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The Lost Ones (continued)

After an initial impression of featurelessness, *The Lost Ones*' cylinder proves to be a surprisingly various interior, with its "cunningly disposed" quincunxes of niches and tunnels. These appear to have been built by design, though interest or energy on the part of the creator ran out before completion. The niches, which allow the searchers to "stretch out" ("s'y étendre") in the French original, seem to have shrunk in the English translation into spaces in which one can only "crouch", as though the process of translation had somehow contracted the available space. At times, more notably in the French text, the cylinder is "embodied", with the tunnels and niches as orifices, a fact that also seems relevant to the faintly odd retention of "aperçu" in the English, with its implication of apertures and piercing, as well as sight. (What English equivalent, if such exists, might Beckett have chosen instead? Is an "aperçu" really what the reader has just had?) In a move common to many Beckett texts, *The Lost Ones* semantically conjures up an entity, the system, then seems to dismiss it: "So much for a first aperçu of the system." Again, the English equivalent of this submission (and dismissal) is far wearier than the more trenchant French "Voilà" etc.

A discussion ensued as to whether the text's "lost one" was the narrator, the postulated viewer, God: whether the cylinder could be seen as a version of the Platonic cave, a thermodynamic system moving towards entropy, or an observer scrutinising a colony of ants. The narrator seems at times a strangely porous being, apparently responding to imagined questions from the viewer who is being instructed in the system's rules, of which the inhabitants seem merely instances. There is a rather grim sense of play.

Focusing on the scientific model (a notebook in the Reading Beckett Archive shows that Beckett familiarised himself in the 1930s with developments in contemporary physics) proved highly suggestive. The closed system, with its searchers and those who have relinquished the search, resembles theories of thermodynamics in which the speed and location of molecules tends inevitably to equalise, hence leading to the ultimate decay of the system. The narrating voice may be seen as akin to James Clark Maxwell's demon - who is postulated as sorting negative from positive particles within adjoining cylinder-systems and thus preserving the system from decay - in its witnessing, and thus perpetuation, of the system. The discussion moved to the compromised realism of the text, for instance, the strangeness of the existence of aged people and infants within the cylinder, even though the number of inhabitants seems to remain constant and copulation appears to have no connection to procreation. The sense of transposed ordinariness of *The Lost Ones* recalls the combination of the humdrum and the surreal of *Happy Days*, a bourgeois breakfast-table buried up to its neck in sand. There is a distinctly tongue-in-cheek Zola-esque sense of presenting an entire world within a text.

Like initial impressions of the cylinder as featureless, initial impressions of the language of *The Lost Ones* as purely scientific and homogenous tend to break down almost immediately. The "coign" which the searchers may win on reaching a niche was noted to be reminiscent of Macbeth's "coign of vantage". Similarly, "wild

surmise" is from Keats's "On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer", where it describes those who do not share Cortes' vision. Even when the vocabulary has no identifiable source elsewhere, it continually exhibits a certain excess - the searchers' "fondness" for certain niches, their "refraining" from others - which sits strangely with the scientific language which dominates, eg. "bodies", "perpetual motion" etc. Lyricism jostles with the strictly denotative. A reference to *Purgatorio* IV gives the impression of Dante suddenly erupting into a closed system, though apparently a Dante without a Virgil. Language sometimes enacts what it describes, as when the narrating voice expresses distaste at the "resurrectability" of the desire among the sedentary to get up again and climb. There are also suggestions of a hellfire sermon detailing the sufferings of the damned, their "darkness motionless flesh". A dynamics of style oscillates between the various modes, as light and temperature oscillate within the cylinder. The session ended with a discussion as to whether the discourse of *The Lost Ones* was a "masculine" one, in its striving for scientific precision, or whether this was countered by the instability of the binaries within the text and the text's "suspension" between them.

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