

The Drama in the Text

Beckett's Late Fiction

ENOCH BRATER

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A last word about the Purgatories. Dante's is conical and consequently implies culmination. Mr. Joyce's is spherical and excludes culmination. . . . In the one, absolute progression and a guaranteed consummation: in the other, flux—progression or retrogression, and an apparent consummation. In the one movement is unidirectional, and a step forward represents a net advance: in the other movement is non-directional—or multidirectional, and a step forward is, by definition, a step back.

(“Dante . . . Bruno. Vico . . . Joyce,” pp. 21–22)

In *The Lost Ones*, “roughly speaking,” a voice finds itself trapped in a short story struggling to be its own sort of novella, but not fitting very well into either category. The nonconformist speaker is trying to locate a safe haven, a quiet space for itself in the void that threatens every formulation of the word with ignominious extinction. “Imagine now the silence of the steps.”²⁶ A compendium of styles and effects from earlier works by the same author, this atmospheric and elliptical piece, full of threatening and consuming shadows, once again refashions language as the only reliable mediator between sound and image. But unlike the previously discussed “têtes-mortes” (a term that translates as “dead heads” and is an obvious play on the French *textes-morts*),²⁷ the script written for this voice has a distinct and distinctive personality of its own. Offering us the droll sound of visible thoughts in verbal interaction, the voice Beckett constructs in this work is the most highly motivated “animator of silence”²⁸ we have met in his fiction since the breakdown of all other narrative elements in *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*. “So much roughly speaking . . . if this notion is maintained.”

The Lost Ones borrows its atmosphere from Dante, its climate control from Bruno, its parody of classification systems from Vico, its scale from Swift, and its geometry from Sir Thomas Browne; but the sound is pure Beckett.²⁹ In this “storiète” a voice has us look at “naked bodies”³⁰ and distorted shapes with a cold, marvelling, alien, and ironic eye. Speaking a language that is both descriptive and deceptive, the voice makes us “imagine” an entire world flattened into a cylinder full of oppressively angled walls and shadowy, Kafkaesque cul-de-sacs. Things, such as they are, are slowly winding down—so slowly in fact that the voice as it speaks cannot but help put meat on the bone; we may even hear from time to time a smile in that voice, as with an oft-told joke. Scripting the spectacle, text in this case becomes *textus*, the garment language wears to make theatrical a voice suddenly “heard in the dark.”³¹ Imagination in this fiction

is therefore auditory before it can be visual: *The Lost Ones* will detail with alarming precision its sources, forms, and functions—“of all kinds” and “of all sorts.”

Beckett took his title for the French *Le Dépeupleur* from Lamartine's *Méditations poétiques*: “Un seul être vous manque et tout est dépeuplé.” But in English “depopulate” shifts its angle of vision to a more somber “loss”: part Dante, part Proust, the simple phrase “the lost ones” provides the title, the physical context, and the limits of *possible* metaphor.³² The piece originally dates from 1966, but Beckett struggled until 1970 with his last paragraph,³³ where the story abruptly shifts forward from one generic moment in time “towards the unthinkable end.” Like “over” in *Ping* and “dusk” in *Lessness*, the last words in *The Lost Ones* problematize the entire concept of conclusion and conclusiveness: “So much roughly speaking for the last state of the cylinder and of this little people of searchers one first of whom if a man in some unthinkable past for the first time bowed his head if this notion is maintained.” Like everything else in the cylinder, this ending is subject to the single contingency “if this notion is maintained,” a subjunctive that can undermine as much as it affirms. The phrase really does much more than that; a cautionary refrain that contains the speaker's chilling monologue like an unwilling litany, it finally becomes this manufactured world's dubious and tentative closure. “Far from being able to imagine” an apocalyptic “last state” when “every body will be still and every eye vacant,” this soliloquizer's elaborate but all the while temporal vision will nonetheless end. But before it does, the constantly shifting subject-object interrelationships explore the many forms, as Malone says, “in which the unchanging seeks relief from its formlessness”: eyes, once “famished” and “questing,” dissolve into mute “calm wastes.” Yet everything, as Hamm avers in *Endgame*, will simultaneously “hesitate to . . . to end.” “I suppose it's only natural,” says Winnie, and with a break in the voice she adds *her* conclusive word: “Human.”³⁴

But the speaker in *The Lost Ones* is not really concerned with “last” things, or even with the sentimental promise of renewal offered by a Christ-like figure who “for the first time bowed his head.” The story might just as well stop here as anywhere else; this uncertain ending, compromised even further by the intrusion of still another “if,” has at least the valorization of precedent behind it. For the speaker in *The Lost Ones* is, strictly speaking, a middleman, “if a man” (“as if the sex mattered”).³⁵ this Malone-like mediator wants to tell a story, finish with it, and be gone, even if “all has not been told and never shall be.” The voice will finally have to settle for a more telling “abode” in silence, where the sound of this tale discovers the shape of a far more decisive conclusion.

Before falling into the stillness that is the ultimate fate of this and every lonely composition, the voice will take a noble stab at control, putting a miniature cosmos into what looks "at first aperçu" like spontaneous and sometimes accelerated motion. Outside of "here," as in *Endgame*, "it's death".³⁶ "For in the cylinder alone are certitudes to be found and without nothing but mystery." The questions this voice asks, moreover, will be, strictly speaking, rhetorical. This anonymous but finicky *auteur* wants to people a tiny planet through the sound of its own voice; in this "chronicle" it is the voice's credibility that is everywhere *on the line*. "Abode where lost bodies roam each searching for its lost one," it begins with clandestine assurance, "Vast enough for search to be in vain." And then the cruelest caveat of all: "Narrow enough for flight to be in vain." Within this claustrophobic set piece, even more "corpse" than *Endgame*,³⁷ this devisor can infiltrate a dehydrated landscape with a surprising symphony of color: "hellish light" turns flesh pink before it fades into an all-consuming "grey"; the tainted atmosphere of sulphur is a stickly red-yellow; and eyes are blue "for preference," as they so often are in the fiction of this period.

This locutionary style, however, much to what will become the voice's dismay, places neither the voice nor its strange interventions at the cutting edge, where it would very much like to be. The rules and regulations, the codes and creeds the voice confirms with such self-serving mendacity plant its feet, so to speak, very firmly in *this* world, even when it turns passive and makes those strictures *sound* so beguilingly different: "It is enjoined by a certain ethics not to do unto others what coming from them might give offence" (compare Hamm's fascinating spin on the same directive: "Lick your neighbor as yourself!").³⁸ As the speaker shifts attention from the adage to the image, more than sound is required to liberate its imagination from the dead-endedness of a closed-circuit society too often marred by a series of vapid parallels to our own. As in life, for example, the "short queue is not necessarily the most rapid," and as in *How It Is*, this world is, ironically, "as just as ours but less exquisitely organized."³⁹ And despite the originality of a peculiar syntax, this speaker's quest for an authentic soundscape is similarly compromised by an attachment to traditions of figuration that can be formulaic and appallingly melodramatic:

Pictresque detail a woman with white hair still young to judge by her thighs leaning against the wall with eyes closed in abandonment and mechanically clasping to her breast a mite who strains away in an effort to turn its head and look behind.

(p. 167)

The uninspired pose of this mannered Madonna and Child sounds like the work of a Renaissance hack who fails once again to make a breakthrough

image in the style of some *miglior fabbro*. Even the eleventh-hour rewrite—concise, abstracted, and diminished though it is—condemns this would-be visionary to a pleasantly familiar illusionism: "The mite still in the white-haired woman's clasp is no more than a shadow in her lap." Worse still, in the penultimate section of *The Lost Ones* the clichéd image of a tired Magna Mater resurfaces as the reference point, in the questionable "guise" of the red-haired North Woman, limber but enigmatic yoga position notwithstanding:

There does none the less exist a north in the guise of one of the vanquished or better one of the women vanquished or better still the woman vanquished. She squats against the wall with her head between her knees and her legs in her arms. The left hand clasps the right shinbone and the right the left forearm. The red hair tarnished by the light hangs to the ground. It hides the face and whole front of the body down to the crutch. The left foot is crossed on the right. She is the north. She rather than some other among the vanquished because of her greater fixity.

(pp. 175–76)

What this speaker says to indict the puny inhabitants of the cylinder therefore makes an even more scathing commentary on its own unexamined assumptions and unexceptional powers of perception: "None looks within himself where none can be." It is, once again in Beckett, the narrator who is being narrated here;⁴⁰ and in this case it is the narrator, not some imminent "other," who remains this work's recreant *dépeupleur*.

The speaker's statement of purpose in *The Lost Ones* is singularly disturbing in that it gives us the shape of allegory without the necessary sanction of an identifiable mimesis. "Abode," a *Godot* word that is also part of Molloy's, Malone's, and the Unnamable's vocabulary, is similarly—"mutatis mutandis"—a waiting-place.⁴¹ Here, even more than in any of the texts discussed so far, representation (if it exists at all) is teasingly inferred rather than stated, endorsed, or confirmed.⁴² A sedentary searcher stepped on instead of over is capable of such an outburst of fury as to throw the entire cylinder into a ferment. "Obsessed with laws, as well as with the codicils that govern their exceptions, this speaker's words can never succeed in clarifying a universe whose every element is fundamentally mysterious, even when those words make liberal use of the discretionary burdens of an essentialized past. In an "instant of fraternity" this story's journeymen (women and children not excepted) build ladders to their zenith in a wild parody of Jacob's dream; and the two creeds held by this insular realm's "semi-sages" make short shrift of those zealous "big" and "little enders" in *Gulliver's Travels*, a minefield of analogy

to this Laputan/Lilliputian dance of the "be"s. Depicting this habitat verbally, vertically, horizontally, and emotionally, the voice makes similar use of additional "traces blurs signs." The "lure" of the fifteen niches deregulates the five fixed points of Sir Thomas Browne's perfectly symmetrical quincunxes in *The Garden of Cyrus*; extreme heat equals extreme cold, as in the illustrative metaphors for identical contraries in Giordano Bruno; and Dante, the one source this speaker acknowledges by name (as well "it" might), could now offer one of his "rare wan smiles" to the cylinder's "non-" and "ex-searchers" in the way he previously looked down on Belacqua. ("If it is by resting that one becomes wise," Dante told *his* fixed point, "there can be no one wiser than you.") And reversing the "divine" Florentine's upward progression with Virgil on a "Terrestrial" cone, "priority" within this overburdened structure is given "at all times to descent over ascent."⁴³

This work also features a specifically Beckettian past recaptured: the very means of "ascent" and "descent," the ladders, this time missing rungs, return from *Endgame* and *Watt*, and the niches, "quincuncially arranged," resemble the womblike shelter Willie crawls back into behind the earth mound in *Happy Days*. And like Winnie in the same play, the speaker in *The Lost Ones* needs to be assured that "something of all this" is "being heard": it counts on the theatricalization of its own voice to confirm the ineffable power of a tantalizing intertextuality. For no matter how lame, this "amateur of myth" longs to place its own signature and its own intonation on "all the dead voices" that have come before, even if only to make a faint noise "like leaves." "The bodies brush together with a rustle of dry leaves. The mucuous membrane itself is affected." (Later it amends "leaves," that "old abomination," to "a rustling of nettles"; "mucuous membrane" is of course entirely "another matter" in *Enough*.)⁴⁴ This little "drama" is therefore by no means "peculiar to the unfinished tunnel"; not Dante perhaps, nor even *Waiting for Godot* for that matter, but all that this wistful *dépeupleur* can manage *if this notion is maintained*: "the ear finally distinguishes a faint stridulence as of insects which is that of the light itself and the one invariable."

In advancing toward the unobtainable goal of recounting through reciting this cautionary tale of classic ambitions ("No try no fail" but "Nice dimensions, nice proportions" nonetheless),⁴⁵ this opportunistic speaker remembers and retraces a literary past only when it is convenient to do so. There are, therefore, extraordinary limits to what his fractured intertextuality is enabled to tell us. Caught up in the vain making of its own rhetorical tropes and avoiding all helpful stops like a contemplative comma, a graphic dash, a correlative parenthesis, or that "hideous" but

time-sharing semicolon,⁴⁶ this voice takes perhaps too much pleasure in the sound of its words and too much pride in the doubtful shape imposed on run-on sentences. Though there is the occasional inspiration of a "red-yellow glister," such a play of language can be too narrowly construed; the best this muse can muster is a suave rather than shrewd phrase-making—"the quidam then quits," "the latter having lost his ladder," "to crawl back backwards"—or the crude falling-off into double-barreled retreats (best avoided) like "the tallest the tallest" and an awkwardly deployed "on on." Having run out of things to say, this stylist gets "lost" in an affected way of saying them.

That way of saying things should be called into question at almost every turn; speech can be deceptive, and "remarks," as Gertrude Stein remarked, "are not literature."⁴⁷ In *The Lost Ones* the voice we hear must be watched closely indeed, especially when it goes to Lucky's extreme of willfully rounding off numbers, "more or less" as the case might perversely be: "light" can be "a word," this time in the enlivening form of a discursive number system, "that not only dims but blurs into the bargain." Though this voice seems to have "logic on its side," and it never wavers in its enticing tone of complete confidence, the "facts" can sometimes speak more eloquently, and certainly more honestly, for themselves. "One body per square metre or two hundred bodies in all round numbers"—this speaker's prepared script—may not have got it exactly right. Inconsistencies, as Nell testifies in *Endgame*, can be something more agonizing than a mere slip of the tongue. "Can you not be a little accurate, Nagg?" she reprimands her man when he tries to misrepresent sand as sawdust. ("It was sawdust once," is his feeble excuse when she calls him to account.)⁴⁸ As more than one critic has noticed, in *The Lost Ones* there are slightly more than 200 people "in all round numbers" packed into the cylinder (205 to be exact); and each has slightly less than the one "square metre" this speaker cavalierly assigns to them.⁴⁹ (Perhaps this is too fine a point, but in a tight spot, as Maddy Rooney and Mr. Slocum discover, every inch counts). Such a tight division of space occasionally offers "the little people of searchers" close encounters of the worst kind:

But even from this point of view no great harm is done so rare is erection in the cylinder. It does occur none the less followed by more or less happy penetration in the nearest tube. Even man and wife may sometimes be seen in virtue of the law of probabilities to come together again in this way without their knowledge. The spectacle then is one to be remembered

of frenzies prolonged in pain and hopelessness long beyond what even the most gifted lovers can achieve in camera.

(p. 175)

Beckett's bilingual reader might also want to consider the discrepancy in the data cited for the cylinder in the two companion versions of the tale: 50 × 16 in French, 50 × 18 in English. Though the author initially told his English publisher that the latter was a misprint, and that the fault was entirely his own, he let it stand. The actor David Warrilow questioned him further about this textual inconsistency. Wondering which statistics he should cite in the opening lines of performance when the Mabou Mines adaptation was on its European tour, he wanted to be sure to get things right for a film version of the production then under option. Pressed, Beckett finally settled for his original "fifty metres round and sixteen high for the sake of harmony." "After all," he demurred before disappearing down the Boulevard Saint-Jacques in Paris, "you can't play fast and loose with pi."⁵⁰

That telltale disingenuousness of pi, "with the help of a little addition or better still division," becomes the perfect instrument of imperfection within the strict boundaries of *The Lost Ones*. "Cunningly out of line" (always and agonizingly 3.14159265 . . .), it is, nonetheless, what we have come to rely on for the mathematical disposition of circular space, determined as area and circumference. Here the "limits to part's equality with whole" assume ratios that give new life to the principle of indeterminacy.⁵¹ One of the great ironies of this piece is the way it replicates such disarming instability on many other levels as well. Displaying the potential of a voice to organize and to advance perception, *The Lost Ones* presents its reader with a laboratory of sounds and simulations in sound. The transformative power of a voice confers meaning, action, and relationship by establishing a freshly imagined sound for every subsequent configuration of space. We literally hear in silence, as Beckett's one "sssh!" abruptly reminds us in his almost-silent movie, *Film*.⁵² Yet what we hear in that imperfectly constructed void, "it goes without saying," is subject to a wide network of negotiations, each one subject in turn to the way each listener responds to new representations of sonic reinvigoration: "This is at first sight strange"; "The truth is"; "That is not quite accurate"; "It is curious to note"; "Impossible to foretell"; "Idle to imagine"; and the "first aperçu" of the abode, the "credence," and the climbers' code. Voice writes its own textuality onto what we thought was only *physical* space; meaning is defined by the sound the voice inhabits. In these words the text is always controlled by the voice; and as we assimilate additional information, we are both outside the text and its image—in silence, the space where Beck-

ett's reader is forced to go. Within this "mere jumble of mingled flesh," eyes "burn," metaphorically and otherwise, depending on how we say it/hear it / see it. "Chacun son dépeupleur."⁵³ "For skin," under such circumstances, can lose much of its innocent "charm."

The Lost Ones makes us profoundly aware of the many sounds of a world that a single voice can contain; such sounds find their shape symbolically and exist only as long as there are words to speak them into being. The same words' force, constructing the sounds within the general sound, can also make "all" go mysteriously "dead still." "In cold darkness motionless flesh": a tableau—though in the context of *The Lost Ones* a better word to say might be *freeze* or *still*—is suddenly both more and less than vivant. Such lulls can be "unspeakably dramatic to put it mildly." But the voice speaks up again, activating and illuminating the poetics of space the way a spot lights the desired part of an empty stage. Lovers "buckle to anew" and fists "carry on where they left off." This is "indeed strange"—but then, in terms of practical theatricality, "Nothing more natural." Light, sound, movement, and vision are eerily and unerringly connected one with another, an adventure in strangely acoustical dynamics; what a brave new world this is. Offered concretion where it might have been least expected, every listener reconstructs the flattened cylinder anew. Circumference, area, and, above all, depth now come full circle in an "absolute absence of the Absolute," "as though the irrationality of pi were an offense against the deity."⁵⁴ The drama of the voice in this text is therefore choral and communal; how we hear and imagine this sound makes us all responsible for bringing "it" into being.

This voice is remarkable in its triumphant ability to hold an audience, its determination to transfix even as its "precocious postures" deceive. As far as the eye can see—and that is what matters most in terms of practical theatricality—betrayal has always been part of seduction. This voice "dripping" in our head is hellbent this time around on getting itself heard, no matter what the cost, "No matter where / No matter when." Nothing will come of nothing, therefore "speak again."⁵⁵ Only by performing itself, self-styling its own verbal energies and "making" itself "all up again" as it goes along, can it hope "at last" to find its "place and pose," to form itself into something even vaguely resembling a *text*. "something" the dust of words finally "said." This is no longer the "eye of prey," but a mainstay of the "eye of flesh." For these words, seeking the harbor of a voice and conscientiously if surreptitiously devising *it all* for company, know that their only alternative is silence, the "nevoid smile"—and that, for Beckett's "troop of lunatics,"⁵⁶ his seasoned players and highly vocal performers, could certainly not be "it."