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The reading eye from *scriptura continua* to modernism: orality and punctuation between Beckett's *L'image* and *Comment c'est/How It is*

Anthony Cordingley

- 1 Samuel Beckett's prose piece of 1959, *L'image*¹, stages a dramatic contest between language as written and as oral. It began as an off-shoot from an early manuscript of *Comment c'est*, the novel Beckett began just before Christmas, 1958, finished and published in 1961 and subsequently translated into English as *How It Is* by 1964. From the punctuated sentences of the early drafts, *L'image* evolved into a short prose piece (ten pages in the Minuit edition) where, beyond the unit of the word, the only punctuation between the first capital and the final full stop, ten pages later, is the space separating each word from the next. The narrative voice is marked with the kinds of repetitions, back tracking and false starts typical of spoken discourse, normally censored from the written record. Yet spoken prosody is harmonised through poetic effects and a rhythm whose musicality is beyond everyday speech. The voice finds traction with the reader through its typographic presentation: without any punctuation the reader is forced to listen for the rhythms of the prose to delimit clauses. This voice is abstracted in a world composed of nothing but itself, its body and a kind of primordial mud. The ostensible business of the fiction is to reproduce with accuracy an image from this body, this memory. The content of the memory is itself arbitrary, the narrator chances upon the "memory" of when he was sixteen, climbing a mountain with his girlfriend. The story witnesses the effort to control the memory's form, to specify it in language without its factual integrity usurped by the controlling energies of prosody in speech, poetic associations within language itself, or formal constraints of its record in written language.
- 2 In the midst of the recollection the narrator says "*j'ai l'absurde impression que nous me regardons*" (14), such a deliberate incoherence places language as the subject matter.²

Foregrounded since Saussure argued for an arbitrariness of the sign – its assemblage of differences and lack of a positive value – the issue has been at the heart of contemporary debates in linguistics, semiotics and literary theory, and is played out through accounting for the divisions of form-content, *parole-langue*, spoken-written. These problems focus into the scene of writing and reading with *L'image* – the elimination of punctuating marks attempts not only to recast the written word as a unit of spoken language but disrupts the rapid, silent reading of the text. The written condition of the word in *L'image* exhibits its desire to be heard as audible voice and not the grapheme of written culture. To approach the relationship between orality, text and reading we find a useful point of comparison between two very different reading cultures: Beckett's and that of his Irish countrymen in the seventh century. This frames the historical development of rapid silent reading, from the moment of its beginning to modernist attempts to disrupt its hegemony in the interpretation of structured written prose, to make the sentence a character of sound. A neurolinguistic account of the interaction between the reading eye, punctuation and the written sentence will help us to judge the implications of Beckett's dramatisation of this contest of word as image and sound, in the process of which we discover a fundamentally ironic dramatisation of a modern reading predicament.

- 3 Jakobson's poetic function – "The set (*Einstellung*) towards the message as such, focuses on the message for its own sake" (Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics", 69) – operates in the linguistic realm of the text: "The function of a given message is an intrinsic quality of that message itself; thus, the focus on the message is an inherent quality of the poem" (Waugh, 62). In 1960, George A. Miller, psychologist and proponent of the "cognitive revolution" in literary studies, commented on Jakobson's poetic function pre-empting certain modern cognitive and reader response approaches:

The poet announces, by the form in which he writes it, that this product is a poem; the announcement carries an invitation to consider the sounds of these words as well as their meaning. If we wish to participate in this game, we will adopt an attitude of phonetic, as well as semantic, sensitivity to the words he uses. (390)

- 4 An imminence and a potentiality, poetic language is an invitation to the reader to adopt a certain ear to the text. Yet there is not here the empiricism of Piaget, whose "*tout est dans le texte*" (everything is in the text) remains, nevertheless, to be constructed by a reader: "*L'objet est connu comme qu'au travers des actions du sujet qui, en le transformant parvient à reconstituer à la fois les lois de ces transformations (compréhendant son mode de production) et les invariants qu'elles comportent.*" (The object is encountered through the actions of the subject who in transforming it manages to reconstitute in the moment those rules of transformation [understanding its mode of production] and the invariants it carries.) (116). This doesn't enter into the realm of George Poulet's phenomenological account of reading where the reader surrenders to the consciousness of the text – "I am on loan to another, and this other thinks, feels, suffers, and acts within me" (1323). In Kristeva's semiotics the reader's identification of a speaking subject in the text sees a constant passage from subject to non-subject in poetic language: "*Dans cet espace autre où les lois logiques de la parole sont ébranlées, le sujet se dissout et à la place du signe c'est le heurt de signifiants s'annulant l'un l'autre qui s'instaure*" (In this other space where the logic of speech is unsettled, the subject is dissolved and in place of the sign is instituted the collision of signifiers cancelling one another). (273). In his extended critique of Kristeva in *Pour la poétique II*, Henri Meschonnic argues that rather than talking about the disappearance of the subject it is

more useful to stress both the impersonality of writing and how the reader attempts to form its fictional persona (54). Though neither Meschonnic nor Miller allow the poetic function to reside entirely with the reader as Stanley Fish did in *Is there a text in this class?*, an extreme version of American reader response theory.

- 5 Yet Miller might have considered that bringing the voice into relief from its other habitual 'fluent' reading practices will often make a reader (at least) intermittently conscious of their own language, of the change in their own reading and perhaps even the sound of their own voice. If we accept Derrida's argument in *de la Grammatologie* that the nature of voice as consciousness, the *s'entendre parler* [hearing-understanding-oneself speak] (17), institutes a myth of metaphysical self-presence, we may nevertheless consider how differences of voice in reading will bring about different reflections of that 'self' upon 'itself'. In the context of 1920s and 30s modernism, Gertrude Stein approached this question when, with reference to her novel *The Making of Americans* in the lecture "Poetry and Grammar", she spoke implicitly of a reader engaging Miller's semantic and phonetic "sensitivity". In Stein's complex sentences one function of the length, minimal punctuation, repetition and variation of clauses is to negate complacency in reading (one effect of punctuation), to induce self-consciousness in reading: "A long complicated sentence should force itself upon you, make you know yourself knowing it" (320-1).

Punctuation and the verbal image: a case of comparison in scripting modern and premodern voices

- 6 From their shape on the page, it is clear that the words of *L'image* are not a species of conventional written language: the eye immediately notices the absence of capitals and punctuation marks – phrases are soon understood as delimited by prosodic rhythm. The first indentation (though absent from the first published version), initial capital and, ten pages later, the final full stop each have little to do with syntax or semantics, rather they mark a passing of time, framing the dramatic effort to build the image. The graphic unit which is respected throughout is the written word – accents on letters and apostrophes are retained as is the capitalisation of one proper noun, Malebranche.³
- 7 In his letter to Alex Kaun of 1937 Beckett expresses a desire to disrupt "the materiality of the word surface" in a way opposed to James Joyce's "apotheosis of the word" or Gertrude Stein's "logographs". He calls his project the "literature of the unword", an imperative to move beyond the "official English", which includes writing within prescribed syntactical and graphic norms, of language assumed to be stable in its representative capacity, located in recognizable genres. He says, "more and more my own language appears before me as a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at things" (*Disjecta* 117). In Joyce's *Ulysses*, where punctuation is suppressed during Molly Bloom's interior monologue, Molly still speaks in grammatically complete sentences. Virginia Woolf's stream of consciousness writing may depart from the syntax of written language, though she continues to avail herself of its written conventions. In Stein's tome of 1925, *The Making of Americans*, she experimented with unusually long sentences built of complex clauses, which are typically variations of repeated phrases strung together with conjunctions and prepositions though sparsely punctuated. Beckett's attitudes towards punctuation from *L'image* to *Comment c'est/How It Is* develop the

theory of punctuation implicit in *The Making of Americans*, and extrapolated upon by Stein in "Poetry and Grammar".

- 8 Stein's hostility towards punctuation marks stems from her belief that written prose is so structured that that they are mostly redundant. She loathes question marks and exclamation marks because they are precisely what the sense of a sentence should impose upon the reader. Capitals, she can either take or leave because they are purposeless. She is particularly loathsome of commas because they are servile marks; she likens them to the butlers of language, who take off our coats and put on our shoes for us, they do the work which the reader should do. A comma regulates our breathing though, "It is not like stopping altogether which is what a period does stopping altogether has something to do with going on, but taking a breath well you are always taking a breath and why emphasize one breath rather than another breath (320-21)." In this sentence, prosodic pauses fall after "altogether", "does", "on", "breath", "well", "breath"; yet despite having only one comma the reader/listener easily senses the structure of the written sentence. While punctuation can specify logical relations between clauses, prosody does this in speech. In *The Making of Americans*, for instance, Stein's attempts to score prosodic rhythm into her prose render punctuation largely superfluous because "punctuation cannot be described as a means of representing the prosodic properties of utterances" (Huddleston and Pullum 1728).
- 9 Stein distains nouns because they claim to represent the thing which they do not – for her meaning resides in effective language use. The attack on nouns translates into an attack on form and so she wants to dynamite "newspaper narrative", which can include anything from the newspaper to dreary realism, anything where rhetorical effect in language is neutralised or predictable. Furthermore, she deplores the inclination in the German language towards neology. She objects to the invention of new names and new words because this should require a tremendous amount of "inner necessity". She defines herself against what has since evolved into a very identifiably Joycean figure:

Language as a real thing is not imitation either of sounds or colours or emotions it is an intellectual recreation and there is no possible doubt about it and it is going to go on being that as long as humanity is anything. So everyone must stay with the language their language that has come to be spoken and written and which has in it all the history of its intellectual recreation. (331)
- 10 In *Ulysses*, neologism isn't the hyperactive trope it is in *Finnegans Wake* but there is no doubt that its exuberant language is the antithesis to what is suggested here by Stein, or Beckett, in his "literature of the unword".
- 11 Despite the striking form of its page – where unpunctuated words in lower case form a clean rectangle of ink – *L'image* is not situated in the tradition, from George Herbert's pictograms to Mallarmé's typographic experimentation to the concrete poetry of the early twentieth century, which foregrounds language as a visual signifier. "No symbols where none intended" Beckett ends his novel *Watt*, and the materiality of the word in *L'image* tests the possibilities of an "unword" – engaging what Walter Ong identified in modern language, its incapacity to express orality without implying its literacy, writing (5-12). The form of the page, initially surprising to the eye, is subject to the effects of repetition: unlike the concrete poem's desire for discrete closure, the narrative voice spills between each of the ten pages of *L'image*, one page barely distinguishable from the next. Curiously enough, there is at one level a similar effect to that of Apollinaire's ideograms, which prune away verbosity in their telegraphic style, and where the initial speed of the visual impression undergoes a reversal through the demands that opaque,

materialised language place upon the reader's attention. Rather than letting the eye race to the end of the sentence, stanza or even poem, the form of Apollinaire's ideograms makes the eye slow down and look (Bohn, 321). Similarly, the eye which encounters Beckett's text immediately registers the dissolution of that apparatus of graphic convention (which roots word to page); and as it becomes clear that the prose doesn't conform to the anticipated patterns of prosodic rhythm engrained in writing, the efficiency of the reading eye is checked. This opens a space for sound to be heard.

From *scriptura continua* to seeing the sound

- 12 The practice in late antiquity and the early medieval period was for scribes to write in *scriptura continua*⁴, that is, where letters sit next to each other on a page without inter-word space, and without distinctions between upper and lower case, commas, full stops, and other forms of punctuation. In a pivotal moment in the history of writing, *scriptura continua* was first systematically disrupted by the practice of precocious Irish scribes in the seventh century (Saenger 23; Parkes 2).
- 13 The insertion of space between words and the introduction of symbols of punctuation was rooted in the desire to make Latin more readable to those for whom it was a foreign language. This was particularly the case for the Irish because their spoken language was not a Romance language. This is not to ignore the distinctions punctuation subsequently held for grammarians and rhetoricians, who emphasized punctuation's function in logical determination or the representation of rhetorical modes of speech respectively. Indeed, in late antiquity, the rhetoricians' attitude towards punctuation is represented in Cicero's scorn for readers who relied on punctuation: "*ne infinite feratur ut flumen oratio, quae non aut spiritu pronuntiantis aut interductu librarii sed numero coacta debet insistere*" (that the sentence may not drift along vaguely like a river, it should end, not because the speaker stops to breathe or the copyist has placed a mark of punctuation, but because the rhythm has brought it to a necessary close) (1xviii, 228). This is very similar to Gertrude Stein's belief in the redundancy of punctuation in writing due to the formality of written prosodic rhythm – the difference is that the rules governing the rhythms of Cicero's prose, the metrical patterning of phrases and the *cursus*, were already defined logical and syntactical relations in rhetorical language. But without a native ear for Latin, Irish scribes found it very difficult to determine the boundaries of phrases within the unspaced blocks of lettering which characterised the scriptural transferral of this rhetorical speech.
- 14 Irish scribes' feeling for the Latin word as an isolatable unit stems from their reliance on the morphological criteria of the ancient grammarians for whom word classes were 'parts of speech'. This was visually translated by Irish scribes abandoning *scriptura continua* to make the parts of speech discernable to the foreign eye. Their practice connects with the Christian concern for the written word as a spiritual medium. Following Aristotle and Augustine they believed that letters were signs of signs through which one may converse with the absent – Augustine writes "*inuentae sunt autem litterae per quas possumus et cum absentibus colloqui: sed ista signa sunt uocum, cum ipsae uoces in sermone nostro earum quas cogitamus signa sunt rerum*" (the words themselves in our speech are signs of the things of which we are thinking) (XV, x, 19). Though at around the time that the Irish began interspacing their texts Isidore of Seville conceived of letters as signs *without* sounds: while they conveyed the sayings of the absent, letters

- and words did so through a visual impression on the mind. This concept relates to Isidore's perspective in his book of etymologies, the *Libri etymologiarum*, where the power (*uis*) manifested in a word is apprehended only when the word's etymology and origin is known. Isidore thought that while reading, the voice was a distraction from the mind's grasping of this power. From this belief Isidore recommended silent reading.
- 15 To aid the eye's comprehension Isidore developed a grammatical hierarchy reflecting the Roman rhetoricians' analysis of discourse as divided into *cola* (or *membra*) and *commata*. He recommended the use of punctuating symbols such as the *punctus* and the *positura* (the '7'-shaped mark or 'comma') which were adopted and adapted by the Irish. Such visual markers came to be relied upon by readers in discerning the limits of *clausulae* within text and the rhythms of the *cursus*. Parkes contends that Isidore's book of etymologies was widely circulated in the west at least up until the ninth century and that it had particular impact among the Irish and their pupils, encouraging them to regard the written word as having its own 'substance' and a status equivalent to, but independent of, the spoken word (22-3).
- 16 Irish scribal practices were exported through the monasteries to the British Isles where punctuation signs grew in number. Conventions for their usage came to be more widely recognized in literate communities and moving to the British Isles, these symbols were expanded upon and through the church came to influence continental manuscript culture. Interestingly though, Parkes shows how in the period of the graphic development in Ireland, the Irish were reluctant to introduce the same changes to texts in their own, spoken language.⁵ It is not until the late middle ages that silent reading was a much more common practice, but the course away from speaking or murmuring texts, was made possible by the introduction of punctuating space between words. As Saenger points out, isolating one word from the next amidst a block of unspaced text had once been the cognitive function of the reader of *scriptura continua*, but this punctuation then became the task of the scribe (13). Over time, word separation and other visual marks of punctuation altered and simplified the neurophysiological process of reading. This was the crucial shift which in future centuries allowed the reader to receive silently and simultaneously the text and encoded information that facilitates both comprehension and oral performance (Saenger 13; Parkes 49). While rapid, silent reading is not the exclusive practice of the modern reader – the diversity of daily reading situations requires a flexibility of reading speeds to facilitate comprehension – the structured nature of modern prose is easily absorbed by a reading eye such that it scans faster than the sound of words registered in the brain. Much faster than normal speech, the sound of text is chopped and blurred.
- 17 Yet in the *Psychology of Reading*, contemporary neurolinguists Rayner and Pollatsek find evidence that when omitting typographic symbols of punctuation from the prose the speed of the reader's comprehension is disrupted. This is because we have come to rely on these visual signs to regulate the saccadic movements of the eye (the jumps which our eyes make across a page when reading). The brain groups words together into recognisable units determined by their visual form. We use this mental and physical interaction when reading to determine the syntactical boundaries in the written sentence. It is the interaction of visual and syntactical consistency which allows us to read silently and rapidly (Rayner and Pollatsek 133).

Feeling with the eyes, seeing with the tongue

La langue se charge de boue un seul remède alors la rentrer et la tourner dans la bouche la boue l'avaler ou la rejeter question de savoir si elle est nourrissante et perspectives sans y être obligé par le fait de boire souvent j'en prends une bouchée c'est une des mes ressources la garde un bon moment question de savoir si avalée elle me nourrirait et perspectives qui s'ouvrent ce ne sont pas de mauvais moments me dépenser tout est là la langue ressort rose dans la boue que font les mains pendant ce temps il faut toujours voir ce que font les mains eh bien la gauche nous l'avons vu tient toujours le sac et la droite eh bien la droite au bout d'un moment je la vois là-bas au bout de son bras allongé au maximum dans l'axe de la clavicule si ça peut se dire ou plutôt se faire qui s'ouvre et se referme dans la boue s'ouvre et se referme c'est une autre de mes ressources ce petit geste m'aide je ne sais pourquoi j'ai comme ça des petits trucs qui sont d'un bon secours même rasant les murs sous le ciel changeant je devais être malin déjà elle ne doit pas être bien loin un mètre à peine mais je la sens loin un jour elle s'en ira toute seule sur ses quatre doigts en comptant le pouce car il en manque (9-10)

The tongue gets clogged with mud only one remedy then pull it in and suck it swallow the mud or spit question to know whether it is nourishing and vistas though not having to drink often I take a mouthful it's one of my resources last a moment with that question to know whether of swallowed it would nourish and opening of vistas they are not bad moments tire myself out that's the point the tongue lolls out again rosy in the mud what are the hands at all this time one must always see where the hands are at well the left as we have seen still holds the sack and the right well the right after a while I see it way off at the end of its arm full stretch in the axis of the clavicle if that can be said or rather done opening and closing in the mud opening and closing it's another of my resources this small gesture helps me I know not why I have such little devices that assist me along even when hugging the walls under the changing skies already I must have been quite shrewd it mustn't be that far a bare yard but it feels far it will go some day by itself on its four fingers thumb included for one is missing (165)

- 18 The sentences of *L'image* are grammatical even if unpunctuated; this opening passage is steeped in the typical discourse of inner speech. Among the features of such discourse Jakobson identifies rhetorical self questioning – “*question de savoir si elle est nourrissante*” (question to know whether it is nourishing), “*si ça peut se dire dire ou plutôt se faire*” (if that can be said or rather done) – and the inverted answer and question game where the subject knows beforehand the reply to the question he will put to himself – “*que font les mains pendant ce temps il faut toujours voir ce que font les mains eh bien*” (what are the hands at all this time one must always see where the hands are at well) (Jakobson, “Language in Opposition” 53).⁶ In *L'image* the search for legs and eyes re-enacts this ritual, and the self affirming, phatic “eh bien”, or, “oh” comes with each discovery. Redundant internal dialogue takes place in the mental wanderings and retracings – “*j'ignore d'où je tiens ces histoires de fleurs et de saisons je les tiens un point c'est tout*” (12) (I don't know where I get these stories of flowers and seasons I've got them full stop that's it), “*j'ignore d'où je tiens ces histoires d'animaux je les tiens un point c'est tout*” (13) (I don't know where I get these stories of animals I've got them full stop that's it)⁷ – and in hesitations and reformulations – “*l'avaler ou la rejeter question de savoir si elle est nourrissante... question de savoir si avalée elle me nourrirait... question de savoir pourquoi une laisse dans cette immensité de verdure*” (10-4) (swallow the mud or spit question to know whether it is nourishing ... question to know whether if swallowed it would nourish ... question to know why a leash in this immensity of verdure) (165-167). The “un point”

as ‘full stop’ or ‘period’ is comic in the context of an entirely unpunctuated prose while also suggesting the inescapability of literacy in modern speech.

- 19 The spoken voice is, for Barthes, in a state of perpetual “innocence”. It is fresh, natural, spontaneous, truthful, expressive of a kind of pure interiority. The idea appears not to be that speakers never lie but that they truthfully reveal their lying states – in speech “*l’innocence est toujours exposée*” (our innocence is always exposed). But when our voices pass into text we protect ourselves, we monitor and censor ourselves, we block our arrogances, self-deprecations, waverings, ignorances and often our pain – all the *moirés* of our imagination, the personal tussle of our *moi* (Barthes, 10). What if the voice on the page is not the public and intellectual “*dialogue*” Barthes sees mediating these two realms, but simply a narrative voice engrained with those *moirés* of its spoken discourse? Perhaps as purely indirect discourse the ‘speech’ of the narrator might be thought to be even more “innocent” – we access, it may seem, the uncensored monologue of the self, complete with its internal dialogue. But this is not poetic improvisation or even automatic writing, there isn’t the innocence of either spoken or indirect discourse but the theatricality of feigned speech.
- 20 In the parallel evolution of this text in *Comment c’est*, Beckett’s revisions from draft to draft gradually eroded the grammaticality of the written sentence. He struck out large numbers of prepositions, articles, conjunctions – many short words which provide logical connectivity in prose. Peering into the private world of the manuscripts, we find some of the old garb of a ‘healthy’, graphical normality: capitals, commas and full stops; the complete expression of syntactical relationships in sentences. For example, the first version of what was to become the eighth paragraph of the published edition contains grammatical, fully punctuated sentences, and subject and predicate are still in tact.

~~Je suis devenu plus simple~~ <Les temps ont changé>. Les <rares>questions que je me pose, et que je ne m’interdis plus de me poser, ne ressemblent pas à celles d’autrefois d’antan. Je ne dis pas, par exemple, D’où vient ce sac, -#<?> ou, S’agit-il vraiment de moi? Non. Comment ai-je échoué ici ? ou S’agit-il <Est -ce> vraiment de moi? Non. Je ne sais pas si c’est <là> un bien, ou si c’est un mal, ~~plus~~ un mal probablement. Je sais seulement que ça ne m’intéresse pas, d’où ce sac vient, et que si ce n’est pas moi ça ferait <fait> aussi bien l’affaire, et ainsi de suite. Soudain quelqu’un est là, en train de me parle, ou simplement de parler, sans que j’éprouve le besoin de me perdre en conjectures à son sujet. Non. Non, ~~mais j’écou~~ J’écoute simplement, ou je n’écoute pas, ce qu’il a à dire, et ~~pui pour ensu~~ ensuite le répéter à ma manière, si je le juge digne d’intérêt. Je dirai même que je ne suis pas fâché d’avoir ainsi de nouvelles de la vie, de temps en temps. ~~? je ne dis pas que c’est bien.~~ Je sais maintenant que je ne risque pas d’y retourner et que personne ne me l’exige le demande. (207)⁸

- 21 This draft was revised through six subsequent manuscripts until it began to resemble the form of the finished version. In early drafts the prose style evolved from the kind above to one similar to that towards the end of *L’Innommable*: sentences burgeon into long sequences of phrases punctuated by commas. Though here we can see short sentences with capitals and punctuation, commas and question marks which still afford the reader the aid of graphic signs to indicate the order of syntax.

Temps changés, moi aussi <ici commence la première partie,> je ne disais plus, D’où vient ce sac ? Comment ai-je échoué ici ? Est-ce moi ? impossible,(208)

- 22 This is almost like a short hand of the original paragraph. Some articles and verbs have been erased, as for example in the opening fragment which was originally, “*Les temps ont changé*”, while now the expected conjunction is missing between “*Temps changés*”

and “*moi aussi*”. The flexibility of this prose syntax sees it gravitate towards the kind of practice associated with poetry where sonic effects begin to delimit clauses. Indeed at this point in the manuscript’s evolution we can see how rhyme interacts with prosody to define units of syntactical sense: “*temps changés / moi aussi / ici commence la première partie / je ne disais plus / d’où vient ce sac / comment ai-je échoué ici / est-ce moi impossible*”. Jakobson believed that, “Only in poetry with its regular reiteration of equivalent units is the time of the speech flow experienced, as it is – to cite another semiotic pattern – with musical time” (Jakobson, “Linguistics and Poetics” 72). Similarly we see here Beckett’s revising towards phrases extending for two rhythmic beats (doubled in the third and sixth); the pattern stretches the last “*moi*” rendering the space of mental consideration, and rejection: *impossible*. Such patterns are intermittent and flexible, there is no overarching regularity to the prosody though here we see how the tonic rhymes help to determine the rhythmical units.

- 23 The paragraph endures fine tuning over five subsequent revisions until it found its final form:

première partie avant Pim comment échoué ici pas question on ne sait pas on ne dit pas et le sac d’où le sac et moi si c’est moi pas question impossible pas la force sans importance
part one before Pim how I got here no question not known not said and the sack whence the sack and me if it’s me no question impossible too weak no importance
(2-3)

- 24 The most elementary, grammatical expression of the final words of this paragraph might have been *c’est impossible, je n’ai pas la force, cela est sans importance*. Prosiopesis, parataxis and asyndeta are features of this language, chopped phrases are linked together with conjunctions and words of logical connectivity. In either spoken or written discourse a reader would expect at least: *[c’est] impossible [parce que / et / quand même] [je n’ai] pas la force [mais / donc / bon] [c’est / cela est] sans importance*. Speakers are not prone to leave out articles, pronouns and auxiliary verbs from their discourse, as occurs in this typical paragraph from *Comment c’est*. Though by erasing these words Beckett cuts from the frame of the eye exactly those short-function words which Rayner and Pollatsek believe are most important in organizing eye movement in reading. It is around these that the eye frames its saccadic skips, because they are particularly easy to decode in parafoveal vision (Rayner and Pollatsek 133). The effect is to slow the reader’s eye and allow the text to be heard, as if a reader were speaking it to himself, or reading it aloud. Indeed this seems to be the point of the technique, it interacts with a foregrounded poetic function when the narrator says, “so many words so many lost one every three two every five first the sound then the sense” (123).
- 25 The narrator of *Comment c’est/How It Is* hears the voice of another, the “other above in the light” as the voice in his head. He claims to be a scribe both quoting and copying that voice – Beckett specified this voice to Hugh Kenner as the “narrator/narrated”.⁹ This voice was “once quaqu then in me when the panting stops” – it has been internalised and he hears it between hearing his own breaths (the panting). Otherwise he is speaking/murmuring reciting the voice, and there are insistent references to his movements of the lower jaw and to his mouthing what he hears in his head. He hears himself in French “*moi le cerveau bruits toujours lointains*”. The noise is specifically divided in its English translation, “I am the brain of two sounds distant” because he is embroiled in a scene of self-translation – echoing in his mind is the original voice (in whichever language that may have been) and the French.¹⁰ In this contemporary scribal

situation, the narrator/narrated is speaking-reading-repeating-mouthing (all are suggested) this voice that seals him in his mental world. Whichever it is, his isolation from competing sounds in fact positions him like a reader in a library of late antiquity whose very projection of voice focused the self upon that of the text and acted as a neurophysiological screen blocking out the sounds of adjacent readers.¹¹ In *L'image* Beckett's desire is to test one discourse in a hermetic enclosure to escape slippages and dialogism. Though by the time he reaches *Comment c'est/ How It Is* he dramatises Ong's unthinkability of orality from within the graphocentrism of contemporary language. Beckett can return the written word to sound at the expense of formal written language, ironically, however, the extraction of voice from a reader does not ultimately return the word to speech, but rather to something like that fragmented language heard in the head during the act of rapid, silent reading – that act so entwined with the visual culture of the printed page.

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NOTES

1. "L'Image" was published in *A Quartely Review* in 1959 and then as a separate volume by Minuit in 1988. All references to *L'image* here are from the Minuit edition. All English translations are taken from Edith Fournier's translation in Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Short Prose, 1929-1989*.
2. "I have the absurd impression that we see me". The French is ungrammatical.
3. The first version has nineteen commas and the rare capitalisation, such as "Mon cheri" and "Mon amour", all of which had been removed from the Minuit edition, save the capital for Malebranche.
4. Saenger uses the term "*scriptura continua*" in *Space Between Words*, while in *Pause and Effect*, Parkes uses "*scriptio continua*" to refer to the same practice.
5. The malleability of the foreign language is one point of connection with *L'image*, yet Beckett was bilingual at the time of its writing. However, his first French novel *Molloy* shows that Beckett was more than capable of writing a long and beautifully balanced, classically styled French sentence. The point is not being made that Beckett had difficulty with understanding the foreign language or its writing.
6. The "well" of Fournier's translation "well the left as we have seen still holds the sack" mixes the phatic with a logical relationship more strongly than in Beckett's French. The effect lessens the surprise in favour of the colluding function, this "well" is like 'and so', 'as we know'.
7. These two translations are mine – Fournier's translation skirts around the phatic "*un point*".
8. Samuel Beckett, *Comment c'est/How It Is*, 207. San serif font represents words in the manuscript which survive into the final manuscript but in a different order or position. Words in < > are autograph revisions.

9. In a letter to Hugh Kenner quoted in, Ruby Cohn, *Back to Beckett* (New Jersey: Princeton U P, 1973), 233.
 10. Samuel Beckett, *Comment c'est/How It Is*, 114-115.
 11. F.J. McGuigan and W.I. Rodier, "Effects of Auditory Stimulation on Covert Oral Behaviour During Silent Reading," *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 76 (1965): 649-55.
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ABSTRACTS

A partir du 7^{ème} siècle, les scribes irlandais ont développé les premiers signes de ponctuation dans la perspective de mieux comprendre les textes latins qu'ils copiaient. Quand Samuel Beckett efface la ponctuation de son texte en prose, *L'image*, publié en 1959 il refuse au lecteur la béquille graphique sur laquelle, pendant l'évolution de la culture graphique, l'oeil avait appris à compter pour régulariser sa lecture rapide silencieuse. Contrairement à l'expérimentation typographique qui a beaucoup marqué la poésie d'avant-garde au vingtième siècle, le texte de Beckett révèle son désir d'être entendu comme son, s'approchant ainsi de la théorie de la ponctuation développée par Gertrude Stein. En revanche, quand Beckett a réintégré *L'image* dans son roman *Comment c'est/How It Is*, la fragmentation de la structure de la phrase a été une entrave supplémentaire dans la délimitation par l'œil des unités sémantiques. Dans *Comment c'est/How It Is*, une disposition rythmique unique commence à organiser le sens, que le lecteur doit écouter pour comprendre. L'effort de produire un texte "oral" dans la culture graphique ne nécessite pas seulement de sortir des conventions graphiques de la page, mais aussi des rythmes prosodiques qui organisent la parole dans la culture elle-même.

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