to decipher. Laura Cerrato (1999) transcribes them as 'Weep ! for end.' But the transcription 'Keep ! for end' seems equally plausible, as this deliberately unfinished text seems to be conceived as the last. It is a sort of testament presenting the creative process as an integral part of Beckett's works, and his entire *œuvre* as an unfinished 'work in progress' – which is reflected in Beckett's decision to keep his manuscripts and to entrust so many of them to university libraries such as Trinity College Dublin and the University of Reading.