

On the Sphere, the Cylinder and the Cuboid: Closed System Dynamics in Various Published Fictions and Beckett's Late Prose Works

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Abstract

In his introduction to Samuel Beckett's *Nohow On*, S. E. Gontarski identifies 'a new character, the nameless "him"' – or on occasion "her," "one," or "it" – as 'Beckett's second major fictional innovation', the first being that of "voice": the 'progressive disintegration of literary character that dominated the journey fictions from *Watt*...' The transition from the latter to the former 'was announced in the fragments and *faux départs* that eventually developed into *All Strange Away*', and is encapsulated in the latter's sixth and seventh sentences: 'Out of the door and down the road in the old hat and coat like after the war, no, not that again. Five foot square, six high, no way in, none out, try for him there.'

This and related texts appear to depict what A. A. Luce, Beckett's personal tutor at Trinity College Dublin, refers to as 'artificially closed system[s] like those postulated by science'. While Beckett scholars tend to associate the term 'closed system' with thermodynamics, an additional, unexplored avenue has the potential to open up further interpretative dimensions for this important preoccupation in Beckett's work: that of classical mechanics – a subject Beckett studied as an undergraduate at Trinity. Indeed, the texts' three-dimensional spaces correlate with the three most common coordinate systems within classical mechanics – the Cartesian, cylindrical and spherical – and the geometry of 'the Pantheon of Rome' referred to in *All Strange Away* brings to mind Archimedes' *On the Sphere and the Cylinder*, whose theorems were themselves conceived of as problems of mechanics.

My affinity with these stories derives from my own training in classical mechanics. The research presented in this thesis has helped me clarify aspects of my approach to *His Enclosure* – my novel-in-progress – and its predecessors. It has also opened up a critical distance between my closed system texts and those of Beckett.

Declaration

I confirm that this is my own work and the use of all material from other sources has been properly and fully acknowledged.

Simon Okotie

Published works

The following publications are submitted as part of this PhD by Published Works:

- the first 22 chapters of *In the Absence of Absalon* (submitted separately), a novel;
- *After Absalon* (submitted separately) – the culmination of a trilogy of novels that started with *Whatever Happened to Harold Absalon?*; and
- the following excerpts from *His Enclosure*, a novel-in-progress:
 - o ‘Bindings’ (2020) originally published online at 3:AM Magazine (and selected for *Best British Short Stories 2021*);
 - o *Two Degrees of Freedom* (2021) published as a chapbook by Nightjar Press;
 - o ‘Manifolds’ (2022) published in Firmament from Sublunary Editions; and
 - o ‘When viewed from the head rather than the foot’ (2024) published by Subtext (and selected for *Best British Short Stories 2025*).¹

In addition, the Afterword includes explanations and elaborations of aspects of the book-length essay *The Future of the Novel* (2025) published by Melville House.²

¹ Simon Okotie, *Whatever Happened to Harold Absalon?* (Cromer: Salt Publishing, 2012)

Simon Okotie, *In the Absence of Absalon* (Cromer: Salt Publishing, 2016)

Simon Okotie *After Absalon* (Cromer: Salt Publishing, 2020)

Simon Okotie, ‘Bindings’, *3:AM Magazine* (2020) <<https://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/3am-in-lockdown-60-simon-okotie/>> [accessed 7 March 2025]

Nicholas Royle (ed.), *Best British Short Stories 2021* (Cromer: Salt Publishing, 2021).

Simon Okotie, *Two Degrees of Freedom* (Manchester: Nightjar Press, 2021).

Simon Okotie, ‘Manifolds’, *Firmament*, Vol. 2 No. 3 (2022), pp. 106-110.

Michael Salu (ed.), *Cybernetics, or Ghosts?: Stories from Myth to A.I.* (Bristol: Subtext/Multiverse Ltd., 2024).

Nicholas Royle (ed.), *Best British Short Stories 2025* (Cromer: Salt Publishing, 2025 – forthcoming).

² Simon Okotie, *The Future of the Novel* (London: Melville House, 2025).

Critical synopsis

‘[T]he action diminishes with each volume’ of the trilogy, according to Blake Morrison in the *London Review of Books*.³

Much of the first novel is taken up with [its protagonist] Marguerite’s efforts to walk along the top deck of a bus and descend its stairs; the whole of the second with his successor’s attempt to gain access to a house by a front gate and front door; and the whole of *After Absalom* with Marguerite’s descent along a ramp leading from a pavement to a pedestrian subway. In real time, each foray might take a minute or two. In fictional time they last an eternity.

For David Evans in the *Times Literary Supplement*, the first two novels ‘seem practically Tolstoyan’ compared to the final volume; ‘So little happens in the final book [for Morrison] that the first fifty pages of the first look Homeric by comparison.’⁴ Yet if the trilogy ‘is all about learning to walk’, the subsequent work (reproduced overleaf) does not ‘let rip and run’ as Morrison urges; instead it ‘raises the level of claustrophobia beyond even Beckett’s imagining.’⁵

³ Blake Morrison, ‘Motherly Protuberances’, in *London Review of Books*, Vol. 43, No. 17, 9 September 2021, pp. 29-30 (p. 30).

⁴ David Evans, ‘Ramping up the Suspense’, in the *Times Literary Supplement*, No. 6132, 9 October 2020, p. 19; *op. cit.*

⁵ David Rose, ‘A Personal Anthology’.

<<https://apersonalanthology.com/category/david-rose/>> [accessed 26 June 2024]

Bindings

And he was, of course, now that his wrist bindings were starting to loosen, right on the brink, potentially, of gaining some crucial information, if not perspective, on his predicament in that, shortly, he would be able to use the hand and arm so loosened to delimit if not demarcate the space that he (as he continued, provisionally, to refer to himself) took himself to be contained within, and, in so doing, garner sufficient evidence, he hoped, to enable his escape from it, which is to say to enable him to remove what he took, for now, to be his body, from that enclosed three- (or more?) dimensional eight- (or twelve-) sided space, with the reason that he referred to this arm and hand in the singular being that the other arm, to which, for now, it continued, so far as he could make out, to be bound would, he thought, remain momentarily incapacitated, as it were, at least in relation to being used, with its freed counterpart, to delimit or demarcate that space given that his body, as he continued to refer to it (despite this form's two-fold implication of possession and of gender, neither of which he was really, he thought, in a position to substantiate, at least not fully), would continue to press down upon it, which is to say that it, or they (that arm and, hence, that hand), would remain trapped, in a somewhat analogous, synecdochal (would it be?) relationship with the remainder of his body given that that remainder, whilst itself being trapped, would remain (in a different, temporal, sense) on top of that arm and hand until he found (or moved) himself in (or into) a position in which to release it, with this very question of what he thought would continue to be a trapped arm and hand raising a further question, which was this: what would he, so-called, prioritise once he was free to do so? What he meant to say by this, as he managed to loosen his bindings further through an action of rotating, crossing and alternating his clenched fists such that the angle subtended by his wrists (to each other) progressively moved from ninety degrees to zero degrees to ninety degrees again (or, more accurately, perhaps, from ninety degrees to zero

degrees to minus ninety degrees, in that the clenched fists moved through a total of one-hundred-and-eighty degrees whilst also flipping back and forth, clockwise and then anti-clockwise, through the same angle), was both how would he deploy his freed right hand, this being the one that he thought would be the first to be released from its binding given that, so far as he could make out, he was on his left side facing towards the rear wall of that enclosed and obscured space, with his left arm beneath his body (the remainder thereof), once he had finally managed to free it, which is to say, how would he prioritise the tasks needed to free himself from that enclosed and obscured space, such as using that freed hand to elevate his body (the remainder thereof), to the extent that he was able, so as to enable his other hand and arm to be released from beneath him, or using it to start to remove the tape or gag, were either of these to be in place in his situation, across or within his mouth, or removing any hooding that might be entirely covering his head and face, or starting to loosen the bindings that he took to be in place around his ankles, or reaching out around him as a means of garnering evidence about the interior of that space — shape, dimensions, latches etc. — and how, moreover, would this relate, he wondered, to his priorities more broadly, once he had removed what he took to be his own body entirely from that enclosed and obscured space? Given that the radius of his wrist-bindings had, through the continued twisting, backwards and forwards, of his wrists whilst also alternating the lateral position of the respective clenched fists such that this action resembled an 'X' shape hinged, at its centre, through this loose (and loosening) binding such that the angle of the top and bottom quadrant (taking, for now, this shape to be symmetrical about both vertical and horizontal axes) progressively reduced to zero, an angle achieved, of course, when the wrists were in alignment with each other but at ninety degrees to the remainder of his body, before continuing into negative territory, as it were, en route, that is, to an angle, between the wrists, of minus ninety degrees, at the point where they

once again aligned themselves with the body (the remainder thereof), now reached the point whereby he would, imminently, he thought, be able to release his right hand and wrist, at least, from the binding, he felt he must turn his mind urgently to these questions of prioritisation such that, as before, he might both use what would, at that stage, be a free hand wisely, in relation to the remainder of what he continued to refer to as his own body, which he assumed was bound, gagged and perhaps even blindfolded and/or hooded, within an enclosed space that was also, somehow, internally obscured (from us as well as from him), and use the removal, by himself, of that body from that enclosed and obscured three- (or more) dimensional eight- or twelve-sided space in a way that would not only honour the struggles that he (and, perhaps, even we) had endured to secure that freedom, but would, in addition, bring about the conditions whereby it could never, he hoped, recur.

Two Degrees of Freedom

'For something so precise – and precisely – about orientation, Okotie's vision is profoundly disorienting' Marc Laidlaw

What he was left with, then, were three axes in the objective plane, these being the primary means of describing an internal space of what he took to be eight sides, with 'side' being used advisedly in that not only did it accurately, he thought, exclude the roof or lid of that space as well as its base but, in addition, excluded the upper faces of what would appear to be two cubes indented at the two lower corners furthest from us, with the subtraction of these two areas or volumes though the insertion, in each case, of three orthogonal faces being the means of accommodating two wheels placed, one on each side, partially beneath that space to enable it to be propelled up a ramp (in the particular scenario under investigation), such that the actual number of faces would, in fact, total an additional four, and that the whole consisted of a concave dodecahedron, with the axes intersecting, from our perspective, at the bottom left corner closest to us, or, rather, at the bottom left corner of a cuboid superimposed upon that irregular dodecahedron for modelling purposes, with the majority of the surfaces of these two three-dimensional objects, which is to say, the dodecahedron and the cuboid, or, more specifically, the right-angled dodecahedron and the rectangular hexahedron, coinciding in such a way that the latter entirely contained the former, thereby obviating the need to define locations internal to that space negatively, this being an eventuality he wished to avoid, for whatever reason, perhaps so as to reserve these negative dimensions for the space outside of that volume, a space to which he was in the process, he hoped, of emerging, if not escaping. Having defined, then, to his reasonable satisfaction, the objective axes and their zero-point,

and taking the equivalent subjective system to consist of a series of interlocking two- or three-dimensional anatomical axes parallel to their objective counterparts and centred at his heart, with the interplay between the respective systems being the primary means of describing his motion within that space, which is to say, his motion within a concave irregular polyhedron of eight sides and twelve faces, with the concavities located at, or towards, the front of that dodecahedron meaning that they would be to his right once he had attained the position towards which he had just started moving by rotating around his longitudinal axis, namely that of lying on his back, he realised that he must in addition define, more precisely, the rotational axes around which that generic irregular polyhedron was angled and around which he himself was moving, which is to say the rotational or angular axes around the translational or linear ones, this to enable him more accurately to describe both his own motion and that of the irregular dodecahedron within which he remained incarcerated given that the latter must, he thought, eventually exit the ramp, either in a forward or a reverse direction, and would, at that moment, by definition, rotate around its transverse linear (or, more accurately, rectilinear) axis in a direction opposite to that in which it had rotated on entering the ramp, with the implication that he would need, in anticipation of this eventuality, and to hold to his self-imposed requirement of describing the subjective and objective motions, and their interaction, entirely in positive terms, a means of switching the polarity of the objective axes in both their translational and angular modes or motions, with the switching being reliant, he thought, as his own continued revolution brought him into immediate contact with a second body, a lifeless one, to his right, on identifying axes that mirrored each other in a plane between, and parallel to, the front and rear faces of the notional rectangular hexahedron that entirely contained the irregular concave polyhedron, suggesting to him the use of literal and metaphorical rules of thumb to establish the directions of, and relationship between, the axes, with the previously

defined objective system utilising the first three digits of the right hand arranged orthogonally to each other, and the equivalent digits of the left hand being used for their reflective counterparts, when viewing, now, the left-side elevation of that space, albeit with the following important concessions: that symmetry around the plane between, and parallel to, the front and rear faces of the notional rectangular hexahedron was not reflected in the shape itself, given the presence, as before, of a pair of three faces arranged orthogonally to each other at the front of that space and to the left as we now look; that a rotational nomenclature must also, of course, be deployed; that the simple reflective transposition effected for the rectilinear axes between left and right hands, with their orthogonal primary, secondary and tertiary digits, could not straightforwardly be applied to that rotational nomenclature, given that, whereas the positive ordinate axes – represented mnemonically in the rectilinear or translational system by the index fingers – would be aligned, as, indeed, would the positive applicate axes (the thumbs), such that only the positive abscissa axes (the middle fingers) opposed each other, this being, in fact, the means by which the required reflective transposition was effected, with the middle finger of the right hand representing forward (and upward) motion in the current scenario, and the middle finger of the left hand representing the converse, the positive directions of the respective angular or rotational axes would, through application of the right- or left-hand grip rule (a further rule of thumb more deserving of the name given the digit most prominently deployed as part of the rule – in this case representing the positive direction of the translational axis in question – with the direction of the fingers indicating the equivalent for the respective rotational axis), all oppose each other as a consequence of this secondary reflective transposition, he thought, meaning, for instance, that the entry of that three-dimensional space of eight sides and twelve faces upon a ramp from below would be recorded as a positive value in relation to both the relevant rectilinear and angular axes (assuming, for now, in relation to

the latter, that the entry was from the horizontal), whilst the polarity of the angular or rotational axes would be flipped in the situation of exiting the ramp (again, assuming, for present purposes, that that exit was to the horizontal), with this latter scenario being, of course, the more imminent one from his perspective, at least to the extent that he could make out from his position within that space, thereby potentially returning a negative value, which, as we know, was something that, for whatever reason, he wished to avoid. Yet what he now realised, as the front of the space in fact jerked upwards, abruptly, and he found himself rolling back to his starting position on his left side, was that just because the right- and left-hand rules applied to the reflected objective axes in question, as well as their subjective counterparts, this did not mean that the left- and right-hand grip rules needed to be equivalently applied: opposing hands could be used to describe the rectilinear or translational and angular or rotational subjective and objective motions such that, for example, the right-hand grip rule was applied in the revised parameters of the example under investigation in determining the rotational positivity around a subjective longitudinal axis determined by the left hand – and, more specifically, the left index finger – that was also used, in the form of an orthogonal middle finger, to indicate the positive direction of the rectilinear or translational motion following the abrupt switch from right-to-left to left-to-right motion (from our perspective), which would bring an obvious advantage in that, where necessary, both hands could be used simultaneously, as in the current example, to determine the positive directions of the angular or rotational and rectilinear or translational axes, albeit with the caveat that there would still be instances where the same hand would be needed for both types – in describing that shape exiting a ramp, from below, onto a steeper ramp, for example, as would appear to be the case, now, in the current circumstances, or exiting a ramp, from above, onto the horizontal or onto a ramp that was less steep, or entering a ramp, from below, from the horizontal or from a ramp that was less steep,

or entering a ramp, from above, from a steeper ramp: whenever, in short, an obtuse angle was subtended between the two planes of motion – although all of these instances would be limited, he thought, to the objective axes given that the spatial constraints within which he was seemingly operating meant that their subjective counterparts were required only to describe his marginal movement, to left or right, around his longitudinal axis, suggesting a simultaneous switch between hand- and grip-rules regardless, really, of the angle subtended, in this case, through the transition, by the base upon which that movement was taking place. He would, then, finally arrive at a position whereby he could describe not only his movements within that irregular concave dodecahedron but also in relation to it – and both somehow in relation to us – as well as the motion of that shape (and, by extension, of his body) in relation to some absolute measure: ‘the horizontal’, with the framework for describing these relative and absolute subjective and objective movements and positions consisting of inter-related and partially superimposed orthogonal axes, both rectilinear or translational and angular or rotational, with the directions of the former governed by the left- or right-hand rule and those of the latter by the left- or right-hand grip rule, both hands being used to describe the circumscribed motion of the subject within that space as well as the motion of the space itself when transitioning between flat planes subtending a reflex angle to each other – the left for the rectilinear axes and the right for the rotational in the scenario where subject and/or object were moving from left to right, from our perspective, and vice versa when moving from right to left – and the same hand being used to describe both the rectilinear or translational and angular or rotational motion of that space when transitioning between flat planes subtending an obtuse angle to each other – with the same assignment of axes as the previous, ambidextral, example – and with both subjective and objective motion being limited, under the test conditions described, to two degrees of freedom such that, in effect, the positive abscissa axis,

represented by the middle finger(s), and the rotational axis, represented by the four fingers curving to resemble a grip, around the positive ordinate axis, represented by the index finger(s), were sufficient, he thought, to exhaust the permutations and combinations of any such motion, a system, in short, that would, he hoped, prove accurate enough if not actually to effect it then at least to occupy him until his release.

Manifolds

And as he continued rolling clockwise from his left side onto his back by pressing on the rear façade with his right hand, he started to deploy his legs in furtherance of this general movement towards the supine position from which he would be able to launch the next phase of his manoeuvre – that of releasing his left arm, which, for now, remained trapped beneath him – an interim stage that would, he hoped, take him further towards his ultimate objective of freeing himself entirely from his mobile enclosure, with the sequence of this deployment being, he thought, quite simply, one of bending his legs more or less into a foetal position whilst increasing the pressure through his right hand until it was sufficient to enable him to lift his knees from their momentary resting place against the structure's base, increasing this angled elevation until the leading knee – the right – had, as it approached the zenith of its arc, separated from its counterpart (to the extent his ankle bindings allowed), continuing the clockwise orbit of his separated knees until his centre of gravity had passed beyond his body's support base, i.e. had reached what is typically referred to as a tipping point, with this more or less coinciding with the ability to release his right hand from the rear façade (given these favourable gravitational effects would be sufficient to supersede the motive necessity of applying direct pressure, via that right hand, against the rear façade), enabling him to deploy it, in turn, in furtherance of both interim and ultimate objectives, with the arm's subsequent movements resembling, he thought, three connected pendula which, rather than swinging through a two-dimensional plane that, typically, would be aligned vertically as a means of utilising the effects of gravity as well as, in the example of the mechanism of an analogue clock, say, a winder capable of imparting energy that would be stored and released slowly, to supplement that available via those planetary forces in a real life scenario where the pivot was non-frictionless and the rod non-massless (a situation this, then, that was analogous to his own

in that, not only would he be using both the potential and kinetic forces available to him to initiate and maintain a rotation – of himself – within his enclosure, but also that his subjugation in this manner would, he now realised, be one in which one of his arms would be travelling much faster than the other), the swept path, in the case of his right arm, being through a three-dimensional space – a volume – although it could perhaps best be described as being through three curved two-dimensional planes or manifolds such that, topologically speaking, they could plausibly be represented as sections of the lateral surface areas of three cones whose notional vertices were located beyond their respective nodal points on, or within, his arm (given, that is, that each of these nodes – his shoulder, elbow and wrist – was, in turn, rotating at a distance from the respective cone's centreline), with the angular velocities being proportional to each section's proximity to the arm's extremity such that the upper arm would swing more slowly than the forearm, which would swing more slowly than the hand, with this speed differential being brought about in part, he thought, by the increased urgency incumbent upon the commitment to that side of the torso that the previous portion of appendage would, by then, have made and which the subsequent section must then make, with the passage of the elbow and then the wrist constituting particular turning points, given that these links or nodes were relatively massy or weighty, meaning they would have a disproportionate effect, gravitationally (and, therefore, rotationally) speaking, compared to the links between these nodes – viz. the fore- and upper arm – hence the moment those nodes passed his torso, in their movement from front to rear (from his perspective), or from rear to front (from the perspective of his mobile enclosure), or, in more general terms, from x to y (where x and y are points within that three-dimensional space such that $x \neq y$) would, all else being equal, serve to increase further the angular velocity clockwise around his longitudinal axis thereby propelling him with added impetus rotationally towards his desired previously-defined staging post, which implied, of

course, that, despite the different articulation in the joints of the hands compared to the arms meaning that the series of connected conical manifolds used to describe the trajectory of the latter could not, he thought, be used for that of the former, in another way a similar case could be made, in his specific case and in the scenario in which he found himself, for the right hand, in that the joints of same were, compared to the remainder of those digits – the fingers and thumb – relatively massy, meaning that to lead with these joints would, like leading with the equivalents in the arm itself, bestow a rotational advantage, potentially, in transferring his centre of gravity further to the right, thereby hastening, however marginally, his clockwise rotation in that direction, with a related disadvantage, in the case of his hand, that its deployment in this way would mean it being further from the rear facade, a facade it would, of course, have hitherto (or thereabouts) been in contact with and which he couldn't, in the circumstances of that enclosure changing its orientation such that it was less favourable to his current bodily disposition, rule out having, once again, to seek, meaning, in short, that any decision on his part to use his right hand forcibly to shift his centre of gravity even further to the right in furtherance of increasing the positive, in the sense of clockwise, angular velocity of his body around its longitudinal axis needed, he thought, to be traded off against the increased distance from the rear of that space, with its concomitant risk of relinquishing this modicum of direct control, until, that is, his right hand had attained what he hoped would be the relative safety of the base of that space, having passed its own tipping point, and one that was related, of course, to the aforementioned whole-body equivalent but which succeeded it, in that, as before, the hand would only have come into play, as it were, once his centre of gravity had passed beyond his bodily support base via the clockwise revolution of the lower half of his body around its longitudinal axis, with this subsequent tipping point being, then, more metaphorical than actual, representing, as it did, a point equidistant between the hand's launching pad on

the rear façade and its landing position, the latter initially being described as being behind him, but which now, given his ongoing upper body revolution around its longitudinal axis, was more accurately described as being to his right, with the distance in question being measured along its actual trajectory rather than along the shortest path between these points, the risk being that the disposition of that mobile enclosure suddenly or gradually became less favourable, particularly, that is, in the situation that now abruptly transpired in which it also started to revolve around an axis parallel to the longitudinal axis through the centreline of his body, with this changed – and changing – disposition being in opposition to that through which he had been revolving such that it could, in the circumstances of his more-or-less understandable desire, be defined, for our purposes, as negative, whereas, of course, his own direction of revolution, to the extent that it continued as it had been hitherto (and we continued to identify with him as protagonist) would be cast as positive – thereby once again occasioning the very counter-revolution he'd fought so hard to avoid, which is to say, quite simply, that of rolling back onto his left side and back into the position from which this whole long-winded manoeuvre had commenced and from which he had sought, for so long, to escape.

When viewed from the head rather than the foot

Yet as she rolled from her left side onto her back by pressing, with her right hand, on the internal rear façade of that eight- or twelve-sided three-dimensional enclosure and, at the moment her centre of gravity passed to the right beyond the base formed by that left side, simultaneously removing that right hand and retracting her right arm, initially by, as it were, folding that arm around its elbow and then, as the hand passed to the right of her torso, unfolding it again around the same joint and revolving it progressively around its shoulder-, elbow- and wrist-joints, such that the hand was in a position to land to her right on the base of that space and act as a shock-absorber for the remainder of her body as the latter revolved, clockwise when viewed from the head rather than the foot, which is to say, when viewed from a position on the superior side of a transverse section through her body, under the force, now, entirely, of gravity, towards a supine position, she found that, rather than being able to adopt a position whereby, through bending her knees, she could place her feet flat such that, by subsequently exerting a force through the soles of those feet, she would be able to raise her torso from that base by arching her back, her feet and shoulders acting as the 'bridge piers', if that's the correct term, such that she would finally be able to release her left hand which, for now, remained trapped beneath her given it had been behind her when she'd been in that recumbent position on her left side, with this manoeuvre being, in fact, a mere staging post en route to her ultimate objective, which was to move forward within that space, which is to say, to move to her right towards the front of that space given that that eight- or twelve-sided three-dimensional enclosure was conveying her from left to right from her perspective, this being the most likely façade, in her estimation, from which to effect her eventual release therefrom, she found that, instead of her heels moving towards her, which is to say, instead of moving towards her backside such that the angle subtended by the upper and lower legs would

progressively decrease in proportion to that decreasing distance, and I could hardly avoid being implicated, she thought, given our multiple mutual entanglements, the equivalent angle between feet and shins increasing accordingly as her toes moved towards the ground or base of that space, they remained resolutely in place, which is to say that her heels made no movement, implying that, despite the signal having been sent by her, so far as she could tell, urgently if unthinkingly, in the usual way, for this manoeuvre to commence, which is to say the movement of the heels along their, and her, resting place towards her buttocks, this latter word preferable to her than the previous way in which she'd referred to this three-dimensional region – the 'backside' – in that it was, she thought, both more specifically technical – less colloquial – and more evocative of the fleshy parts of its counterparts, the heels, as well, of course, as being pluralised like those counterparts, which is to say that it evoked and, to some extent, paralleled the shape and relative fleshiness of the latter, not, of course, that she blamed me exactly, she thought, for her predicament – that wasn't what we were saying – perhaps unsurprisingly given the shock-absorbent function served by both zones or regions, one pair in relation, of course, to standing, walking and (dare she say it) dancing, the other in relation, primarily but perhaps not exclusively, to sitting, that the signal had, somehow, gone unreceived or unrecognised, meaning, in short, that she was literally and metaphorically powerless and in the hands of others, at least, that is, in relation to the lower limbs, the upper being, so far as she could tell, still capable of receiving her volitional transmissions, the right arm, of course, being the one best suited to testing this hypothesis in that it was relatively unencumbered, as it were, by the rest of the body, remaining, as it was, more or less free in its articulations as her right hand approached the base of that enclosure to the right of her torso, meaning that it, at least, was available to assist her in moving in the manner described, which is to say, to assist her in moving towards attaining a position whereby she would be able to release her left hand

from beneath her such that she could use that hand with its counterpart to manipulate further the remainder of her body, through whatever means, in such a way as to adopt a posture within that enclosure whereby she might eventually effect her release therefrom, a strategy and approach that she decisively, now, modified, given not only that her right hand had finally touched down upon the base of that space to the right of her torso, but also that the space itself, as though in response to this additional contact, had started to tilt backwards, consistent, that is, with it having started up a ramp in a forwards direction, such that its leading edge had gained elevation in relation to its trailing edge, with this development being, of course, contrary to her aspiration to move forwards within that space, as though through as it were placing her therein, she thought, I had this indirect control over her on its part – given, that is, that her body was arranged laterally within it such that a backwards – or upwards – tilt objectively translated into a leftwards tilt subjectively – thereby opposing, or resisting, the clockwise revolution around her longitudinal axis when viewed from the head rather than the foot, which is to say, when viewed from a position on the superior side of a transverse section through her body, that she had so long aspired to, leaving her wondering why it was that, rather than actively resisting this motion on her part, which is to say, actively resisting the motion induced, or potentially induced, in her by the front of that eight- or twelve-sided three-dimensional space elevating itself consistent with it entering upon an upwards ramp in a forwards direction such that this would induce in her a counter-clockwise revolution around her longitudinal axis which would serve to send her back to the position of resting on her left side from which she had commenced this whole manoeuvre, this resistance taking the form, for instance, of her placing her right hand, which, remember, remained at liberty and available to her, unlike its counterpart, the left, back upon the internal rear façade of that space, and applying an equal and opposite pressure to that being applied upon her by the increasing elevation of the front of

that space in relation to its rear, which is to say, the counter-clockwise revolution around the space's rear axle when viewed from the right of that space as it moves from left to right in front of us, this equal and opposite force being just sufficient, by definition, to resist the counter-revolutionary force being applied by that space upon her in the manner described, there being no reason, of course, on her part, for her not to increase the force that she could apply in this way such that she would, in fact, continue in this manner to revolve clockwise around her longitudinal axis when viewed from the head rather than the foot, which is to say, when viewed from a position on the superior side of a transverse section through her body, as she had been hitherto, not, of course, that she would need to initiate this resistive force until that space, whose front was still in the process of elevating itself in relation to its rear, had attained a certain angle, which is to say, a certain degree of steepness, given, that is, that the breadth of her body (and that of most human and even humanoid bodies per se) was proportionately much greater than its depth, meaning, in short, that in circumstances in which it was arranged in a supine position, a steep angle would be required to tip such a body from its back or, were it arranged in a prone position, from its front, onto one or other of its sides, such that she decided instead, instinctively and immediately, and despite now removing her right hand, or, more specifically, her right palm, from the base of that space, actively, in fact, to accentuate rather than to resist the counter-revolutionary force that continued to be induced in her by the front of that space elevating itself, or being elevated, in relation to its rear, by leaving her right elbow in situ on the base of that space to the right of her own supine torso, with the deployment of that vertex designed to enable, in short, greater leverage on her part, given the ongoing non-responsiveness of her lower limbs, in relation to the counter-clockwise revolution around her longitudinal axis when viewed from the head rather than the foot, which is to say, when viewed from a position on the superior side of a transverse section through her body, and

which she now initiated by applying a force through it that was sufficient, despite the mismatch in the aforementioned relative dimensions of her body – despite, that is, its breadth being so much greater, relatively speaking, than its depth – decisively to switch the polarity of revolution in her body, to initiate, that is, this counter-clockwise revolution around her longitudinal axis when viewed from the head rather than the foot, which is to say, when viewed from a position on the superior side of a transverse section through her body, a motion she further accentuated by moving her right hand counter-clockwise both around the equivalent elbow – when viewed, that is, from her right – and around her longitudinal axis when viewed, as before, from the head rather than the foot, which is to say, when viewed from a position on the superior side of a transverse section through her body, such that it traced a curved trajectory around her torso, thereby shifting her centre of gravity slightly to her left, which, with the addition of the still-increasing backwards, upwards, or, from her perspective, leftwards, tilt of the space itself meant that she found herself on the brink of another tipping point, albeit one whereby her centre of gravity shifted from the infinite three-dimensional volume to the right of her base when viewed from the head rather than the foot, which is to say, when viewed from a position on the superior side of a transverse section through her body, to the infinite three-dimensional volume to its left, which, incidentally, removed, once again, the pressure that had been placed on her left hand and arm given that, in this transition, the right-hand side of her torso had, of course, elevated itself, or been elevated, such that that left hand and arm, which remained behind her, were no longer bearing that part of her body, with the pressure on her left shoulder increasing accordingly, at which point she was literally and metaphorically in a position to remove her right elbow from the base of that space, which is to say, literally and metaphorically to transition back from using her right elbow to apply thrust to the base of that space towards using her right hand to apply thrust to its internal rear façade, with the relative

dynamics within that space, in this interim between force applications upon surfaces that were, of course, at right angles to one another, being sufficient, she judged, all else being equal, to maintain her counter-clockwise angular momentum, which is to say that, despite being literally and metaphorically in no position, during this interim or hiatus, to use her right elbow or hand to apply pressure upon any of the internal façades of the eight- or twelve-sided three-dimensional space, given that the right elbow and hand were, as it were, then free-floating within that space – as that hand transitioned, that is, through the arm's straightening around that elbow and the wrist's bending in the process, in preparation for the contact of that hand, in the form, perhaps, of its palm or fingertips, with the internal rear façade of the eight- or twelve-sided three-dimensional space once again, just as it had transitioned previously, albeit in the opposite direction – although she found, as she judged her right hand to be approaching that surface, which is to say the internal rear façade of that eight- or twelve-sided three-dimensional space within which she remained, for now, enclosed, that the trailing edge of that enclosure actually commenced elevating itself – or being elevated – not though in relation to the leading edge, but rather in a way that was consistent with the continued increase in elevation of that leading edge such that both edges, now, were engaged in increasing their absolute elevations while maintaining, between them, a constant elevatory differential so that, as far as she could tell from her compromised and constrained vantage point within that mobile enclosure, the space's trailing edge had – perhaps inevitably – now entered, in a forward direction, upon the same upwards ramp or slope that its counterpart, the leading edge, had been occupying and ascending ever since her right palm had first touched down upon the base of that space to the right of her torso as a form of shock-absorber for the remainder of her body as the latter revolved clockwise around her longitudinal axis when viewed from the head rather than the foot, which is to say, when viewed from a position on the superior side of a

transverse section through her body, although she still judged, despite concerns to the contrary, this abrupt elevatory action on the part of the trailing edge of the space to be, in fact, insufficient to prevent her from reaching her revised goal, given, that is, both the proximity, now, of the fingertips of her right hand to the internal rear façade and the angular momentum still available to her from both the force she had applied via her right elbow to the base of that space and that of gravity supported by the ongoing angular disposition of the space itself, which remained, of course, broadly supportive of the counter-clockwise revolution around her longitudinal axis when viewed from the head rather than the foot, which is to say, when viewed from a position on the superior side of a transverse section through her body, in which her body continued to engage, despite that angular disposition no longer, now, increasing, such that she felt certain she would eventually turn fully to face the space's inner rear façade again, her right hand placed upon it, with the latter having traversed that inner volume via a series of swept paths resembling, if not replicating precisely, the mirror image, rotated through ninety degrees, of the route it had taken from that façade, the hand, wrist and elbow, in these trajectories, acting, she thought, like the weights at the end of a series of connected pendula to effect the aforementioned motion, and she would continue rolling towards the rear of that space until, that is, she found herself, as she did now, back in her starting position, resting on her left side facing, at close quarters, the inner rear façade of what she regarded, now, as the relative safety of that dreadful enclosure, a stasis she monitored and maintained by ensuring that her right hand not only stayed in contact with that façade but, in addition, remained poised to increase, reduce or remove accordingly the force she had at her disposal, in response, that is, to the changing dynamics imposed upon her if not by me then by some unnameable – and seemingly unassumable – presence that is, perhaps, despite its rigours, worthy of

preserving in its undifferentiated, non-subjectively inhabitable, non-objectifying, non-automated, unfocalised and fully unaffiliated combinatory form.

List of abbreviations

Works by Beckett:

- CSP *The Complete Short Prose, 1929-1989* (New York: Grove Press, 1995)
- DI *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment* (New York: Grove Press, 1984)
- DRE *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (London: Faber and Faber, 2020)
- LeD *Le Dépeupleur* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1970)
- MMU *Molloy, Malone Dies and The Unnamable* (London: John Calder, 1994)
- Mu *Murphy* (London: John Calder, 1993)
- NO *Nohow On: Company, Ill Seen Ill Said, Worstward Ho* (New York: Grove Press, 1996)
- PTD *Proust and Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit* (London: John Calder, 1999)
- SP *Selected Poems* (London: John Calder, 1999)
- TFN *Texts for Nothing and Other Shorter Prose, 1950-1976* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010)
- TM *Têtes-Mortes* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1967)

Works about Beckett:

- FUW S. E. Gontarski, 'From Unabandoned Works: Samuel Beckett's Short Prose', Introduction to Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Short Prose 1929-1989* (New York: Grove Press, 1995)
- SOON S. E. Gontarski, 'The Conjuring of Something out of Nothing: Samuel Beckett's "Closed Space" Novels', Introduction to Samuel Beckett, *Nohow On* (New York: Grove Press, 1996).
- TGC C. J. Ackerley and S. E. Gontarski, *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove Press, 2004)

On the Sphere, the Cylinder and the Cuboid:

Closed System Dynamics in Various Published Fictions and Beckett's Late Prose Works

Introduction

In his introduction to the Grove Press edition of Samuel Beckett's late "trilogy" *Nohow On*, S. E. Gontarski identifies 'a new character, the nameless "him"' – or on occasion "her," "one," or "it" – as 'Beckett's second major fictional innovation', the first being that of "voice": the 'progressive disintegration of literary character that dominated the journey fictions from Watt...'.⁶ The transition from the latter to the former 'was announced in the fragments and *faux départs* that eventually developed into *All Strange Away*', and is encapsulated in the latter's sixth and seventh sentences:

Out of the door and down the road in the old hat and coat like after the war, no, not that again. Five foot square, six high, no way in, none out, try for him there.⁷

The sense of enclosure of a character or characters continues, in different forms, from *All Strange Away*'s cuboid, which is 'tightened' to three foot square, five high, enclosing first a solitary male figure and then a solitary female one, its ceiling then further lowered 'down two foot' to form, now, momentarily, a 'perfect cube'.⁸ This becomes the rotunda 'as in the Pantheon of Rome or certain beehive tombs' that is taken forward into *Imagination Dead Imagine* and which there contains 'two white bodies', a male and a female, lying on the ground,

⁶ SOON, pp. viii-ix.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ CSP, pp 170 and 173.

both on their right sides, ‘back to back head to arse’, ‘each in its own semicircle’.⁹ ‘White walls one yard by two white ceiling one square yard never seen’ enclose the one who is ‘perhaps not alone’ in ‘Ping’, while *The Lost One*’s flattened sixteen-metre-high cylindrical abode contains some two hundred bodies ‘each searching for its lost one.’¹⁰

My engagement with *The Lost Ones* began on 30 March 1999.¹¹ Yet as I embarked upon a Creative Fellowship at the University of Reading’s Samuel Beckett Research Centre nearly twenty-five years later, I was still to discover what, precisely, had ‘piqued my interest’ in these ‘closed space’ texts.¹² I speculated that part of my interest in *The Lost Ones* in particular was its ‘transitional nature’, situated, as it is, between the post-war prose, with what Gontarski called its ‘compulsion to (and so solace in) motion’, and the late works of enclosure ‘featuring stillness or some barely perceptible movement, at times just the breathing of a body or the trembling of a hand.’¹³ Further engagement with the archive led me to discern additional characteristics of *The Lost Ones* and adjacent texts, and led me to conclude that my interest in Beckett’s ‘closed space canon’ arose, in part, from a seemingly unlikely shared influence.

The research described in this contextual chapter has led me to understand that the published works submitted as part of this PhD thesis were influenced by my training in classical mechanics – a subject Beckett also studied as an undergraduate, at Trinity College Dublin.¹⁴ This has enabled me to open up further critical distance from Beckett’s work and has made the ongoing

⁹ CSP, p. 176. Although in *All Strange Away* it becomes ‘suddenly clear these dimensions faulty and small woman scarce five foot fully extended making rotunda two foot diameter and two from ground to verge’. (*Ibid.*, p. 177) Nixon more plausibly uses ‘vertex’ instead of ‘verge’ in TFN, noting (in his Preface) that ‘there is no clear evidence’ that Beckett wanted to make the change from the latter to the former. (Note 11, p. xxii)

¹⁰ CSP, pp. 193 and 202.

¹¹ Simon Okotie, ‘In Search of The Lost Ones’, The Samuel Beckett Research Centre – University of Reading (2022-23) <<https://research.reading.ac.uk/beckett/simon-okotie/simon-okotie-reflections/>> [accessed 21 June 2025]

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ SOON, p. vii.

¹⁴ John V. Luce, ‘Samuel Beckett’s undergraduate course at Trinity College Dublin’ in *Hermathena* (Dublin: Trinity College), Winter 2001, No. 171, pp. 33-45, p. 34. I graduated from the University of Southampton’s Faculty of Engineering in 1990 with a First Class BEng (Hons) in Engineering Acoustics and Vibration, a degree that was reliant on the foundational principles of classical mechanics.

research informing *His Enclosure*, my novel-in-progress, much more focused and explicit. This contextual chapter also contends that a grounding in classical mechanics provides an unexplored avenue within Beckett studies with the potential to open up further productive interpretative dimensions in relation to his late prose works in particular.

Closed space canon

There is no consensus on what might constitute an exhaustive list of Beckett's 'closed space' texts. James Little indicates that they 'are generally seen as comprising *Imagination Dead Imagine* (*Imagination morte imaginez*, 1965), 'Closed Place' ('*Se voir*', 1973), 'Ping' (*Bing*, 1966), *Lessness* (*Sans*, 1969), *The Lost Ones* [*Le Dépeupleur*] and *All Strange Away* (1976).'¹⁵ Little also adds 'Long Observation of the Ray' (an abandoned prose text composed by Beckett in 1975 and 1976) to the list.¹⁶

Ruby Cohn includes *All Strange Away*, *Imagination morte imaginez*, *Bing* and *Sans*, before arguing that *All Strange Away*'s dry tone and geometry leads to *Le Dépeupleur*.¹⁷ Graham Fraser similarly cites 'All Strange Away, *Imagination Dead Image*, *Ping*, *Lessness*, and *The Lost Ones*' as the 'rotunda works'.¹⁸ However, Beckett's foreword to the Calder edition (*Signature Series 9*, 1970) of *Lessness* (*Sans*) suggests that the work deals with the 'collapse of some such refuge as that last attempted in *Ping* and with the ensuing situation of the refugee'.¹⁹ *Lessness* is not, then, strictly (which is to say, literally) speaking a closed space text (as, perhaps, suggested by its original title of *Without*). Nor, strictly speaking, is '*Se voir*' – at least not in the same way as

¹⁵ James Little, *Samuel Beckett in Confinement: The Politics of Closed Space* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), p. 154. Note that, unlike 'Ping', *Bing* is italicised because it was published as a standalone edition.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Ruby Cohn, *A Beckett Canon* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), p. 289.

¹⁸ Graham Fraser, 'The Pornographic Imagination in "All Strange Away"', *Modern Fiction Studies*, Fall-Winter 1995, Vol. 41, No. 3/4, Sexuality and Narrative Double Issue (Fall-Winter 1995), pp. 515-530 (p. 529, note 1).

¹⁹ Quoted in Nixon 2010, p. xvii.

some of the other texts. Van Hulle notes that Beckett initially translated 'Endroit clos', the opening words of the *Foirade* (or *Fizzle*) 'Se voir', as 'Closed space' before replacing them with 'Closed place'.²⁰ The enclosure in this case is provided by a raised track 'made of dead leaves', and a deep ditch, beyond which 'there is nothing'.²¹ The approximate depth of the ditch can be calculated from the fact that the millions of bodies it contains 'appear six times smaller than life.'²² Its width could be calculated were one to know how many dark and bright 'lots' span across it, with the bright lots appearing as squares with just enough room to accommodate an average-sized body stretched diagonally, meaning that a body that is larger than average 'has to curl up'.²³ The dark lots far outnumber the bright. The ditch encloses a vast black arena containing 'Room for millions. Wandering and still. Never seeing never hearing one another. Never touching.'²⁴

A distinction can be made, on this basis, between Beckett's 'closed place' prose and his 'closed space' prose, with the enclosure of the former consisting of a place of inaccessible access or egress, whereas those of the latter consist of spaces where access or egress is non-existent. David Houston Jones contrasts the possibilities of an exit from the closed space of *The Lost Ones* with that of 'Long Observation of the Ray' before concluding that, in the latter, 'the existence of a door or shutter is asserted with some certainty'.²⁵ There is also, though, an emphasis on the 'hermetic' nature of the chamber in 'Long Observation': 'Long observation of the ray suggests a spherical chamber full 6 ft in diameter. Of inlet or outlet no trace has

²⁰ Dirk Van Hulle, 'Figures of Script: The Development of Beckett's Short Prose and the "Aesthetic of Inaudibilities"' in S. E. Gontarski (ed.) *A Companion to Samuel Beckett* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p. 258.

²¹ CSP, pp. 236-237.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ David Houston Jones, *Samuel Beckett and Testimony* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 151.

appeared.²⁶ My reading of the latter's 'unseen slide or shutter' emitting the eponymous ray is that it provides a way in for the light rather than an egress from the chamber – much like a shutter on a stage light, say, or the 'deadlight' from *what would I do without this world*, Beckett's 1948 translation of *que ferais-je sans ce monde*, the second of his *Quatre poèmes*:

what would I do what I did yesterday and the day before
 peering out of my deadlight looking for another
 wandering like me eddying far from all the living
 in a convulsive space
 among the voices voiceless
 that throng my hiddenness²⁷

For Gontarski, the sequence of novels collected in *Nohow On – Company* (1980), *Ill Seen Ill Said* (1981) and *Worstward Ho* (1983) – represents '[t]he masterwork of this period [from the mid-1960s] of narratological experiment, the seeing in a closed space where the homophones "seen" and "scene" are coeval'.²⁸ Gontarski refers to these as "'closed space" novels' despite, again, the spaces depicted within the first two novels at least not, strictly speaking, being closed.²⁹ There is no evidence for an enclosure, for instance, around the one who is 'on his back in the dark' in *Company*; granted that when the narrator attempts to '[i]magine closer the place

²⁶ Samuel Beckett, 'Long Observation of the Ray', University of Reading, Beckett Manuscript Collection, draft manuscript 2909/3.

²⁷ SP, p. 25. As Ackerley and Gontarski indicate, this poem is 'remarkable for its incantatory effects and its identification of the "gouffre [pit cave] de murmures," intimating the voice that he, voiceless, is hearing within himself.' (TGC, p. 473) This 'almost audible' major theme of *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable* is accompanied by another: that of enclosure. (*Ibid.*) A 'deadlight' is nautical term for a 'shutter or plate fitted to a cabin window or porthole to prevent water entering during a storm; a portlight that does not open. Deadlights also serve to prevent light being emitted from a ship.' Oxford English Dictionary <https://www.oed.com/dictionary/deadlight_n?tl=true> [accessed 30 June 2025]

²⁸ SOON, p. xi.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. vii, xvii and xxvi.

where he [the character] lies' he initially suggests that a clue to its 'form and dimensions' is provided by the nature and characteristics of the voice that comes to the character from afar.³⁰

From above and from all sides and levels with equal remoteness at its most remote. At no time from below. So far. Suggesting one lying on the floor of a hemispherical chamber of generous diameter with ear dead centre. How generous? Given faintness of voice at its least faint some sixty feet would suffice or thirty from ear to any given point of encompassing surface. So much for form and dimensions.³¹

Further imagining, though, 'shows him to have imagined ill. For with what right affirm of a faint sound that it is a less faint made fainter by farness and not a true faint near at hand?'³² He concludes provisionally on this basis that the character lies in immeasurable, contourless dark, and '[l]eave[s] it at that for the moment.'³³ Later, crawling in the dark, he measures his progress, 'adding half foot to half foot', trying to 'retain in his memory the ever-changing sum of those gone before.'³⁴ Finally, with eyes and ears maintained 'at a high level of alertness' he searches for clues as 'to the nature of the place to which imagination perhaps unadvisedly had consigned him' – ultimately in vain.³⁵

Similarly with the old woman whose cabin in *Ill Seen Ill Said* lies at 'the in-existent centre of a formless place' within which stones 'increasing abound', with this zone of stones surrounded in turn by meagre pastures 'on which it slowly gains'.³⁶ Beyond these lies a zone referred to (as

³⁰ NO, p. 3.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 23.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

Peter Boxall indicates) as 'unknown', or as 'the haze', or, at one point, as 'paradise'.³⁷ This haze is the 'sole certitude'.

The same that reigns beyond the pastures. It gains them already. It will gain the zone of stones. Then the dwelling through all its chinks. The eye will close in vain. To see but haze. Not even. Be itself but haze. How can it ever be said? Quick how ever ill said before it submerges all. Light.³⁸

An engulfing void, then – rather than an enclosure – albeit one of dazzling light rather than of darkness.

It is only with *Worstward Ho* that a sense of potential enclosure resembling that of the previously identified closed space texts can be discerned. Here we

Say a body. Where none. No mind. Where none. That at least. A place. Where none. For the body. To be in. Move in. Out of. Back into. No. No out. No back. Only in. Stay in. On in. Still.³⁹

It is clear from *Worstward Ho's* first page, then, that there is no way out of the space described. What is different, however, is the indeterminacy of this restraint: all that can be said with certainty is that there is 'No out. No back.'

A place. Where none. A time when try see. Try say. How small. How vast. How if not boundless bounded. Whence the dim. Not now. Know better now. Unknow better now. Know only no out of.⁴⁰

³⁷ Peter Boxall, *Since Beckett – Contemporary Writing in the Wake of Modernism* (London: Continuum, 2009), p. 157.

³⁸ *NO*, p. 78.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

The narrator knows better now than to speak of whether the space is bounded and, if so, how. The specifics of *All Strange Away*'s initial 'Five foot square, six high, no way in, none out, try for him there' (for instance) have made way for a 'Thitherless there' – 'the so-said void' – whose means of issuelessness (to adapt a word from *Lessness*) are indeterminate.⁴¹ The spaces of these three novels are of a different nature, then, to those that had gone before. While they allow of ingress but no egress (if we take *Worstward Ho* as a guide) there is no suggestion of a *physical* enclosure (unlike the previous works); Beckett had moved on (if not out).

The closed space prose pieces can, on this basis, be taken to consist solely of *Imagination Dead Imagine*, *Bing*, *The Lost Ones*, *All Strange Away* and 'Long Observation of the Ray', although Beckett's other proximate works, whether poetry, prose, or written for television or the theatre, clearly provide insights into these pieces. These five prose pieces are key to the transition from the early to the late 'trilogy' and they provide the main focus for this contextual chapter.

The UK's Health and Safety Executive defines a confined space as 'any place, including any chamber, tank, vat, silo, pit, trench, pipe, sewer, flue, well or other similar space in which, by virtue of its enclosed nature, there arises a reasonably foreseeable specified risk'.⁴² A further distinction is made on this basis between the *confined* closed space texts – *Imagination Dead Imagine*, *Bing*, *All Strange Away* and 'Long Observation of the Ray' – and those (in the case of *The Lost Ones*) that, if not *unconfined* (given the latter's population density) are less confined than the former.⁴³

⁴¹ CSP, pp. 169 and 197; NO, pp. 92 and 101. The sealed cylinder that is encountered in *Worstward Ho* is used simply to demonstrate the consistency of the void's dimness: 'Say a pipe in that void. A tube. Sealed. Then in that pipe or tube that selfsame dim.' (*Ibid.*) The word 'issueless' also appears in Beckett's 'MacGreevy on Yeats', an artist who 'brings light, as only the great dare to bring light, to the issueless predicament of existence, reduces the dark where there might have been, mathematically at least, a door.' See DI, p. 97.

⁴² The Confined Spaces Regulations 1997. Statutory Instrument 1997 No. 1713. <<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/1997/1713/made/data.pdf>> [accessed 27 June 2025]

⁴³ Albeit that the space described in 'Long Observation of the Ray' is unoccupied.

Closed system dynamics

Alongside ‘closed space’ and ‘closed place’, Beckett introduced a further term into the critical discourse around his work – one that is even more fruitful for present purposes: that of the ‘closed system’.⁴⁴ Murphy’s friend Wylie, for instance, says that ‘the syndrome known as life is too diffuse to admit of palliation. For every symptom that is eased, another is made worse. The horse leech’s daughter is a closed system. Her quantum of wantum cannot vary.’⁴⁵ Murphy himself, later in the novel, likens his own mind to ‘a closed system, subject to no principle of change but its own, self-sufficient and impermeable to the vicissitudes of the body.’⁴⁶

Murphy’s mind pictured itself as a large hollow sphere, hermetically closed to the universe without. This was not an impoverishment, for it excluded nothing that it did not itself contain. Nothing ever had been, was or would be in the universe outside it but was already present as virtual, or actual, or virtual rising into actual, or actual falling into virtual, in the universe inside it.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ A system within the physical sciences can be defined (according to Karnopp et al in *System Dynamics*) using the following two basic assumptions:

1. ‘A system is assumed to be an entity separable from the rest of the universe (the environment of the system) by means of a physical or conceptual boundary...
2. ‘A system is composed of interacting parts’, with the art and science of system modelling being to construct ‘a model complex enough to represent the relevant aspects of the real system but not so complex as to be unwieldy.’ (pp. 1-2)

A closed system in this context is one ‘in which no mass passes through the system boundaries.’ (p. 552) Dean C. Karnopp, Donald L. Margolis, and Ronald C. Rosenberg. *System Dynamics: Modeling, Simulation, and Control of Mechatronic Systems*, (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2012). ProQuest Ebook Central, <<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/reading/detail.action?docID=817383>> [accessed 18 March 2025]. A similar definition (from Landau and Lifshitz, p. 8) is ‘a system of particles which interact with one another but with no other bodies.’ L. D. Landau and E. M. Lifshitz, *Mechanics : Volume 1* (Oxford: Elsevier Science & Technology, 1982). ProQuest Ebook Central, <<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/reading/detail.action?docID=1160891>> [accessed 25 March 2025].

⁴⁵ Mu, p. 36.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

Beckett scholars tend to associate such references to closed systems primarily with thermodynamics. Hugh Kenner, for instance, characterises the world of *Murphy* as being

locally freakish but totally shaped by two laws, the law of conservation of energy [i.e. the first law of thermodynamics] and the second law of thermodynamics. The former law states that nothing is added to or subtracted from the system, but simply mutated, and the latter states the degree of organization within this closed system grows constantly less and so constantly less improbable, all actions being irreversible.⁴⁸

‘Wylie demonstrates the first law’ (for Lance Duerfahrd), a further example being the novel’s seminal first sentence, ‘which heralds *Godot*’s description of the sun’s repertory: “The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new.”⁴⁹ The second law of thermodynamics is ‘the real theme’ of Lucky’s monologue in *Godot*, for Kenner, with ‘its stream of elegiac phrases, “wastes and pines,” “fades away,” “the great cold the great dark,” “fading fading fading” ...’⁵⁰ Herbert Blau argues, though, that *Godot* counteracts this second law, with energy being ‘pumped back into the dead system by having it come back from the other side of the stage, crippled and much the worse for wear, crying pitiably for help.’⁵¹

For Darko Suvin a further law is required to describe Beckett’s universe more accurately: Walther Nernst’s statement that ‘absolute zero can only be approached asymptotically’ i.e. the third law of thermodynamics, with Suvin’s inclusion of it addressing, for Duerfahrd, ‘how Beckett’s system tends toward an ever-reduced impoverished minimum, rather than the sheer

⁴⁸ Hugh Kenner, *Samuel Beckett: a critical study* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), p. 182.

⁴⁹ Lance Duerfahrd, *The work of poverty: Samuel Beckett’s vagabonds and the theater of crisis* (Columbus: The Ohio State University, 2013), p. 35.

⁵⁰ Kenner, pp. 182-183.

⁵¹ Herbert Blau, ‘Notes from the Underground,’ in *Sails of the Herring Fleet* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), p. 31, quoted in Duerfahrd, p. 197.

zero of nihilism.’⁵² Duerfahrd identifies (in 2013) David Houston Jones’s *Samuel Beckett and Testimony* as offering ‘the most recent and suggestive reading of the closed system,’ with Houston Jones’s account again primarily drawing upon thermodynamic laws and systems – in his reference, for instance, to James Clerk Maxwell’s thought experiment (“Maxwell’s demon”) in which ‘an imaginary being [is] able to prevent the loss of heat in a closed system, keeping entropy at bay’, thereby invalidating the second law of thermodynamics.⁵³

Anna McMullan suggests that

we might think of [Beckett’s closed space texts] as evoking damaged, exhausted or entropic habitations, cosmologies or biospheres, where the systems of heat and light have become polarised and extreme: *All Strange Away’s* ‘[s]ame system light and heat with sweat more or less, cringing away from walls, burning soles, now one, now the other’ [...]; the ‘passage from heat and light to black and cold’ [...] of *Imagination Dead Imagine*, or the oscillation of the temperature between hot and cold in *The Lost Ones*.⁵⁴

Given these works’ ‘continual textual deconstruction’, McMullan goes on to assert that the inherent instability of the depicted systems operates at both the level of ‘the imagined world and [of] its textual generation’.⁵⁵ This she compares to ‘the entropic aspects of ecosystems, which may remain stable for some time and then ultimately decline’.⁵⁶

⁵² Darko Suvin, *To Brecht and Beyond: soundings in modern dramaturgy* (Brighton: Harvester, 1984), p. 182, quoted in Duerfahrd, p. 35.

⁵³ Duerfahrd, p. 36.

⁵⁴ Anna McMullan, *Beckett’s Intermedial Ecosystems – Closed Space Environments across the Stage, Prose and Media Works* (Cambridge: University Press, 2021), p. 6.

<<https://www.cambridge.org/core/elements/abs/becketts-intermedial-ecosystems/80129EE23DA811CA550E66BA405963D3>> [accessed 1 July 2025].

⁵⁵ McMullan, p. 34.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

Insightful though such thermodynamic readings are, an additional, unexplored avenue has the potential to open up further productive interpretative dimensions in relation to Beckett's closed system texts: that of classical mechanics – a subject Beckett studied as an undergraduate at Trinity College Dublin (in 1924-25).⁵⁷ David Houston Jones' description of *The Lost Ones*' 'elaborate scenario of scientific observation and measurement', for instance, with its bodies 'perpetually in motion' (or at rest) can be likened to dynamics: 'that branch of mechanics which deals with the motion of bodies under the actions of forces', while what Gontarski describes as the bodies' stillness or 'barely perceptible movement' in 'Ping' and *Imagination Dead Imagine* can be likened to statics, 'which deals with the effects of forces on bodies at rest.'⁵⁸ Indeed, the three-dimensional spaces of Beckett's closed system texts correlate with the three most common coordinate systems within classical mechanics (or combinations thereof): the Cartesian in the case of *All Strange Away*'s rectangular cuboid, with its 'deasil' [i.e. clockwise] floor angles – 'a, b, c and d and ceiling likewise e, f, g and h' with the nameless "him" leaning 'for rest with feet at a and head at g'; the cylindrical – in the case of *The Lost Ones*' 'flattened cylinder fifty metres round and sixteen high for the sake of harmony'; and the spherical – in the later drafts of 'Long Observation of the Ray', whose 'chamber [is] full 6 ft in diameter.'⁵⁹ The rotunda can be described geometrically as a cylinder surmounted by a hemisphere or 'dome semi-circular in section as in the Pantheon at Rome or certain beehive tombs' (in the words of

⁵⁷ John V. Luce, p. 34. Classical mechanics is the branch of physics dealing with the description and explanation of the motion of objects through three-dimensional Euclidean space (as defined in N. C. Rana and P. S. Joag, *Classical Mechanics* (New Delhi: Tata McGraw-Hill Publishing Company Limited, 1991), p. 2. Archive.org ebook.

⁵⁸ *Samuel Beckett and Testimony*, p. 147; CSP, p. 204; SOON, p. vii; J. L. Meriam and L. G. Kraige, *Engineering Mechanics: Dynamics*, Seventh Edition (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), p. 3. Statics also deals with objects moving at constant velocity.

⁵⁹ Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), *Classical Mechanics*, online textbook (Massachusetts: MIT OpenCourseWare, Fall 2016), Chapter 3: Vectors, p. 7 <https://ocw.mit.edu/courses/8-01sc-classical-mechanics-fall-2016/mit8_01scs22_chapter3.pdf> [accessed 1 July 2025]; CSP, pp. 171 and 202; 'Long Observation of the Ray', *op. cit.*

All Strange Away).⁶⁰ According to Giangiacomo Martines, the Pantheon's geometry calls to mind a fundamental work of Archimedes – *On the Sphere and the Cylinder* – whose theorems were themselves 'conceived as problems of mechanics'.⁶¹ Here, then, is an unexplored source for what Steven Connor identifies as 'two important preoccupations in Beckett's work': the preoccupation with 'cylinders and enclosed spaces' (or, more specifically, with cylinders and other forms of enclosed space such as spheres and cuboids); 'and the preoccupation with the dynamics of looking which runs from *Play* and *Film* through to *Ill Seen Ill Said*.'⁶²

Beckett's attendance at lectures on Latin, logic, mathematics and mechanics – alongside his study of modern languages – led Deirdre Bair to conclude that he 'seems to have spent his first two years at Trinity dabbling in various courses'.⁶³ Yet, as John V. Luce indicates, it was not possible at that time to follow a specialised honours course at Trinity without also completing a standard general course that included such subjects. Instead of 'dabbling', then, Beckett was following the prescribed courses, which required him to sit examinations in mechanics, algebra, trigonometry, Euclid, logic, Latin and French at the end of his second year.⁶⁴

Nor was Beckett's attendance record in his first two years as a Trinity undergraduate as poor (according to Luce) as Bair and Anthony Cronin suggest, with the latter writing that Beckett

⁶⁰ CSP, p. 176.

⁶¹ See 'The Conception and Construction of Drum and Dome' in Tod A. Marder and Mark Wilson Jones (eds.), *The Pantheon – from Antiquity to the Present* (Cambridge: University Press, 2015), pp 99-131, p. 100 and p. 102. The title of Archimedes' work 'would have been evident to any ancient mathematician standing in the centre of the Rotunda.' (*Ibid.* p. 100) Beckett's familiarity with Archimedes is attested to in *Malone Dies* where Malone, having lost his stick, remarks that 'Sine qua non, Archimedes was right. The stick, having slipped, would have plucked me from the bed if I had not let it go.' (MMU, p. 255) This likely relates to the (probably apocryphal) story of Archimedes helping 'to launch the biggest ship in the world, in competition with those of Alexandria'; while using the mechanism that he designed for this purpose, 'he remarked, "Give me a place to stand and I shall move the earth."' Reviel Netz, *A New History of Greek Mathematics* (Cambridge: University Press, 2022), pp. 128-129.

⁶² Steven Connor, 'Between theatre and theory: *Long Observation of the Ray*', in John Pilling and Mary Bryden (eds.), *The ideal core of the onion: Reading Beckett archives* (Reading: Beckett International Foundation, 1992), pp. 79-98, p. 79.

⁶³ Deirdre Bair, *Samuel Beckett: A Biography* (Vintage edition, 1990), p. 38, quoted in John V Luce, p. 34.

⁶⁴ John V Luce, pp. 33-34 and 42. Beckett's mark in the mechanics paper was second only to that in logic – both of which were superior to his result for French.

‘was not interested in the lectures he was supposed to attend occasionally drifting in and out of them until reminded by his tutor that it was necessary to “keep terms” – to attend a certain minimum number’.⁶⁵ Such judgements are based on conversations with Beckett’s ‘moral’ (or personal) tutor at Trinity, who Luce indicates ‘was the present writer’s father, Dr. A. A. Luce’, whose views on Beckett’s attendance were ‘too depreciatory when viewed against the overall examination record of the first two years.’⁶⁶

Here, then, is an unappreciated yet important source for Beckett’s investigations into the problems of kinesthetics and the mechanics of human movement that continued throughout his writing life. Beckett’s ‘Whoroscope’ notebook, for instance, contains references to George M. Minchin’s 1900 book *The Student’s Dynamics: Comprising Statics and Kinetics*, this, presumably, being one of the textbooks Beckett used in his Trinity mechanics course – if not the only one.⁶⁷

Beckett’s notes transcribed from Minchin in his ‘Whoroscope’ notebook provide an example of an elementary dynamical system relating to the ‘Collision of Spheres’ which, it can be argued, would later find expression in the interactions of (and within) his fictional characters.⁶⁸ Minchin had already discussed the case in which two spheres that are both moving in a straight line through their centres collide without separating, like ‘two lumps of putty’, continuing to ‘travel together with a common velocity’.⁶⁹ He goes on to note, though (in the passage copied by Beckett) that ‘in nearly all cases’ spheres do, however, separate after collision, resulting in

⁶⁵ Anthony Cronin, *Samuel Beckett: the Last Modernist* (Flamingo, 1997), p. 53, quoted in John V. Luce, p. 38.

⁶⁶ John V. Luce, p. 41.

⁶⁷ Dirk Van Hulle and Mark Nixon, *Samuel Beckett's Library* (Cambridge: University Press, 2013), p. 206; George M. Minchin, *The Student's Dynamics: Comprising Statics and Kinetics* (London: George Bell Sons, 1900)

⁶⁸ In relation to DRE, as described in Marco Bernini, *Beckett and the Cognitive Method – Mind, Models, and Exploratory Narratives* (Oxford: University Press, 2021), pp. 172-174, albeit in relation to complex rather than closed systems; Minchin, p. 139; *Whoroscope* notebook, p. 65, Beckett Manuscript Collection, University of Reading.

⁶⁹ Minchin, pp. 121-122.

two subsequent velocities, x and y , with the velocity of separation being a constant fraction of the velocity of approach.⁷⁰ This fraction (denoted by the symbol e) ‘depends on the substances of which the spheres are made’, with e being referred to (at the conclusion of Beckett’s notes) as ‘the *coefficient of restitution* of the bodies.’⁷¹

Echoes of these bodily dynamics can be heard, for instance, in Beckett’s *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*. Here the ‘refractory constituents’ (i.e. *Dream*’s characters) are reluctant to synthesise or bind together since ‘[t]heir movement is based on a principle of repulsion, their property not to combine but, like heavenly bodies, to scatter and stampede, astral straws on a time-strom, grit in the mistral.’⁷² As Marco Bernini indicates, these dynamics also operate *within* characters: not only do they (in the words of *Dream*’s narrator) ‘shrink from all that is not they’ (which in turn shrinks from them), they also ‘strain away from themselves.’⁷³ Yet they also have periods of reconciliation, ‘a kind of centripetal backwash that checks the rot.’⁷⁴ *Dream*’s narrator posits that it is within this backwash – ‘this nervous recoil into composure’ – that a Balzac or an Austen character is located: ‘[t]o the item thus artificially immobilised in a backwash of composure precise value can be assigned.’⁷⁵ All a novelist has to do, according to this false process, is to bind their material ‘in a spell, item after item, and juggle politely with irrefragable values, values that can assimilate other values like in kind and be assimilated by them, that can increase and decrease in virtue of an unreal permanence of quality.’⁷⁶ Beckett’s criticism of the ‘clockwork’ characters of Balzac, in particular, is based on the sense of their residing in this ‘spellbound backwash’ within which the author can ‘rely on their staying put

⁷⁰ Minchin, p. 139.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* Italics in original.

⁷² DRE, pp. 124-125.

⁷³ Bernini, p. 172; DRE, p. 125.

⁷⁴ DRE, *ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

wherever needed or staying going at whatever speed in whatever direction he chooses.⁷⁷ The narrator refers to this false process of character-formation as ‘a distillation of Euclid and [the fairy tales of] Perrault’.⁷⁸

Another example from *The Student’s Dynamics* in relation to *Imagination Dead Imagine* further illustrates the affinity. Minchin speaks of ‘the simple case in which there are two suspended bodies’ – two masses suspended, that is, from a light, flexible 34-inch long cord *ACDB*, whose ends are

...attached to *A* and *B*; at *C*, 13 inches from *A*, let a mass of weight *P* be suspended; at *D*, 6 inches from *C*, let a mass of weight *Q* be suspended. What must be the ratio of *P* to *Q* so that the portion *CD* of the cord may be horizontal?⁷⁹

Again, the resemblance to the notation and tone used in *Imagination Dead Imagine* is striking (albeit that the latter’s two bodies are lying on the ground rather than being suspended above it):

No way in, go in, measure. Diameter three feet, three feet from ground to summit of the vault. Two diameters at right angles *AB CD* divide the white ground into two semicircles *ACB BDA*. [...] Still on the ground, bent in three, the head against the wall at *B*, the arse against the wall at *A*, the knees against the wall between *B* and *C*, the feet against the wall between *C* and *A*, that is to say inscribed in the semicircle *ACB*, merging in the white ground were it not for the long hair of strangely imperfect whiteness, the white body of a woman finally. Similarly inscribed in the other semicircle,

⁷⁷ *Op. cit.* pp. 125-126.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

⁷⁹ Minchin, p. 62. Emphasis in original.

against the wall his head at A, his arse at B, his knees between A and D, his feet between D and B, the partner.⁸⁰

What, then, is the nature of the Beckett's closed systems? Which variables, if any, do they progressively control for? Bernini uses the passage from *Dream* as a basis for treating Beckett's late work 'as a research project' aimed at modelling 'complex dynamics within the mind'.⁸¹ Yet a counter-argument can also be advanced in relation, specifically, to the closed space texts: that, ostensibly at least, these represent a contrary move towards both the *minimisation* of complexity – towards a radical simplicity (or 'lessness') through the neutralisation of external influences (or 'exogenous variables', in the language, again, of closed system dynamics) and also a regression (in the language of classical mechanics) from dynamics to statics: that is, from the analysis of bodies in motion to that of bodies at rest.⁸² Similarly, the enclosures do not seem to resemble 'a space become active, blossoming, ripening, disappearing. The opposite of "closed space"' (in the words of André Masson's article 'Divagations sur l'espace' [ramblings on space], which Beckett was so approving of in his letters to, and dialogues with, Duthuit).⁸³ They resemble, instead, what A. A. Luce described as 'artificially closed system[s] like those postulated by science'.⁸⁴ What was Beckett's purpose in imposing these artificial constraints upon and within these transitional works? The relationship between *Bing* and *Le Dépeupleur* suggests one approach to such questions; the irredeemable abandonment of *Long Observation of the Ray* suggests another.

⁸⁰ CSP, pp. 182 and 184

⁸¹ Bernini, p. 174.

⁸² Dean Rickles, Penelope Hawe and Alan Shiell, 'A simple guide to chaos and complexity', *Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health*, 61(11) (2007), pp. 933–937.

<<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2465602/>> [accessed 5 July 2024]

⁸³ David Addyman, 'En attendant Godot: A New Philosophical Landscape', in Peter Fifield and David Addyman (eds.) *Samuel Beckett: Debts and Legacies – New Critical Essays* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013) pp. 63–108, p. 75.

⁸⁴ A. A. Luce, *Bergson's Doctrine of Intuition – The Donnellan Lectures for 1921* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1922), p. 103, Archive.org ebook.

'Every closed system also communicates'⁸⁵

Gontarski's introduction to *The Complete Short Prose* explores how Beckett abandoned and, in many cases, 'unabandoned' some of his short prose pieces.⁸⁶ As well as inhabiting 'the margins between prose and poetry, [and] between narrative and drama,' much of the short prose occupies, then, a space 'between completion and incompleteness.'⁸⁷ 'From an Abandoned Work', for instance, was written (in English) as part of a new novel in 1954 or '55. It was first abandoned and then published, as a short story, in 1958.⁸⁸ Nearly a decade passed between its completion and 'Beckett's next major impasse': a novel with the working title of 'Fancy Dying'. It is from the latter that the *faux départs* ('false starts') emerged that eventually became *All Strange Away*.⁸⁹ A further decade elapsed between the commencement of 'Fancy Dying' and Beckett's attempts at 'Long Observation of the Ray' (in 1975 and 1976), a work that remained abandoned.⁹⁰

It is striking that the note, in Beckett's hand, accompanying the manuscript of *The Lost Ones* in the Reading archive indicates that 'Bing may be regarded as the result or miniaturisation of Le Dépeupleur abandoned because of its intractable complexities.'⁹¹ While also indicating that the two pieces were 'very different formally', the note hints that miniaturisation may have been a means for Beckett of resolving otherwise potentially intractable difficulties in his closed system works.⁹² *The Lost Ones*' gestation had indeed been long, with Beckett starting it on 31 October

⁸⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema I: The Movement Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 16. '[A] system which is closed – even one which is very closed up – only apparently suppresses the out-of-field, and in its own way gives it an even more decisive importance.' (*Ibid.*) It is striking that Beckett commenced writing his closed system texts immediately upon his return from his first and only trip to the US, where he was assisting with the production of his *Film* in New York City (in July-August 1964). See, for instance, Nico J. Brederoo and Onno Kusters, 'Beckett's "Film": an essay', *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*, 1992, Vol. 1, pp. 157-170.

⁸⁶ FUW, p. xii.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ Steven Connor, *Between theatre and theory*, p. 79.

⁹¹ Samuel Beckett, *The Lost Ones*, University of Reading, Beckett Manuscript Collection, draft manuscript 1536/1.

⁹² *Ibid.*

1965 but not completing it until 1970, with the concluding paragraph written just before publication.⁹³ In contrast, the first draft of *Bing* is dated 20 July 1966 and it was first published later that year.⁹⁴

The sense in which the latter is a miniaturisation of the former can be read in at least two ways: in terms of its textural length, with *The Lost Ones* being Beckett's 'longest later narrative', while *Bing* 'is very short, covering barely two pages'; and in terms of the dimensions of the enclosure, with *The Lost One's* cylinder being (by my calculation) nearly five thousand times the volume of *Bing's* cuboid.⁹⁵ And with the system's spatial miniaturisation comes a depopulation: from 'One body per square metre or two hundred bodies in all round numbers' to the one who is 'perhaps not alone' within *Bing's* enclosure.⁹⁶

That these miniaturisations were not always sufficient for the resolution of the issues Beckett faced in completing *The Lost Ones* is evidenced by the irredeemable abandonment of 'Long Observation of the Ray'. The key feature, though, in this instance is not the dimensions of the enclosure but its vacuity – the fact that it contains no character(s); it resembles, instead, a laboratory instrument for a cold, hard scientific experiment from which the human element has been absented – at least in terms of what is enclosed if not in terms of the observer of the dynamics within the enclosure. While these spaces may be inhuman in their dimensions, they cannot (it would seem) be devoid of the human.

⁹³ TGC, p. 324.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 57. Its translation (by Beckett) was, however, 'arduous'. (*ibid.* p. 438) Mary Bryden, Julian Garforth and Peter Mills. *Beckett at Reading: Catalogue of the Beckett Manuscript Collection at the University of Reading* (Reading: Whiteknights Press and the Beckett International Foundation, 1998) p. 161.

⁹⁵ Dan O'Hara, 'What goes 'Ping' in Beckett's *Ping?*', *Notes and queries*, 06/2007, Volume 54, Issue 2, pp. 184-186.

⁹⁶ TGC, p. 324; CSP, p. 204. The literal meaning of *Le Dépeupleur* is 'the depopulator'; the more accurate round number of *The Lost Ones'* bodies (based on one per square metre) is 199. Something similar can be said in relation to miniaturisation about the relationship between *All Strange Away* and *Imagination Dead Imagine* (although on a smaller and more variable relative scale). Nixon indicates that Beckett had already begun work on *Imagination morte imaginez* when he abandoned *All Strange Away* in early 1965; indeed, the former 'was generated from the textual ruins' of the latter, with Beckett referring to it 'as the "residual precipitate" of the earlier text'. See Preface to TFN, p. xiv.

One effect of these spatial miniaturisations was to enact a shift from a social space (in the case of *The Lost Ones*) to a confined space (in the case of Beckett's other closed system works, where the spaces approximate to the dimensions of an individual). This, in turn, draws attention to both the nature of the space itself and of the bodies' interaction with it, with the focus shifting to an essentialised, embodied subjectivity at the same scale as its objective counterpart. Whereas *The Lost Ones* leads to the undermining of its cylindrical co-ordinate system's origins, Beckett's confined closed spaces dispense entirely with such orientational foundations.⁹⁷ This has the effect – in both cases – of highlighting a disintegrating objectivity to parallel its more subjective counterpart in 'voice'.

The floor and ceiling of *The Lost One's* cylinder, for instance, 'bear no sign or mark apt to serve as a guide', while its wall 'presents an unbroken surface all the way round'.⁹⁸ The only orientational referent within the space is provided by 'one of the vanquished or better one of the women vanquished or better still the woman vanquished.'⁹⁹ She alone represents 'the north':

She rather than some other among the vanquished because of her greater fixity. To one bent for once on taking his bearings she may be of help.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ A coordinate system in classical mechanics enables the motion of bodies to be described, with an observer acting as (or within) a 'reference frame' for describing variables such as the position, velocity and acceleration of such bodies. The choice of origin – the zero or reference point from which all other points are measured – is the first of the 'four basic elements' of such coordinate systems. See MIT, *Classical Mechanics*, online textbook (Massachusetts: MIT OpenCourseWare, Fall 2016), Chapter 11: Reference Frames, p. 11-2 <https://ocw.mit.edu/courses/8-01sc-classical-mechanics-fall-2016/mit8_01scs22_chapter11.pdf> [accessed 26 April 2025] and Chapter 3: Vectors, p. 7 <https://ocw.mit.edu/courses/8-01sc-classical-mechanics-fall-2016/mit8_01scs22_chapter3.pdf> [accessed 2 June 2025].

⁹⁸ CSP, pp. 220-221.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

The climbers within the cylinder may position their ladders ‘so many paces or meters to east or west of the woman vanquished’ as a means of more or less reliably reaching one of the niches recessed into the wall.¹⁰¹ The woman vanquished can therefore be taken to represent the origin of the coordinate system within the cylinder, although note that her fixity remains relative rather than absolute, borne, as it is, by her *greater* immobility compared to the others vanquished.

An even more precise orientational referent or origin emerges on closer inspection of the woman vanquished, however. Ordinarily she ‘squats against the wall with her head between her knees and her legs in her arms’, her tarnished red hair hanging to the ground and hiding her bare body; she remains forbidden, however (like the cylinder’s other inhabitants), from ‘withhold[ing] the face or other part from the searcher who demands it’.¹⁰² Her hair has thus frequently been gathered up and drawn back, her head raised, and her face laid bare along with the ‘whole front of the body down to the crutch.’¹⁰³ The translation of ‘*l’entre jambes*’ (in the original French) as ‘crutch’ rather than ‘crotch’ can also be taken as suggestive of the forking place of origination and of referential support for the entire cylindrical system.¹⁰⁴ As well as being ‘a staff with a crosspiece at the head to place under the arm’, a crutch is ‘a bifurcation, crotch’ and a small, inserted figure to assist in arithmetic.¹⁰⁵ The opening sentence of *Bing/Ping* suggests the withdrawal of this support in the process of *Le Dépeupleur*’s miniaturisation:

Tout su tout blanc corps nu blanc un mètre jambes collées comme consues.

All known all white bare white body fixed one yard legs joined like sewn.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰¹ CSP, p. 221.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

¹⁰⁴ LeD, p. 51.

¹⁰⁵ *The Chambers Dictionary* (Edinburgh: Chambers Harrap Publishers, 1998), p. 393.

¹⁰⁶ TM, p. 61; CSP, p. 193.

The Lost One's explicit detail draws us back to what Graham Fraser calls 'the pornographic imagination' in *All Strange Away*, where images of Emma's face; breasts; thighs and genitalia; and buttocks and anus are affixed to each of the cuboid's four walls in turn, at a certain point in its evolution.¹⁰⁷ 'Fancy' is, for Fraser, the 'mental function' that dominates *All Strange Away* in the sense in which Coleridge defined it: 'as a putative power which "has no other counters to play with but fixities and definites"'; this is likened to pornography's 'heavy use', as a visual or narrative genre, of permutation and repetition.¹⁰⁸ It could equally be argued that the diminishing 'fixities and definites' within Beckett's closed system prose – the dimensions of the spaces and the relative positions of the body or bodies within them – are defined in relation to an unstable, unreliable 'crutch': an orientating origin for this particular species of story which is, in turn, dissolved, diffused and dissipated through a dead or dying imagination.¹⁰⁹ It can also be argued – as it is in this contextual chapter – that one of the origins of these 'voiceless bodies, origins unknown' is Beckett's formative training in the rigours of classical mechanics.¹¹⁰

It is fitting, then, that the penultimate of Beckett's closed system texts to be published can be taken, in a sense, as an origin and orientational basis for the whole series. As Galina Kiryushina and Mark Nixon indicate, *The North*, a 750-word extract about 'the woman vanquished' from *Le Dépeupleur's* penultimate paragraph, was published by the Enitharmon Press in March 1973.¹¹¹ This followed Beckett's addition of the concluding paragraph to *Le Dépeupleur* 'shortly before

¹⁰⁷ Fraser, p. 516.

¹⁰⁸ Fancy is contrasted by the Romantics with 'the higher power of Imagination, which takes the units of experience organized by Fancy and "dissolves, diffuses, and dissipates [them] in order to re-create" poetically or metaphorically'. Fraser, p. 516, quoting Owen Barfield, *What Coleridge Thought* (London: Oxford UP, 1971), p. 86.

¹⁰⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 517. This seemingly runs contrary to Schopenhauer's view of the genitals as being 'subject merely to the will, and not at all to knowledge.' *The World as Will and Representation*, translated by E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1969), Volume I, §60, p. 330.

¹¹⁰ FUW, p. xxv.

¹¹¹ Galina Kiryushina and Mark Nixon, 'Samuel Beckett's *The North*', *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 09/2021, Volume 30, Issue 2, pp. 188-204, p. 190. <<https://www.euppublishing.com/doi/pdf/10.3366/jobs.2021.0340>> [accessed 30 May 2025].

correcting proofs in May 1970', thereby 'unabandoning' it for publication the same year by Les Éditions de Minuit, with his translation, *The Lost Ones*, following in 1972.¹¹² *The North's* publication preceded Beckett's work on 'Long Observation of the Ray' (in 1975 and 1976), a piece that (as we have seen) remained abandoned. The last of the pieces to be published returns us, in a sense, to the origins of the whole series. *All Strange Away* had been abandoned in early 1965, a few months before Beckett's false starts in the form of the 'Faux Départs' were published.¹¹³ It was eventually published by Gotham Book Mart in 1976 as the last word from Beckett's extraordinary statics- and dynamics-inspired closed system texts.¹¹⁴

¹¹² Nixon, p. xv. Kiryushina and Nixon, p. 202 (note 2), erroneously says *Le Dépeupleur* was published in September 1971.

¹¹³ Nixon, p. xiii.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Afterword

Having completed this contextual chapter, I now understand more fully the affinity I felt when I first opened the pages of *The Lost Ones* in Oaxaca's English language lending library towards the end of the millennium.¹¹⁵ In doing so I entered a strange, closed world yet one that was in many ways familiar to me from my scientific training – a world founded, in part (as argued here), upon the axioms of classical mechanics. I conceived of the protagonist – if not yet the narrative voice – of *Whatever Happened to Harold Absalon?*, my first novel, the following year, having read *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable* during a subsequent trip to Chile.

In *The Anxiety of Influence*, Harold Bloom argues for a violent inter-generational struggle between 'strong poets' in which writers seek to master their literary predecessors, aiming either for their 'absolute absorption' (in the specific case of Shakespeare with Marlowe) or for their decisive defeat.¹¹⁶ Influence is, for Bloom (in the latter case), a 'Battle between strong equals, father and son as mighty opposites, Laius and Oedipus at the crossroads'.¹¹⁷ Yet, as Peter Boxall argues, it is right to resist this model in relation to Beckett:

In Beckett's writing, the father is as likely to belong to the future as he is to the past, just as those who register Beckett's influence tend to think of him not as parent to be slain, but as a possibility to be glimpsed, the spectral boy in the wasteland outside the refuge rather than the progenitors in the trashcans.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ Simon Okotie, 'In Search of The Lost Ones', The Samuel Beckett Research Centre – University of Reading (2022-23) <<https://research.reading.ac.uk/beckett/simon-okotie/simon-okotie-reflections/>> [accessed 21 June 2025]

¹¹⁶ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, second edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 11, quoted in Boxall, p 16.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ Boxall, p. 16, with reference to Beckett's play *Endgame*.

The temporal proximity of my reading of Beckett's fiction – in the form, in particular, of the 'trilogy' and the closed space texts – and the subsequent production of my own trilogy and closed system novel might appear to suggest an attempt on my part to emulate Beckett's equivalents. But it doesn't (and didn't) work like that. A better metaphor for what transpired is that the process of writing each of my novels was that of progressively discerning the components of a device which, once assembled, would operate (semi-) autonomously. Part of the influence of Beckett's work on this process was to connect me to the rest of what B. S. Johnson called the "very virile and interesting" tradition of the novel represented by "writers such as Petronius, Apuleius, Rabelais, Cervantes, Nashe [and] Sterne...".¹¹⁹ I was also reading *Don Quixote* for the first time on that Chile trip and this, alongside Beckett, opened up the potential of characters who act 'as intermediaries between high and low culture', as Bakhtin explored in his seminal book on Rabelais.¹²⁰

These figures are 'enormously significant for the later development of the European novel' [...] Their equivalent within the African-American tradition, according to [Henry Louis Gates Jr.], is 'of the order of the trickster figure of Yoruba mythology (Esu-Elegbara in Nigeria and Legba among the Fon in Dahomey)', with these trickster figures also primarily serving as mediators between the high and the low, between the people and the gods: Èsù Elegbára (to give him his diacritic dues), for instance, is the master of the interface between the profane and the divine.¹²¹

My reading in the minor tradition identified by Johnson also served, then, to identify particular types (or shapes) of productive tension *within* these character archetypes as a means

¹¹⁹ Jonathan Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant: The Story of B. S. Johnson* (London: Picador, 2005), p. 87.

¹²⁰ *The Future of the Novel*, p. 64; Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, translated by Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1984).

¹²¹ *The Future of the Novel*, pp. 63-64.

of discerning the materials from which each of these components might be constructed. I write about this in relation to my own characters – and, by implication, narrative voice – in *The Future of the Novel*.

Growing up in rural Norfolk, the only black role model I'd encountered (aside from my father) was a man, known as Marigold, who was often seen on Norwich's inner ring road unofficially directing traffic wearing yellow rubber gloves. With the help of a friend and mentor – the Buddhist poet Maitreya-bandhu – and having encountered a further role model in the form of a well-spoken privately educated black man who was the client's representative within the project office where I was working, I abandoned the seemingly interminable conventional novel that Marsha [Hunt, an earlier mentor] had encouraged me to write and finally followed the more experimental path that was my vocation. The conceptual persona of 'Marigold' and the client's representative had somehow intersected in my mind, a symbiosis of socio-economic extremes that resonated deep within me before irrepressibly spilling out onto the page. My writing, in other words, had acquired a life of its own.¹²²

The circumstance of the increasing enclosure of this protagonist (and his successors) arose somewhat differently, however. Here it related more to progressive research within each work – discovering which spaces the characters themselves preferred, with increasing confinement being suggestive, paradoxically, of a near-infinite exploratory potential. From the moment the unnamed protagonist of *In the Absence of Absalon* places his left foot against the small step protruding 'from beneath the gate leading to the area in front of the townhouse', for instance, there was a frisson akin to that felt by Proust's narrator on the uneven paving-stones in the Guermantes courtyard.¹²³ Instead of propelling him to the baptistery of St. Marks in Venice,

¹²² *The Future of the Novel*, pp. 132-133.

¹²³ *In the Absence of Absalon*, p. 7. The latter's experience of putting his foot 'on a stone which was slightly lower than its neighbour' is, as Beckett indicates, the first of five such 'visitations...[which] may be considered as forming

however, the step sends the protagonist to somewhere resembling ‘the Pantheon of Rome’: back to a grounding in mathematics and the physical sciences; back, in a word, to Archimedes.¹²⁴

Yet even this description of discerning the relationships – the creative tensions – and their exploratory potential within Beckett’s (and others’) work as a means of identifying equivalent elements within the apparatus of each of my own novels is not quite right – it is too *conscious*, too *rational*. A key part of the process of being ‘influenced’ by Beckett was forgetting entirely all that I had surmised from his work – just as he had forgotten his own influences.¹²⁵ It is only having abandoned all hope and memory in this way that my writing could, in time, take on a ‘life of its own’.

*

His Enclosure extends beyond the confines of Beckett’s closed systems in a number of ways, not least in the sense that it does not limit itself to the three main co-ordinate systems of sphere, cylinder and cuboid. Inspired by travelling in the boot of the family hatchback with my younger brother into the Norfolk market town where we lived, and, prior to that, sitting on the back seat with my older brother as we entered a multistorey car park in my birthplace of Stratford,

a single annunciation and as providing the key to [Proust’s] life and work.’ See Marcel Proust, *Time Regained & A Guide to Proust*, translated by Andreas Mayor & Terence Kilmartin (London: Vintage, 2000), p. 216, and PTD, p. 38. The other four connected ‘visitations’ are ‘spoon and plate, napkin, water in the pipes, and [George Sand’s novel] *François le Champi*’. (*Ibid.*)

¹²⁴ *Time Regained*, p. 218; CSP, *op. cit.*

¹²⁵ Bernini makes a persuasive case for the influence of Louis-Ferdinand Céline’s novel *Mort A Credit*, for instance, which Beckett read around the time of its publication in 1936, on board the *SS Washington* between Le Havre and Hamburg (according to Knowlson, p. 231). Bernini argues that the memories of such encounters can form part of the cultural repertoire that is unconsciously drawn upon in future work. He identifies ‘a remarkable similarity’ between the opening of *Molloy* and *Malone Dies* and that of *Mort A Credit*: ‘Together with a thematic and stylistic resemblance, the narrative beginning of Céline’s novel, in its informational uncertainty, reads like a combination of Molloy’s reference to ambiguous presences coming and going from the room and Malone’s fatigued promise that all will be over soon: “Here we are, alone again. It’s all so slow, so heavy, so sad. ...I’ll be old soon. Then at last it will be over. So many people have come into my room. They’ve talked. They haven’t said much. They’ve gone away. They’ve grown old, wretched, sluggish, each in some corner of the world”.’ Bernini argues that ‘Céline’s room would have had the time to permeate into Beckett’s introspective imagination’ before resurfacing during the composition of Beckett’s ‘trilogy’. (Bernini, p. 98, note 2) I am arguing for something similar in this Conceptual Chapter in relation to *The Student’s Dynamics*.

east London, before we moved to Norfolk, *His Enclosure* extends both the complexity of the space and of its dynamics, as well as of the dynamics of the body enclosed within it. Whereas Beckett's closed systems can be read as an existentially pessimistic regression to stasis, *His Enclosure* and its predecessors represent a more optimistic epistemological attempt at exhausting and dissecting the dynamics to (and beyond) their descriptive limits. This results in a more meticulous and methodical approach than Beckett's fragments leading to a more thoroughgoing conclusion that neither the origins nor the co-ordinate systems originating from them are ultimately real or reliable.

These works also represent a return to the temporal circularity of late Joyce in that there is no end to the described dynamics; these are texts to be entered at any point and, returning from last page to first, are capable of being read indefinitely. *His Enclosure*, for instance, is a novel about a man who rolls from his side onto his back, and back again, and the first footnote of *Whatever Happened to Harold Absalon?* can be read as a continuation of the final footnote of *After Absalon*. This circularity contrasts with the final position – a pause, at least, in the proceedings if not a decisive end – of *The Lost Ones*, say, where 'the last state of the cylinder' is one in which 'dark descends and at the same instant the temperature comes to rest not far from freezing point'.¹²⁶ My own texts can be read, then, as *perpetuum mobiles* – devices that, unlike Beckett's, are seemingly not subject, in the long term, to the first and second laws of thermodynamics. This might be read as representing the true claustrophobia of these enclosures, a sense of endlessly repeating the same actions *ad infinitum* (akin, perhaps, to the recreator in Tom McCarthy's *Remainder*).¹²⁷ Yet, if this is the case, it is one in which the characters enclosed are willing participants – it is they, after all, who have, as it were, sought

¹²⁶ CSP, p. 223. On the temporal circularity of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* see, for instance, Donald Phillip Verene (ed.), *Vico and Joyce* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987).

¹²⁷ Tom McCarthy, *Remainder* (London: Alma Books Ltd., 2007).

out such spaces; it is they who ultimately choose to remain within them even as they go through the motions of seeking an escape – or of describing, at least, the conditions whereby such an escape might come about. There is no sense, in other words, of Beckett’s pessimism at the issueless predicament seemingly represented by such spaces – on the contrary: they are places of infinite possibility (or of ‘endless enumeration’ in the words of David Evans’ review of *After Absalon*).¹²⁸ This perhaps positions my own work on what David Rose refers to (in his review of Gabriel Josipovici’s *What Ever Happened to Modernism?*) as the ‘bright’ side of modernism:

For Modernism was [...] always double-stranded, both Pessimistic and Optimistic. Josipovici espouses only the former, the negative approach to the problematic, ‘the burden of expression with nothing to express’ strand. Joyce and Lawrence both believed in an optimistic view of the novel (‘the bright book of Life’), in the possibility of the novel as a means of exploring, illuminating and enhancing life...¹²⁹

As someone who has always spanned ‘the two cultures’ of science and the humanities, and having completed this contextual chapter, it is now clear to me, in summary, that the trajectory of my work leading to, and including, *His Enclosure*, draws on a dual heritage: on the minor but ‘very virile’ characterological tradition of the novel inaugurated by Cervantes; and on what Reviel Netz refers to as the enduring ‘literary genre’ of Greek mathematics.¹³⁰ It is this dual heritage that the first indelible reading of *The Lost Ones* connected (or re-connected) me to.

¹²⁸ *Times Literary Supplement*, *op. cit.*

¹²⁹ David Rose, ‘Dark Matter: Modernism and the Anti-Novel’ < <https://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/dark-matter-modernism-and-the-anti-novel/> > [Accessed 1 September 2025]

¹³⁰ *A New History of Greek Mathematics*, p. xii. This genre includes geometry, astronomy and optics, as well as mechanics. (*Op. cit.*)

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I didn't think of myself as a short story writer until Nicholas Royle persuasively asked for one for his Nightjar Press. I am indebted to Nick in innumerable ways; *Two Degrees of Freedom* is reproduced here with his permission. Thanks also to Andrew Gallix, Josh Rothes and Michael Salu for their kind permission to reproduce 'Bindings', 'Manifolds' and 'When viewed from the head rather than the foot', respectively.

As Fredric Jameson says in the *London Review of Books*,

Influence is not a kind of copying, it is permission unexpectedly received to do things in new ways, to broach new content, to tell stories by way of forms you never knew you were allowed to use.¹³¹

My formative encounters with the nameless “him” – or on occasion “her,” “one,” or “it” – within Beckett’s closed space stories undoubtedly planted a seed; the sense I have within my own writing, however, is of a self-generating trajectory, a sense in which I progressively learn the ‘form and dimensions’ of the increasingly constrained spaces my characters have preferred, until now, to inhabit. This contextual chapter has helped me understand something of the nature of that trajectory, and that these characters might share some, at least, of my own preoccupations.

¹³¹ Fredric Jameson, ‘No Magic, No Metaphor’, in *London Review of Books*, Vol. 39, No. 12, 15 June 2017. <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v39/n12/fredric-jameson/no-magic-no-metaphor>> [accessed 29 June 2025]

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