

At the End, Writing **Beckett, Agamben, Berardi**

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Abstract

This article reads Beckett's poems "Mort de A.D." and "What is the Word" for how they voice and incorporate notions of formal and epistemic endings, or the lack of an ending. These two poems, written in different phases of Beckett's career, are useful in mapping a shift in Beckett's "problems" with endings. Putting Beckett in conversation with the contemporary Italian philosophers Giorgio Agamben and Franco Berardi specifically their analyses of "infancy" and "conjunctions" respectively, this article pays close attention to Beckett's poetics of ending, or rather the impossibility of writing about the end.

Résumé

Cet article lit les poèmes de Beckett « Mort de A.D. » et « What is the Word » pour évaluer comment ils expriment et intègrent les notions de fin formelles et épistémiques, ou d'absence de fin. Ces deux poèmes, écrits à différentes phases de la carrière de Beckett, sont utiles pour cartographier un changement dans les « problèmes » de Beckett avec les fins. Situer Beckett en conversation avec les philosophes italiens contemporains Giorgio Agamben et Franco Berardi en particulier leur analyse respectivement de « l'enfance » et des « conjonctions », cet article accorde une attention particulière à la poétique de la fin dans la poésie de Beckett, ainsi qu'à l'impossibilité d'écrire sur la fin.

Keywords

Poetry – Beckett – Agamben – Berardi – Literary Modernism – Ending

I/ And

First published in "Cahiers des Saisons" in 1955, "Mort de A.D." commemorates the death of Beckett's friend and colleague from the Irish Red Cross Hospital in Saint-Lô, Arthur Darley, who died of tuberculosis in 1948 while being treated in a hospital in Dublin. Like "Malacoda", an elegy Beckett wrote for his father, "Mort de A.D." intimately and physically describes the dying subject, his deathbed, while at the same time refusing the closure that this death beckons. In "Mort de A.D.", even as the speaker testifies to Darley's death and its aftermath, the speaker cannot help but feel insuperably far from the actual instance of death. This is what incites the swerve in the voice, shifting rapidly from "là être", by the deathbed, to "je vivais/ et être là buvant":

et là être là encore là
pressé contre ma vieille planche vérolée du noir
des jours et nuits broyés aveuglément
à être là à ne pas fuir et fuir et être là
courbé vers l'aveu du temps mourant
d'avoir été ce qu'il fut fait ce qu'il fit
de moi de mon ami mort hier l'oeil luisant

les dents longues haletant dans sa barbe dévorant
 la vie des saints une vie par jour de vie
 revivant dans la nuit ses noirs péchés
 mort hier pendant que je vivais
 et être là buvant plus haut que l'orage
 la culpé du temps irrémisible
 agrippé au vieux bois témoin des départs
 témoin des retours
 Beckett 2012, 116¹

The use of Arthur Darley's initials in "Mort de A.D." has prompted some to read the preposition "de" in the title as Beckett's way of spelling out dead or deA.D..² The supposed tautology in the title between "mort," meaning death but also dead, and oddly spelled "de A.D.," preveins the distinction the poem's speaker draws between the fact of death and the person who dies, speaking of death as something that happens to the dead—"ce qu'il fit" —and continues after them. If the initials "A.D." specify the loss, they also erode the name of its usual semantic power to address and seek a response from Arthur Darley, whom the poem tells us has died yesterday ("mort hier"). It is perhaps this loss of authority and the impossibility of addressing the friend that obliges one to deliberately misread "A.D." as dead, stripping the name of its semantic and social value. Despite the impossibility of addressing Darley, the lyric voice in the poem remains immanently bound to him, starting with the conjunctions, "et" that launches the poem. The conjunction is an important tool here for the voice that finds itself in medias res, without any exposition into who it is mourning or why, but only the fact that it is capable of being there, "être là" (which incidentally would be the French translation of Heidegger's "Dasein" or being-there), and that it is "pressé contre ma vieille planche vérolée du noir." The first conjunction immediately puts the voice in relation with an invisible plurality, multiplicity, even though one is not made aware of the component that comes before the inaugural "et"; one also doesn't know if component contradicts "être là" or adds another layer to it. The next few lines use the conjunction again, but this time to clearly point out a rapid change of terms—"jours et nuits" and "ne pas fuir et fuir et être là". This conjunction carries out the swerve in the poem, at least in the first four lines, which remain committed to witness the death of a friend, or rather the exact time of death: "courbé vers l'aveu du temps mourant".

The poem continues by describing the instant of Darley's death, "d'avoir été ce qu'il fut fait" and that of his life, "la vie des saints une vie par jour de vie", but it does not use a conjunction to bind together any of these characterisations. When it does use the conjunction again it is in the twelfth line, where it juxtaposes the fact of his own vitality with the death of his friend, thus balancing a mournful end and a kind of endlessness which immediately succeeds it. After accepting Darley's death, and situating it in time with "mort hier", the speaker rues the fact that "pendant que je vivais", the other

¹ Cf. Samuel Beckett, 'Mort de A.D.', trans. into English by Philip Nikolayev, published in *Poetry*, Vol. 191, No. 5 (Feb., 2008), p. 384:

and there to be there still there
 pressed against my old plank scabbed with black
 days and nights blindly ground
 to being there and to not fleeing and fleeing and being there
 bent toward the avowal of time dying
 of having been what was does what it did
 to me to my friend dead yesterday gleaming eye
 long teeth panting in his beard devouring
 the life of saints a life by day of life
 reliving in the night its black sins
 dead yesterday while I lived
 and to be there drinking above the storm
 the guilt of time irremissible
 gripping the old wood witness to departures
 witness to return

² As do Lawlor and Pilling in their annotations to the *Collected Poems*.

died. Of course, it is implicit that one of them had to be alive to witness and vocalize another's end. This perhaps is the guilt, "la coulpe", that the speaker evasively attributes to the "temps irrémissible", which he does nothing to outgrow or abandon. In fact, as the conjunction suggests, "et être là buvant plus haut que l'orage," the speaker can only continue endlessly, drinking above the storm. Unlike the first few lines, the conjunction is used here not to denote the speaker's resolute attempt to witness the passing of his friend, "ne pas fuir et fuir et être là", but rather it acts as a wedge or cut, indelibly differentiating the speaker from what has transpired. This is both similar and dissimilar to how Beckett's 1935 poem "Malacoda" attends to the death of the speaker's father, while Darley's death brings home the realisation that the speaker has survived his friend, occasioning a complex interplay between life and death. This does not stop either of the poems, however, from turning away sharply from the main object of their attention, its end, and towards some other residual form of life. The conjunction in the twelfth line of "Mort" does just this and swerves the speaker away from the deathbed.³

Italian thinker Franco Berardi purports that conjunctions such as "and" act as defiant responses to various kinds of ends. Arguing that "conjunctions do not happen somewhere in the world, but [...] happen in a sensible mind", Berardi contends that conjunctions are not dependent on material or ontological bonds but on a sensorial connection. (Berardi, 15) Conjunctions allow for "co-extensivity", where the subject, or the lyric voice, is no longer atomized, an end-in-itself, but is constantly responding and relating to something or someone outside itself. The task for the speaker of "Mort de A.D." is not to memorialize or overcome the end of his friend's life, but, as Berardi puts it in a different context, "it's a matter of co-extensivity, not of representation." (15) While Darley's death signals the end of a friendship and the end of another person, these ends remain unrepresentable, and what the speaker of "Mort de A.D." does instead is announce its intimacy with these ends while also recognising the inconsistency in their relation: "mort hier pendant que je vivais." According to Berardi when it comes to endpoints there is "no correspondence or adjustment or Aufhebung-realization" but only "conjunctions", and "Mort de A.D." changes the function of its conjunctions between the first and twelfth line to reflect this — while "et là être là" tries to set up a correspondence, an intimacy with Darley, "et être là buvant" strives to bind them, keep them conjunct, in their pure difference. Berardi explains how a conjunction does not erase the difference between two sides but rather changes one when exposed to the other. This kind of conjunction is also at play when Beckett's speaker experiences "la coulpe du temps irrémissible":

Conjunction, therefore, can be viewed as a way of becoming other. Singularities change when they conjoin, they become something other than what they were before their conjunction. Love changes the lover and the conjunctive composition of a-signifying signs gives rise to the emergence of a previously inexistent meaning. In contrast, in the connective mode of concatenation each element remains distinct and interacts only functionally. Rather than a fusion of segments, connection entails a simple effect of machine functionality. (21)

There is no attempt in "Mort de A.D." to make the end of the poem coincide with the end of the person it commemorates; in fact, the final two lines promise the obverse—the ability to witness both "départs" and "retours". The speaker does not claim to witness ("témoin") of the death of his friend, an impossible experience, instead it is only able to see the friend departing, moving towards his end as the line "les dents longues haletant dans sa barbe dévorant" viscerally describes. The pluralisation of "retours", or returns, in the last line hint at the fact that it is not merely Darley's spectral return that the poem concerns itself with, but the promise of a return as such. The assured tone of the last line, announcing the "retours" after "départs", impairs the incontrovertible power that the speaker had thus far been associating with death as an absolute limit-point. It is also worth noting that the swerve in the last lines between "départs" and "retours" is contingent on one's ability to witness but this ability

³ Shane Weller in "'All the Dead Voices': Beckett and the Ethics of Elegy" focuses on the conjunction between the self and the (dead) other in the poem: "In other words, the poem moves not in the direction of an unambiguous openness to the other, but rather in the direction of an ethical conflation or imbrication of self and other." (91)

cannot be attributed to the speaker alone. Owing to the fragmentary syntax and a lack of punctuation consistent throughout the poem, anyone between the speaker, the “vieux bois” or the poem itself could be the witness of this departure and return. Not unlike the speaker, the poem registers Darley’s death but is itself unharmed. It can only register the end because it cannot participate in it. However, both “départs” and “retours” are pluralized in the poem, making Darley’s death less unique, but also suggesting that the witness, whoever it is, is not capable of chasing the departed or abstaining returnee from leaving again. The end, in other words, interrupts the life of the speaker and occasions the poem without conceding its own meaning—the end remains impossible to reveal. Placing himself in relation to Darley’s death, the speaker establishes a connection not just with Darley but with the end that interrupts his friendship. The poem operates both as the site of mourning and that of endless returns, where the swerve is never abolished for an absolute end.

Berardi claims that conjunctions forge singular relations and experiences for the living world, where “and” operates as the unique signature of a self-changing and becoming another kind of subject. This kind of co-extensivity is performed in both “Malacoda” between the speaker’s dead father and his surviving mother (“mind the imago it is he/ hear she must see she must”) and in “Mort” between the speaker and his friend. In both cases, conjunctions open new relationships between the speakers and their dying or dead addressee. In both poems, the speakers are particularly attentive to how death itself is beyond any signification and concern themselves with this very impossibility of expressing or representing their losses. Thus, the conjunction in both the poems serves to expose the speakers to the limit of their own language, its inherent vitalism. This vitalism of the autonomous subject, its language, is what Berardi claims is threatened (read: liberated) by the co-extensivity of a conjunction.

II/ End

Beckett’s last works have often been read as his last *words*, announcing the end of things. While such a correlation is not entirely mistaken, it draws a facile equivalence between ending and dying, between mortality and the limits of language, as if these are components working in tandem and towards the same end. “What is the Word”, being not only Beckett’s final poem but also his final literary work, has invited similar readings that relate his speaker’s failing attempt to find the right word to the collapse of language altogether, a collapse mirrored in life that is nearing end. My own reading of the poem in this section, however, would argue that these variegated ends—of life, language, and history—in the poem are not symmetrical to each other and neither do they point towards an absolute end; instead they point towards radical and sporadic beginnings. The context for such a reading is not limited to “What is the Word” but extends to a range of Beckett’s last works that have often been read as pursuing or even marking the end of language. Leslie Hill in his seminal account of Beckett’s prose, *Beckett’s Fiction: In Different Worlds*, performs one such reading when he states, “From beginning to end, Beckett’s work pursues one end, which is the end of language. The end of language, however, never comes. Or rather it has always already taken place. Beckett writes in the name of something which has no name, but to which he struggles to give a name” (162). This is a view of Beckett’s work that I am trying to contest here by reading “What is the Word” as not pursuing the end of language but, however unsuccessfully, its beginning.

My reading of “What is the Word” is predicated on the poem’s failure to end and how this failure is performed in the speaker’s fruitless search for the word that would put an end to the speaker’s poetic utterance. The poem does not mirror the finality that is historically inscribed in it by being Beckett’s last work, instead it voices the impossibility of such an end:

[...] what is the word –
folly from this –
all this –
folly from all this –
given –
folly given all this –

seeing –
folly seeing all this –
this –
what is the word – [...]

what is the word
Beckett 2012, 228

Beckett makes this very capability of the lyric voice to defer the end the central subject of the poem “What is the Word”, where the lacking word both plagues the speaker and rings through its voice. It is to be noted that the poem’s dashes, its stuttering failure to find the “word,” performs a unique logic of sound or the voice in the poem. Beckett builds the poem around his speaker’s inability, aphasic or otherwise, to finish his utterance and, thus, end the poem. This principal endlessness is what drives the speaker, “yearning” not “for an end” but a beginning, a place in language.

The elliptical lines and the dashes also add to the perfunctory and makeshift appearance of the poem, and, to use an architectural metaphor, act almost as a scaffold for another poem to emerge behind it. When the English translation of “Comment Dire” was first published in the *Sunday Correspondent* as “What is the Word” in 1989, John Calder’s accompanying article disclosed 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” (32). It is another matter though that the poem, published independently of the notebook, appears even in its final stage as an unfinished work. Caught in the act of production, of producing the finished sentence that never comes together, the poem seems to chase a complete text, an end, that is never actualized. This complete text is undone not just by the lack of the “word” but also by the tentative and approximative voice that seek it. This performance of a compositional incompleteness, channelled through the speaker’s linguistic insufficiency, can be misleading, since “What is the Word” is neither an incomplete nor an abandoned utterance. On the contrary “Comment dire” has a complicated and well-archived genesis, leading up to Beckett’s own English-translation of the poem under the title “What is the Word.” The genetic history of the poem betrays the diligence with which the speaker’s impossible search for the “word” is rendered possible in words, including the opening line where the word “mal” was carefully changed to “folie” in later drafts (Van Hulle, 99). This is not to point out an obvious schism between a deliberate poetic form and an indecisive content, but rather to suggest that the voice that asks the question “what is the word”, is a voice that develops over drafts and pages, and continues framing the question in all the draft without providing it a definitive answer. The titular question of the “word” develops through the drafts, plaguing the voice but also influencing how Beckett arranges the poem(s) to be able to ask the question in all its force. Instead of being a contradiction between the determinacy of the composition process and the hesitancy of the voice, the question repeated throughout the poem is also central to its formal development: a fruitless pursuit for the “word” carried out in words.

The question “what is the word” is, in some ways, also the most infantile or basic question possible, evoking a genuine curiosity about what is this thing called the “word”, which changes the speaker’s quest for the right or the appropriate word to the full meaning of the word that is “word”. The heap of broken, torn down sentences that the voice goes through several times before arriving at the question, makes it clear that the speaker does not already possess, or is possessed by, something that is the “word”. This voice speaks in all possible worded and un-worded ways, in fragments, in the gaps between words, and in the dashes. While all the words used in the poem are classified as “folly,” the dashes, and the breath they invoke remain outside this stricture of “folly” and “what” really “is” the word. The sonic architecture of the poem is riddled with these gaps, where the voice can be heard without being overlaid by words. The poem’s failure to arrive at the word does not interrupt the voice from impressing these gaps onto speech, gaps that very much signal the poem’s infancy and the infancy of any language that is constituted of sounds that exceed (or even precede) sense.

As Giorgio Agamben puts it in *Infancy and History*, “[any] theory of experience truly intended to posit the problem of origin in a radical way would then [ask] does a mute experience exist, does an *infancy* [*in-fancy*] of experience exist? And, if it does, what is its relationship to language?” (Agamben 1993, 42) It is obvious that it is not an infant’s experience that Agamben is equating to

muteness, but rather pointing towards a residual infancy that lurks in all normative experience. This infancy, Agamben clarifies, is not a conditional category of experience for a transcendental subject nor can it be understood within our psychological complex, it is rather a mode of experience that cannot be regulated by language or reason. Commenting on Emile Benveniste's work, Agamben contends that, "the constitution of the subject in and through language is precisely the expropriation of this "wordless" experience; from the outset, it is always "speech" (54). It is this very jurisdiction of speech that the voice in "What is the Word" interrupts or gestures towards. In encountering "all this", "What is the Word" is perhaps hinting at an "infancy of experience," where the experience can neither be invited into language nor be habilitated as intuitions or memories. In fact, the poem questions the very ability of the speaker to experience "this" at all, "making the inexperiencible its [the poem's] normal condition." (47) If one does read "What is the Word" as approximating the end of (Beckett's) life, the end of subjectivity and memory, then the experience of such a cataclysmic end can only be registered, ironically, as "infancy".

While the "word" is never cited in the poem except as "the word", the search for it creates a fragmentary yet audible terrain for the speaker. The dashes, apart from being visible strokes of absence in the poem, are also heard in the cracks they open on the metrical surface of the poem. One needs to *listen* to "What is the Word" and not just read it to hear the end that the voice pursues through its pauses, its lilting repetitions, stutters, and its propensity to start sentences without finishing them. The end, the "all this" that is "here" and "there," resonates through the lines as mere suggestions; what is also heard in the poem's numerous repetitions of words and syllables is the will of the speaker to signify something that by its very nature remains elusive. Each line invites the speaker back into the fold of sound, after having exiled it with a dash in the previous line. The auditory structure of such an utterance is perhaps best explained by what Agamben describes in a different context as "no longer mere sound and not yet logical signification, this thought of the voice alone [...] opens thought to an unheard dimension sustained in the pure breath of the voice" (65).

III/Beginning

When one listens to "What is the Word" as a structure of beginnings, as a work that leaves its speaker and its reader at the beginning of language rather than its end, one hears Beckett's last words not as semantic entities but as breaths. If the poem is indeed Beckett's last words, and if the last word is one's last breath and not the last audible word, then it is breath that one should hear in Beckett's last words. This breath is the final punctuation separating words from the empty space of death beyond it. This space haunts the speaker of "What is the Word," so much so that each line-break or enjambment in the poem uses the dash to militate against the empty page next to it. Each dash resists the finality of the breath by committing instead to the next line, and thus, to the possibility of continuance rather than end. However, Beckett's failure in "What is the Word" affects the speaker's ability to speak altogether and not only to speak *about* the end. It is not singularly bound to an object of encounter or to a place but to universal place— "all this"—and thus it is the very emergence of a voice that is at stake in "What is the Word" and not its evocative powers. This foundational distinction leads to the speaker finding in everything it says or sees a "folly":

folly seeing all this this here –
for to –
what is the word –
see –
glimpse –
seem to glimpse –
need to seem to glimpse –
folly for to need to seem to glimpse –

Voice seen as an extension of ipseity, of its ability to discern lived reality and cast judgment on what is intuited, is reduced here to a hermeneutic necessity with only a "need to seem to glimpse." The speaker of "What is the Word" having already discredited speech as "folly," in want of the "word," also delegitimizes sight as a "folly for to need to seem to glimpse." Instead of subtending its subject-

position through what it sees, the voice finds itself on even shakier grounds with no words to preserve or present what has been glimpsed. Yet the “need to seem to glimpse” is rooted in the speaker’s imperative to speak, its foundational logic to speak the very lack of speech. This imperative means that nowhere in the poem is the absence of “word” tantamount to an absence of voice, even when this voice struggles to determine its object or its source. Listening to “What is the Word” entails listening to the syllables, the locution of individual words and breaths. The speaking voice in the poem remains distinct from the words we hear and from the “word” that is under abeyance. The voice attempts signification, even attempts to ask the question of signification— “what is the word”—but it does not allow itself to be signified into meaning. Although Beckett’s speaker might be propelling language to the very limits of representation and meaning, what is crucial here is that the audibility of such a language although interrupted remains unchallenged within the poem. Even if the claim that the speaker of “What is the Word” is at end of language is true, the speaker is nowhere near the end of voice; if anything, the poem’s voice is that of an infant just beginning to be absorbed into language.

To address a nameless end, which has no sound of its own and in fact the very happening of which will put an end to all sounds, the speaker finds itself at the infancy of language, beholden to a voice that is only beginning to discern (again), to speak (again):

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

The outburst in the final lines, already anticipated through paratactic lines earlier in the poem does not come from a place of “primary psychic” interiority of the subject rather it vocalizes what is vaguely exteriorized as “this,” “here” and “there.” In this (re)constitution of the subject, based on an uncertain experience of exteriority, the speaker of “What is the Word” is returned to infancy, to a place that is not the “silence of the subject” nor a “primary psychic phenomenon” but, as Agamben argues, a place of breach between language and voice. The subject’s linguistic experience is founded on the unicity of speech and voice, and while questions like “what is the word” are framed within this unity, they also open a rift between these elements, forcing speech into discontinuities, pauses and repetitions. Beckett’s last poem does not take language beyond language, but is afflicted with the unending nature of language, where the sentence once begun will remain endless despite being robbed of the speech that makes it sensible or coherent. The voice that lurks behind this endless language, behind the subject’s endless place in language, comes to the fore every time the speaker confronts other kinds of endings, as the speaker of “What is the Word” does. Realising that such endings cannot be assigned to a language that is end-less, the speaker resorts instead to endless beginnings. In *Texts for Nothing* Beckett rues similar beginnings: “Name, no, nothing is nameable, tell, no, nothing can be told, what then, I don’t know, I shouldn’t have begun” (331).

The desire to not even “have begun” is radically altered by the speaker of “What is the Word” by making interminable beginnings, with the hope perhaps that one of those beginnings will be free of “folly”. If the narrator of *Texts for Nothing* mourns the inaugural moment that cemented the subject’s place in language, “What is the Word” returns to that very inaugural moment, its infancy, to revoke, or at least partially disrupt, speech’s dominion over experience. Beckett’s narrator in *Text for Nothing* pursues a place outside of language, but it is important to note that this place is not envisioned to be at the end or after the demise of language but before it has “begun”. It is another matter that Beckett’s narrator fails to secure such a place, a place that is yet to be born, yet to be seized by speech. However, as Christopher Langlois demonstrates in his reading of “Texts for Nothing”, such a place will always have to be constructed in language, and thus be bound by the very logic that one is so keen on escaping: “The notoriously Beckettian impulse towards silence and nothingness is what would afford the narrative voice of *Texts for Nothing* its avenue of escape” (Langlois, 118). Although this impulse by itself does not “suffice to cut the narrative voice off from its unworkable existence encased in language and words,” the gesture does allow the voice to distinguish itself from language and makes its demand explicit. In the case of *Text for Nothing*, Langlois contends, “nothing is made in the very acts of speaking, telling and making,” and the voice countermands the project speech sets up for itself.

The last line of “What is the Word” ends with the word “word,” ironically announcing its absence by naming it thus. The dash that is the placeholder for the speaker’s breath elsewhere in the poem does not suffix the “word” in this instance. The potential of an enjambment, of another beginning, is suspended here by the lack of any punctuation. However, this lack of “word” or breath at the end still does not signal the very end of speech, because this absence is never properly part of the poem. With the poem stopping at “word,” the empty punctuation-less space after the line cannot fully participate in the poem nor can it be made legible. In this sense perhaps, no poem can properly end, as its end would always bring it to the limits of legibility. Similarly, the question posed in “What is the Word” deliberately undermines the poem’s ability to present an end. The failure to find the “word” remains foundational to the poem and it is with this failure that the poem signs off, or fails to sign off, but in either case this failure does not paralyse the voice or push it to abandon speech. It catalyses a difference instead, between voice and speech, where one interrupts and interlaces another. The experience of infancy, Agamben argues, “is not an oath of silence or mystical ineffability; on the contrary, it is the vow that commits the individual to speech and to truth” (Agamben 1999, 58). Likewise, the experience of “all this” tests the speaker’s ability to speak but it also pledges the speaker to the “word,” making it the very destiny of the poem. If the poem is really taken as Beckett’s last words, Anne Stillman is right to suggest that they take us back to the beginnings of life, to “how we learn words, how we find them, or how they find us, elude us” (119). Although Beckett’s speaker does not seem any more fluent or linguistically mature than at the start of the poem, it embodies the timidity of such beginnings, the discontinuities of the voice as it yields to speech, and the impossibility of end after one has “begun.”

Agamben refers to the “moat” as the site of transaction between language and discourse, between the semiotic and the semantic, arguing that “It is the fact of man’s infancy (in other words, to speak, he needs to be constituted as a subject within language by removing himself from infancy) which breaks the closed world of the sign and transforms pure language into human discourse, the semiotic into the semantic” (1999, 63). The “folly” of speech in “What is the Word” is not redeemed by the voice or supplemented by another “word,” in other words neither the semiotic nor the semantic can redeem it; the “folly” carries on. It is in addressing this “folly” that the speaker of “What is the Word” encounters the end of language, where finding the word is impossible. This is an end that once defeated in language is carried ahead in the voice alone. Celan’s famous lines “The world is gone, I must carry you” (267) invokes a similar imperative of carrying someone’s end, their death, even when such carrying does not warrant affinity or possession. “What is the Word” carries out the search for the “word” that would put an end to the speaker’s inexplicable, inexhaustible pursuit only to find out that what cannot be linguistically expressed will still be carried as a mark of the unsaid, as the abyss that defers the end, as writing that only knows how to begin again.

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