

Conventional Criticism of an Unconventional Text: on Samuel Beckett's **Ping**

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Robert Scholes once affirmed that the sense of design is essential to a full reading experience and that in fiction it takes many forms, which are mainly of two kinds: juxtaposition and repetition.¹ If so one of the very causes of difficulty in "Ping", its repetitive nature and its elusive permutations, can turn into guidelines for its analysis.

Beckett's rhetoric of repetition operates as a cumulative process, which allows us to distinguish the fundamental semantic constituents of "Ping". Hence it is possible to try to organize items that correspond to the traditional elements of fiction, as stated below. In order to make the work less hard for the eyes and the mind, I have recopied the seventy sentences of "Ping", each one separately, and numbered them. I shall refer to the numbers in my text. (See Appendix.)

1. Character

The first sentence of the text reads "All known all white bare white body fixed one yard legs joined like sewn". From then on a **body** (and this is the first noun in the text), probably human but with no indication of its sex, is both revealed and concealed by means of fragmentary presentation. Considering the sentences where the word 'body' occurs, the information about it can be neatly arranged in a table (a procedure I have followed for the other items throughout my reading):

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Word groups	Sentence numbers				
all known all white	1				
bare white... fixed one yard	1	17	22	40	45
bare white... fixed	4	7	9	25	
white on white	9	22	40		
invisible	9	22	40	45	
given rose only just	22	45			

This table affords material for questions and comments. The first is whether 'all' actually refers to 'body', or whether it is a synonym of 'everything'; and hence whether 'known' also applies to 'body'.²

The 'body' is 'bare', 'white', 'fixed'; there is a reference to measure, 'one yard', which has also been interpreted as an anticipation of the walls of the setting (as we shall see later). It is probably against these walls that the 'body' is said to be 'white on white' and becomes 'invisible', although it seems to have had some colour: 'given rose only just'.

The body's limbs are introduced without much balance or symmetry: 'legs', 'feet', 'heels', 'toes'; and 'hands', 'palms', 'nails'. The **legs** are 'joined like sewn' (1, 14, 35, 59 and 64); the **feet**, 'white feet' (6, 34), are 'invisible' (19); the **heels** 'together right angle' (6, 14, 19, 34, 59 and 64) are also 'invisible' (19); the **toes** are 'joined like sewn' (19, 34), similarly to the legs; the **hands** are 'hanging palms front' (6, 24, 35, 59, 64), 'white on white invisible' (24); the **nails** are 'given rose only just... fallen white over' (50).

The body has a head, always kept upright, 'head haught' (11, 28, 36, 54, 60, 70); with **hair**, 'long hair fallen white invisible over' (51); and **mouth**, 'white seam like sewn invisible' (29, 30); **nose** and **ears**, which are no more than 'white holes' already 'invisible' (43, 54), tend to disappear or to be 'over' (54); the head has **eyes**, actually the most significant of its features.

The **eyes** have colour and that is what singles them out as regards the other features of the face. This uniqueness of the eyes is gradually presented: 'only the eyes only just' (4, 10), 'light blue almost white' (10, 11, 20, 26, 28, 29, 36, 38, 41, 55, 58, 60, 63), 'alone uncover' and 'given blue' (20, 38, 41, 55), 'fixed front' (26, 28, 36, 38, 41, 55, 58, 64, 70). Even when like the 'nose' and the 'ears' they are 'holes' (29, 36, 38, 58, 60, 63), their blue is the 'only colour' (38) of "Ping's" strange small universe: 'only colour alone uncover' (41, 55), 'last colour' (63). Yet it also disappears: 'white over', says sentence 63. And the eyes turn 'white invisible fixed front over' (64) and cease to be (70).

The text becomes more intricate with the entry of one singular eye, which occurs as 'dim eye black and white half closed long lashes imploring' (62) and 'eye unlustrous black and white half closed long lashes imploring' (70). I shall return to this later.

The body, i.e. the character, also has a **heart**. The word occurs twice in association with **breath**, but neither beating nor breathing can be heard: 'heart breath no sound' (40, 69).

2. Setting

Light and **heat** brought together, 'light heat', seem to be unceasing and tormenting (2, 7, 24, 32, 56, 69). There are **floor**, **walls**, **ceiling** and **planes**. The floor is introduced as 'white... one square yard never seen' (2) and recurs simply as 'white floor never seen' (66). The walls are 'white walls one yard by two' (3); 'shining white' (16); each one having 'its trace' (31); yet losing it later, 'walls shining no trace' (63). Like the floor, the ceiling is 'white ceiling one square yard never seen' (3), 'shining white' like the walls (47); always 'never seen' (47, 66). The floor, the walls and the ceiling seem to come together as planes, 'white planes shining white' (7, 39, 56, 68) and 'meeting invisible' (32); one of the planes is singled out, 'one only shining white infinite but that known not' (56, 68).

Traces and **blurs** appear in several sentences. They are 'light

grey almost white on white' (5) 'light grey almost white' (8, 13, 15, 18, 31, 48) or just 'light grey' (58); they become 'signs no meaning' (8, 13, 18, 31, 48); they are 'alone unover' and 'given black' (15, 48). The walls have 'each its trace grey blur' (31). Most of the information is brought together in sentence 48: 'Traces alone unover given black grey blurs signs no meaning light grey almost white always the same'. But all this disappears, as we later read 'no trace' (63).

I tend to think that the setting is summarized in the word there in sentences 37 and 61, where I see it as opposed to elsewhere. This is one of the many debatable points in the analysis of "Ping".

3. Time

The notion of time in the text is basically connected with the words 'murmur(s)', 'image' and 'memory'. Time is 'brief' (12); 'murmur(s)', 'memory' and 'image' are said to be hardly perceived: 'almost never', a word group that is repeated insistently (12, 21, 23, 27, 30, 33, 39, 44, 49, 53, 57, 58, 62, 66, 67); time can be precise, 'one second' (21, 27, 30, 33, 39, 44, 46, 47, 49, 53, 57, 62, 66, 67, 70); time is tormenting, for 'light time' (39, 53) is certainly parallel to 'light heat'; it seems unchanging: 'same time' (46, 57, 62), 'always the same same time' (49); yet it eventually lasts less, 'a little less' (49, 62); it becomes an 'afar flash of time' (63); and contributes to the dying process in the text, where image and memory, 'that much memory henceforth never' (67), as well as the murmur, 'last murmur', are finally 'over' (70).

The relation space/time also seems equated with the opposition 'elsewhere'/'there'. The opposition between 'over' and 'unover' will be discussed later.

4. Plot

In "Ping" the plot is reduced to an 'instance of awareness'³,

i.e. the conjectures, remembrance and knowledge of a human mind in an extreme situation.

Conjectures are introduced by **perhaps**: 'perhaps not alone' (21, 49, 62, 70); 'perhaps a way out' (27), 'perhaps way out' (47); 'perhaps a nature' (30, 46, 67), which is once reduced to 'a nature' (57); 'perhaps a meaning' (33, 67) and 'a meaning' (58), as opposed to 'no meaning' (8, 13, 18, 31, 48); 'perhaps there' (66). The imprisoned being seems to try to interpret the 'traces' on the walls, and the 'murmur(s)' (as presented above). The reference to 'a nature' (57) is very mysterious, "is it the faint hope of a faint being after all, human in kind", finally expressed in the last sentence of "Ping"?

As for remembrance, the **memory** is said to awaken seldom and briefly. It is connected with the perception of 'murmur' (30, 33, 39) and with the conjectures. It lasts no more than 'one second' (30, 33, 39, 46), always the 'same time' and even 'a little less' (46, 49, 57, 62), and after all vanishes away: 'that much memory henceforth never' (67). The information about 'memory' progresses along the text (30, 33, 49, 62, 67). Introduced in the word group, 'that much memory almost never' (30), and so twice repeated (33, 39), 'memory' is later associated with 'image' (49). It will not be easy for the reader to come to a conclusion about that **image** in the memory. The context of "Ping" (the sequence of sentences 46, 49, 53 and 57) leads us to think that, in sentence 67, the 'blue and white in the wind' can be a soothing image, a recollection of beauty. Yet in 62, where the words 'image' and 'memory' actually appear in the same sentence, the image in the memory seems to be that 'dim eye black and white half closed long lashes imploring'. And "Ping"'s minimum plot could gain some depth with the remote figure of a woman, an image beautiful to the reader but tormenting to the character as a glimpse of remorse for love denied.⁵ Such things, however, remain indeterminate, if not obscure.

Obscure indeed is the reference to a certain **knowledge** and **non-knowledge** on the part of the character (or the narrator). The formula ('all known all white', as we have seen, can apply to 'body'

(1), but it can also be more inclusive (32, 39). When the reference to colour is dropped (12, 44), all **known** associates with 'murmurs'. In sentence 45, 'all known without within' applies again to body, I think, as it does in 65. What is unknown, or rather **known not** is more difficult to define. I find it associated with the opposition 'elsewhere'/'there' (37, 61), with 'planes' (42) and with the singular 'plane' of sentences 56 and 68.

5. Symbolism: a thematic use of colour

White is pervasive in "Ping", the adjective being repeated ninety one times in the text (present in fifty nine of its seventy sentences). It is the colour of the setting: floor (2, 66); walls (3, 16, 31, 63); ceiling (3, 47, 66); and planes, these often 'shining white' (7, 39, 42, 56, 68). It is also that of the character: the body is 'all white' (1), 'bare white' (1, 4, 7, 9, 17, 22, 25, 40, 45 even in 59 and 65 with the omission of the word 'body'); seen against the walls it is 'white on white' and 'invisible' (9, 22, 40, 45). White are the feet (6, 19, 34), the hands (24), the 'mouth white seam like sewn' (29, 43, 54), the nose and ears 'white holes' (43, 54) the nails and the long hair fallen white' (50, 51). White also are the 'scars... as flesh torn of old' (52). Even the blue eyes are insistently 'almost white' (10, 11, 20, 28, 29, 36, 38, 41, 55, 58, 60, 63). In "Ping" white is evidently a lethal colour, especially when associated with 'over': 'all white all over', 'white over', we read in 63.

Referring always to trace(s) and blur(s), **grey**, as 'light grey almost white' (5, 8, 13, 15, 18, 31, 48) or simply as 'light grey' (58) concerns the setting. Yet this colour does not contribute to any real change in the text, for the 'traces' and 'blurs' do not make sense: they are 'signs no meaning' (8, 13, 18, 31, 48).

Blue is the colour of the eyes all through the text (10, 11, 20, 26, 28, 29, 36, 38, 41, 55, 58, 60, 63); and of that image, 'blue and white in the wind' (46, 53, 57, 67). In these alone there is a colour proper, the disappearance of which seems to be the sign of death at the end of the text.

Black: the traces, grey and indefinite (as presented above), for a moment are 'given black' (15, 48); black also, 'black and white' is the mysterious 'eye' of sentence 62.

Rose is a pale hue that enhances the deadening whiteness of "Ping": 'given rose' were the 'bare white body' (22, 45, 65), the nails (50), and the scars or the 'flesh torn of old' (52).

The thematic opposition expressed by means of colour is very specifically the contrast between 'blue' and 'white'. The latter has none of the positive connotations usually attributed to it, the exception being the 'blue and white' of the image in the memory. Otherwise 'white' belongs to the deadly realm where light and heat are negative, tormenting. Even when in connection with blue white refers to the eyes, blue remains the 'only colour' (38), 'only colour alone unover' (41, 55), the 'last colour' (63); for as the eyes come to be completely 'white', they are also 'over' (63, 64).

6. Point of view

We have come to the point of asking who is the **narrator** of "Ping"'s brief poignant tale of anguish and agony. "Ping no longer has a clearly defined narrator and, in fact, dispenses with all personal pronouns", says Edith Kern.⁶ Ruby Cohn accounts for an "omniscient elliptical narrator, who describes a quasi alternation between the body and its surroundings".⁷ Yet I think that in "Ping" the rendering of consciousness, or what I have called conjectures and perceptions, comes to us as if through the very mind of the character. Here 'the teller and the told' mingle and are entangled in the verbless incantation⁸ of the text; the shift in point of view, if there is any, is also elusive.

7. Meaning

The ultimate **meaning** of "Ping" seems to me the final awareness of an actual distinction between life and death. There are two words

in the text that can represent the antithesis: **unover** (Beckett's coinage)¹⁰ and **over**.

The traces (15, 48) and the eyes (20, 38, 41, 55) are said to be 'alone unover'. But they also belong to an unescapable situation that gradually evolves towards 'over' (60 to 63), and prevails at the end of the text (70).

The great puzzle of the text is its tittle word, **ping**, repeated thirty three times with no definite semantic association. Probably the earliest and most detailed comment on this topic was David Lodge's in "Some Ping Understood". Samuel Beckett himself once explained: "'Ping' a recurrent twang (pizzicato) punctuating icecold monotone".¹¹

For the sake of a conclusion, I would like to add that this analytical reading, based on a pattern of repetition, is just a partial reading. For "Ping"'s design also relies heavily upon juxtaposition, or permutation. As permutation both deconstructs and remakes each sentence, one should also pursue this pattern in order to be aware of the value of ambiguity and indeterminacy in the text, as well as of Beckett's masterly handling of the poetic potentials of word order in English.

Indeed "Ping" bears witness to Raymond Federman's words: "contemporary fiction dwells on the circumstances of its own possibilities, on the conventions of narrative, and on the openness of language to multiple meanings", where the "impossible becomes possible because language escapes analytical logic".¹²

Notes

¹Robert Scholes, **Elements of Fiction** (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), p.35.

²Cf. Brian Finney, **Since How It Is** (London: Covent Garden Press, 1972), p.38.

³Ralph Freedman, **The Lyrical Novel** (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), p.viii.

⁴Beckett, "Texts for Nothing III". In **No's Knife**, (London: Calder and Boyars, 1967), p.134.

- ⁵Cf. Hugh Kenner. *A Reader's Guide to Samuel Beckett*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973), p.133.
- ⁶Edith Kern, *Existential Thought and Fictional Technique*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), p.238-239.
- ⁷Ruby Cohn, *Back to Beckett*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), p.251.
- ⁸Edith Kern, p.241.
- ⁹Ruby Cohn, p.250.
- ¹⁰David Lodge, "Some Ping Understood", *Encounter*, Feb. 1968. p.87.
- ¹¹In a card to this writer, July 10, 1977.
- ¹²Raymond Federman, *Surfiction*, (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1975), p.292, 305.

APPENDIX

SAMUEL BECKETT'S "PING"

- 01 All known all white bare white body fixed one yard legs joined like sewn.
- 02 Light heat white floor one square yard never seen.
- 03 White walls one yard by two white ceiling one square yard never seen.
- 04 Bare white body fixed only the eyes only just.
- 05 Traces blurs light grey almost white on white.
- 06 Hands hanging palms front white feet heels together right angle.
- 07 Light heat white planes shining white bare white body fixed ping fixed elsewhere.
- 08 Traces blurs signs no meaning light grey almost white.
- 09 Bare white body fixed white on white invisible.
- 10 Only the eyes only just light blue almost white.
- 11 Head haught eyes light blue almost white silence within.
- 12 Brief murmurs only just almost never all known.
- 13 Traces blurs signs no meaning light grey almost white.
- 14 Legs joined like sewn heels together right angle.
- 15 Traces alone uncover given black light grey almost white on white.
- 16 Light heat white walls shining white one yard by two.
- 17 Bare white body fixed one yard ping fixed elsewhere.
- 18 Traces blurs signs no meaning light grey almost white.
- 19 White feet toes joined like sewn heels together right angle invisible.

- 20 Eyes alone uncover given blue light blue almost white.
- 21 Murmur only just almost never one second perhaps not alone.
- 22 Given rose only just bare white body fixed one yard white on white invisible.
- 23 All white all known murmurs only just almost never always the same all known.
- 24 Light heat hands hanging palms front white on white invisible.
- 25 Bare white body fixed ping fixed elsewhere.
- 26 Only the eyes only just light blue almost white fixed front.
- 27 Ping murmur only just almost never one second perhaps a way out.
- 28 Head haught eyes light blue almost white fixed front ping murmur ping silence.
- 29 Eyes holes light blue almost white mouth seam like sewn invisible.
- 30 Ping murmur perhaps a nature one second almost never that much memory almost never.
- 31 White walls each its trace grey blur signs no meaning light grey almost white.
- 32 Light heat all known all white planes meeting invisible.
- 33 Ping murmur only just almost never one second perhaps a meaning that much memory almost never.
- 34 White feet toes joined like sewn heels together right angle ping elsewhere no sound.
- 35 Hands hanging palms front legs joined like sewn.
- 36 Head haught eyes holes light blue almost white fixed front silence within.
- 37 Ping elsewhere always there but that known not.
- 38 Eyes holes light blue alone uncover given blue light blue almost white only colour fixed front.
- 39 All white all known white planes shining white ping murmur only just almost never one second light time that much memory almost never.
- 40 Bare white body fixed one yard ping fixed elsewhere white on white invisible heart breath no sound.
- 41 Only the eyes given blue light blue almost white fixed front only colour alone uncover.
- 42 Planes meeting invisible one only shining white infinite but that known not.
- 43 Nose ears white holes mouth white seam like sewn invisible.
- 44 Ping murmurs only just almost never one second always the same all known.
- 45 Given rose only just bare white body fixed one yard invisible all known without within.
- 46 Ping perhaps a nature one second with image same time a little less blue and white in the wind.
- 47 White ceiling shining white one square yard never seen ping perhaps way out there one second ping silence.
- 48 Traces alone uncover given black grey blurs signs no meaning light grey almost white always the same.

- 49 Ping perhaps not alone one second with image always the same time a little less that much memory almost never ping silence.
- 50 Given rose only just hairs fallen white over.
- 51 Long hair fallen white invisible over.
- 52 White scars invisible same white as flesh torn of old given rose only just.
- 53 Ping image only just almost never one second light time blue and white in the wind.
- 54 Head haught nose ears white holes mouth white seam like sewn invisible over.
- 55 Only the eyes given blue fixed front light blue almost white only colour alone uncover.
- 56 Light heat white planes shining white one only shining white infinite but that known not.
- 57 Ping a nature only just almost never one second with image same time a little less blue and white in the wind.
- 58 Traces blurs light grey eyes holes light blue almost white fixed front ping a meaning only just almost never ping silence.
- 59 Bare white one yard fixed ping fixed elsewhere no sound legs joined like sewn heels together right angle hands hanging palms front.
- 60 Head haught eyes holes light blue almost white fixed front silence within.
- 61 Ping elsewhere always there but that known not.
- 62 Ping perhaps not alone one second with image same time a little less dim eye black and white half closed long lashes imploring that much memory almost never.
- 63 A far flash of time all white all over all of old ping flash walls shining no trace eyes holes light blue almost white last colour ping white over.
- 64 Ping fixed last elsewhere legs joined like sewn heels together right angle hands hanging palms front head eyes white invisible fixed front over.
- 65 Given rose only just one yard invisible bare white all known without within over.
- 66 White ceiling never seen ping of old only just almost never one second light time white floor never seen ping of old perhaps there.
- 67 Ping of old only just perhaps a meaning a nature one second almost never blue and white in the wind that much memory henceforth never.
- 68 White planes no trace shining white one only shining white infinite but that known not.
- 69 Light heat all known all white heart breath no sound.
- 70 Head haught eyes white fixed front old ping last murmur one second perhaps not alone eye unglorious black and white half closed long lashes imploring ping silence ping over.