

# *“Occasional extinction or more likely occultation”: form and source in “Long Observation of the Ray”*

Article

Accepted Version

Davies, W. (2019) “Occasional extinction or more likely occultation”: form and source in “Long Observation of the Ray”. *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui*, 31 (1). pp. 82-97. ISSN 0927-3131 doi: <https://doi.org/10.1163/18757405-03101007> Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/85390/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher’s version if you intend to cite from the work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

Published version at: [https://brill.com/view/journals/sbt/31/1/article-p82\\_7.xml](https://brill.com/view/journals/sbt/31/1/article-p82_7.xml)

To link to this article DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/18757405-03101007>

Publisher: Rodopi

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the [End User Agreement](#).

[www.reading.ac.uk/centaur](http://www.reading.ac.uk/centaur)

**CentAUR**

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online

## **“Occasional extinction or more likely occultation”**

### ***Form and Source in “Long Observation of the Ray”***

**William Davies\***

Post-Doctoral Research Fellow, Department of English Literature, University of Reading, UK  
w.j.davies@reading.ac.uk

#### **Abstract**

This article analyses Samuel Beckett’s unpublished prose piece “Long Observation of the Ray” (UoR MS 2909; 1975-1976) and considers the formal, thematic, and intertextual aspects of the text in order to reflect on its ‘abandoned’ status. By drawing attention to possible sources for the linguistic and descriptive choices that Beckett makes throughout the manuscript, the article argues that the text represents a partial return to the author’s abiding interest in calculations of light and distance first prompted by his study of astronomy, a return which he uses to further his experimentation with form and structure in “Long Observation of the Ray” and beyond.

#### **Résumé**

Cet article analyse l’ouvrage non publié de Samuel Beckett qui s’intitule “Long Observation of the Ray” (UoR MS 2909; 1975-1976). Il considère les aspects formels, thématiques et intertextuels de ce texte pour considérer les raisons possibles pour lesquelles “Long Observation” s’est retrouvé comme “ouvrage abandonné.” En proposant des sources probables des choix linguistiques et descriptifs que Beckett a fait dans le manuscrit, cet article affirme que “Long Observation of the Ray” offre une résurgence de la grande curiosité que Beckett a montré pour les calculs de lumière et distance auxquels ses études d’astronomie l’avaient mené. Cette récurrence de curiosité encourage l’expérimentation continue avec forme et structure dans les ouvrages contemporains de Beckett.

#### **Keywords**

“Long Observation of the Ray” – light – perception – mathematics – intertextuality

#### **Mots-clés**

lumière – perception – mathématiques – intertextualité

Written over two attempts in 1975 and 1976, the abandoned prose piece known as “Long Observation of the Ray” (UoR MS 2909) is one of the more substantial texts in Samuel Beckett unpublished canon, yet it remains critically neglected.<sup>1</sup> A blend of the closed-space pieces of Beckett’s later career and his long-standing interest in light and perception, the “Long Observation” manuscripts chart Beckett’s ambitions to generate a text that describes the process of observing a ray of light which illuminates the inside of a sealed chamber. In order to examine the abandoned nature of “Long Observation,” and to better explicate the text’s value for charting the development of a number of different elements of Beckett’s aesthetic, this article will address the relationship between formal and thematic aspects of the text, particularly its mathematical structure and the intricacies of the ray’s source that becomes the text’s obsession. The article begins by considering the mathematical structure that Beckett deploys in “Long Observation,” specifically his desire to have a mathematical formula shape the text as it is written. The article draws attention particularly to the formal elements of the poems “something there” and “dread nay” which share compositional similarities and thematic preoccupations with “Long Observation.”

---

\* Thanks to Hannah Simpson for assistance with translation.

<sup>1</sup> There are exceptions. The text gives its title to the art magazine *Lovely Jobly*’s special section, “Samuel Beckett: The Long Observation” (1990). Steven Connor, Mark Nixon and David Houston Jones have also examined the text for its relations to Beckett’s published works. These are discussed below.

This examination is followed by an analysis of the text's central themes of perception and light through the lens of Beckett's scientific and astronomical interests, accounting for a number of Beckett's linguistic choices in the description of the ray. In doing so, this article identifies "Long Observation" as the abandoned successor of a number of Beckett's formal and thematic experimentations, a status that allows us to use the text to better consider the relationship between form and content that continued to preoccupy Beckett through his later career.

In the earliest draft of "Long Observation," Beckett develops a schema for the text's structure and a list of the themes or images he wishes to address. In undated—but likely early—notes that accompany the manuscripts from 1975, Beckett outlines the "Themes" of the text:

- A. Observation
  - B. Chamber
  - C. inlet-outlet
  - D. Constant intensity (inexhaustible source)
  - E. Faintness
  - F. Cross-section (lantern)
  - G. Constant length
  - H. Saltatoriality
  - I. Extinction-occultation (duration and frequency) (lantern not quite impermeable)
- UoR MS 2909/1, loose sheet; qtd. in Nixon, 296

At this point, Beckett envisaged the piece beginning and ending with a paragraph of nine sentences summarising the text as a whole. He notes that the central body of the text will follow a strict mathematical structure: five sections made up of nine paragraphs labelled A to I (following the above themes) with the first section of three sentences, a second of six sentences, a third of nine, a fourth of six, and a fifth of three. Barring the first, each section's paragraph has the potential, according to Beckett's notes, to occur in "any order" (UoR MS 2909/1, loose sheet; qtd. in Renton, 24). In total, this will produce 261 sentences ( $9 + 27 + 54 + 81 + 54 + 27 + 9$ ), generating a text that appears to arise from mathematical processes rather than any apparent narrative trajectory. By the last typescript of 1975, the summary description is condensed to the following:

Long observation of the ray suggests a spherical chamber full six feet in diameter. Of way in and/or out no trace has yet appeared. <sup>Hermetic inasmuch as no trace of inlet and/or outlet has appeared</sup> This ray does not vary in intensity. Faint it grows no fainter! Cross and lighting where it falls an area in accordance. Unvarying length of same three feet from unseen slide or shutter to point of impact. Saltatoriality of erratic transfer from one blank to another and thence similarly to another and so on. Occasional extinction or more likely occultation accompanied by faint sound.

UoR MS 2909/4, 1r; qtd. in Houston Jones, 123

Comprised of just a single typescript page, Beckett abandons this draft with just the section "A. Observation" complete.

On resuming the text in 1976, Beckett makes two major alterations: he changes "A Observation" to "A Eye-Mind" and notes "3-6-9-6-3 too much. Try 2 3 4 3 2 = 126" (UoR MS 2909/5, 1r; qtd. in Renton, 25). Beckett's brief re-engagement with the text, comprising only a few pages, abides by this new structure. The last page of the final typescript of 1976 recounts a "long observation that is sum of countless brief observations separated by spells of uneasy rest," an "observation" which, before the text's abandonment, reaches the conclusion that the source of observation (now in this draft the "eye") is indistinguishable from the source of the ray: "The eye if inside the sphere in order to observe such things as constant length of ray where else inside the sphere but at its point of equity of centre that is at the source of light itself" (UoR MS 2909/6, 1r; qtd. in Renton, 26). At the brink of collapse, the final typescript affirms "the source of light itself" as the point from which the text might have gone on had Beckett found the means or energy to do so.

As Beckett develops the text across the manuscripts, it shifts focus from the data gathered by observation to the labour of observation itself that the hermetic chamber produces. As Steven Connor notes, observation occurs in the moments when the ray enters the chamber, meaning that in the text "we

not only see the observing ray in the act of observing, we see the observing mind observing itself in the role of the observing ray” (90). Such a situation is rife with potential paradoxes and contradictions, inducing weariness in the observer in the text and potentially proving an intractable formal conceit that brings about the text’s abandonment.

Beckett’s difficulties with the text are made clear by the editing and re-structuring that occurs throughout. This is also reflected in correspondence from the period. Beckett describes the first drafts to Jocelyn Herbert on 23 November 1975 in the following terms: “beating myself (feebly) against another impossible—but not for theatre” (Beckett 2016, 412). Two months later, on 22 January 1976, he writes to Barbara Bray from Tangier: “have the ray with me but can’t bear the thought” (420). It is not clear when Beckett abandoned the text for the first time, but by 5 February 1977, two-and-a-half months after the “reprise” of the text, he wrote to James Knowlson: “fear I won’t have anything for [Journal of Beckett Studies] No. 2. Current efforts in a mess” (452). Though finally abandoned, it is important to note that Beckett’s return is a relatively unique occurrence as he was “usually [...] content to abandon works that are slipping out of control” (Knowlson and Pilling, 157). Ultimately, though, the manuscripts would suggest that Beckett’s mathematical structure subsumes the text’s progress in a manner that the content cannot rectify. It seems that the structure, and the initial demands for a considerably longer text compared to the other prose pieces of the period (*Lessness* is 120 sentences, for example, much closer to Beckett’s revised length of 126 for “Long Observation”) are what lead to the text’s (double) abandonment. Yet there seems also to be the lingering possibility that Beckett could not fully relinquish the text to a fundamentally disinterested process of mathematical textual generation as issues of mind and perception (both in the text and Beckett’s own) continued to frustrate the piece.

### “Long Observation of the Ray” and Beckett’s Late Canon

Despite the text’s abandoned status, Beckett’s return to the manuscripts in 1976 has implications for the text’s intertextual elements. As Connor observes, “Long Observation”

forms a link between two important preoccupations [...], the preoccupation with cylinders and enclosed spaces to be found in *The Lost Ones*, *Ping*, *All Strange Away* and *Closed Space*, and the preoccupation with the dynamics of looking which runs from *Play* and *Film* through to *Ill Seen Ill Said*.

Connor, 79

Looking beyond the prose, Mark Nixon notes that “If the first stint at writing ‘Long Observation of the Ray’ precedes work on *Ghost Trio*, the second attempt follows directly after the completion of *...but the clouds...*” (296). The fixed beam of light that illuminates the action of *...but the clouds...* in particular resonates with the image of “Long Observation.”

With the attempt in “Long Observation” to work a series of images or themes into a defined structure ordered by a numerical make-up of paragraphs and sentences, Beckett’s late poetry also offers much for thinking through both the form and content of “Long Observation,” specifically the poems “hors crâne,” “dread nay,” and “something there,” each written in 1974, the first in French, the latter two in English.<sup>2</sup> Though “Long Observation,” begun less than a year later, remains prose in its abandoned state, it shares much with the English poems in imagery, vocabulary, and, in the case of “dread nay,” specific compositional processes.

Beckett commenced “hors crâne” on 1 January 1974, “a bitterly cold day, which may have called to mind the chattering head of Bocca degli Abati frozen in the ice of Antenora” (Lawlor and Pilling, 441). Initially prose, “hors crâne” would not take poetic form until the fifth draft, “organised for the first time as a twelve-line poem in four sections of three lines each,” vaguely reminiscent of Dante’s *terza rima* (441). The early drafts of the poem spawned “something there,” a poem with images of an eye and mind responding to sound and light as its focus.

### “something there”

---

<sup>2</sup> For the development of the poems, see Lawlor and Pilling (441-443).

Whilst “hors crâne” builds from the image of “Bocca dans la glace” (Lawlor and Pilling, 201), “something there” produces a steady but futile articulation of “something there somewhere outside / the head” (202). The poem, like “Long Observation,” makes use of a cold, detached tone comprised of pronoun-less statements ordered in three nine-line stanzas.<sup>3</sup> The poem exchanges “head” for “whole globe” across the first two stanzas, producing the much starker and more dehumanised sense also generated in “Long Observation” in its largely lifeless chamber. This thematic detail is anticipated in the final stanza of “something there,” that the “something out there” is “not life / necessarily” (202). Yet the poem is fundamentally also an attempt to observe what is “out there” (202). Just as in the “Long Observation” drafts that would follow a year later, the poem moves from the object of observation, the “something,” to the process of observation through “the eye”:

at the faint sound so brief  
it is gone and the whole globe  
not yet bare  
the eye  
opens wide  
wide  
till in the end  
nothing more  
shutters it again  
202

In particular, the poem anticipates the shift in the 1976 drafts of “Long Observation” from the process of “Observation” to the relationship of “Eye-Mind”; before this, the earlier drafts switch back and forth between direct and indirect suggestions that the space of the text is an eye. In both cases, though, like in “something there”, any image of an eye is presented in mechanical, nonhuman terms, “shutter[ing]” each time it opens and closes. Indeed, Beckett’s choice of the word “shutter” in “something there” foregrounds the description of the ill-heard sound of “shutter[ing]” in the chamber each time the ray is occulted. This aural aspect of the text is introduced when Beckett replaces the notion of the light blinking out—suggestive of an eye—with the vaguer phrase “faint sound”, also seen in “something there” that survives across the manuscripts and accompanies each emission of the ray. While “something there” does not reach the possibility of a mind reacting to what is observed, in the final “Long Observation” draft of 1975 the shutter sound is posited as the indication that some conscious decision may be made each time the ray goes on or off; like the rest of the deductions in the text, though, the reasoning is strained by a “weak mind” struggling to carry out its observations.

### ***“dread nay”***

Begun a month after “hors crâne,” “dread nay” is much closer to its French counterpart’s Dantean imagery, imagining “hellice eyes” that “stream till / frozen to / jaws” (203). Yet, the poem is also concerned with an eye observing: “long still / faint stir / unseal the eye / till still again / seal again” (203). As the “hellice” image is observed across the fourth stanza, the process of observation itself is destabilised by a violent “clack chatter” which produces the “shocked wide” eyes that are “sudden in / ashen smooth / aghast” by a “glittering” light, the description of which prompts in the seventh stanza the first image of what would become the heart of “Long Observation”:

at ray  
in latibule  
long dark  
stir of dread  
till breach  
long sealed

---

<sup>3</sup> Consider also the multiples of three Beckett uses when planning “Long Observation.”

Whilst the “stir of dread” will become the “weak” struggle of observation in “Long Observation,” discussed below, “dread nay” produces the image which Beckett’s abandoned manuscripts will zoom in upon: a “ray” “long sealed” in a “latibule” (Lawlor and Pilling, 444).

It is not just their concern with the “ray” that the two pieces share. The composition of “dread nay” also anticipates “Long Observation”: “The first draft consists of notes, [...] organised under four numbered headings: ‘1. Head’; ‘2. Position of Head’; ‘3. Argument’; ‘4. Inside of head’. [...] There is a further elaboration below which sets out the eight-part structure of the poem” (442). As in “Long Observation,” these headings are noted alphabetically, A-G. “These are bracketed together ‘Any order’,” Pilling and Lawlor explain, “Underneath Beckett has written ‘First prose. Then’, followed by two words too heavily cancelled to read. It is not until draft 5 that “dread nay” is set out as a poem” (443). Like “Long Observation,” Beckett considers a modular, “any order” approach based on a series of themes or images.<sup>4</sup> More significantly, the phrase “first prose. Then” suggests that Beckett found a transition between forms conducive to the expression he was trying to produce, beginning in prose for both “hors crâne” and “dread nay.” With this in mind, we might more seriously consider the received reading of “Long Observation” as a prose piece. As in “dread nay”, the planned mathematical structure of “Long Observation” is akin to the construction of a poem with Beckett building each section around a theme that is described within the parameters of a certain number of phrases or sentences that will be “first prose” and then pared down. That is to say, we cannot rule out that “Long Observation” may too be the beginning of the same compositional process, possibly on the way to becoming far closer to a poem or prose-poem hybrid.

In this we might also discern a possible reason for Beckett’s struggle with “Long Observation” at a formal level. Though Beckett successfully incorporates mathematical processes in other works, the difference is that in other texts the content precedes the form to some degree: for instance, Beckett wrote the sentences of *Lessness*, then constructed the text. In “Long Observation,” Beckett attempts to write in accordance with the mathematical structure, rather than introducing his calculations after initial drafting. In so doing, Beckett is confined by a system that appears to be an attempt to free him of narrative demands. This potentially paradoxical process may well have contributed to the text’s abandonment. However, Beckett’s interest in the text is not just at the formal level when he resumes it in 1976; he also remains engaged with the idea of “the observing ray in the act of observing,” to use Connor’s formulation. Indeed, the struggle with form is mirrored in the text’s repeated emphasis of the “struggle” to observe and describe the ray in question.

### Observing the Ray

Throughout the 1975 drafts of “Long Observation,” the ray is described as illuminating the space intermittently, the light disappearing by way of “occultation.” Implying the opening and closing of a shutter within the text’s chamber—later the eye-lid of the “eye-mind” introduced in 1976—the “occultation” of the light source leads an “observer” to conclude “in his weariness” that since the ray “does not vary in intensity,” it can be “ascribed [...] to an inexhaustible source” (UoR MS 2909/2, 1r; qtd. in Houston Jones, 124). By the second typescript, the “inexhaustible source” is revised: “if not itself inexhaustible” the source is now “inexhaustibly replenished” (UoR MS 2909/4, 1r; qtd. in Houston Jones, 124). David Houston Jones examines this emphasis on the ray’s source through entropic theories of energy transferral, particularly Beckett’s reading of Poincaré, Maxwell’s “Demon” thought experiment, and “Lavoisier’s principle of the conservation of mass” (124-127). “Long Observation” is certainly scientific in nature; read again with this in mind, the opening summary paragraph quoted above reads very much like the parameters for an optical thought experiment. Whilst Beckett’s interests in entropy and energy are likely at play in “Long Observation,” I want to develop this thought experiment motif further to suggest that certain linguistic and thematic choices in the manuscripts

---

<sup>4</sup> Beckett used a similar compositional approach when writing *Lessness* a few years prior, a text which Ruby Cohn identifies as having poetic elements (403-404).

surrounding the ray itself indicate that Beckett's interest in physics, astronomy, and the function of light are crucial to the text.

Beckett's fascination with light and astronomy is well documented. In his "Dream" Notebook, Beckett made numerous notes from Sir James John's 1929 work *The Universe Around Us*, many concerned with the relationship between calculation and the observable nature of light, demonstrating Beckett's early and sustained interest in the methods, as well as the content, of scientific observation: "Neptune calculated (not observed) from observed vagaries of orbit of Uranus (Greatest triumph of human thought) !!" (Beckett 1999, 147).<sup>5</sup> Entries in the later "Whoroscope" Notebook are again concerned with stars and planets, particularly Venus, which appears as late as *Ill Seen Ill Said* and *Stirrings Still* (Van Hulle and Nixon, 207). Astronomical distances and methods of calculation also recur. In *The Unnamable*, for example, Malone is conceived as an orbiting body who "passes before me at doubtless regular intervals" amongst "Dim intermittent lights" which "suggest a kind of distance" (2-3). Such calculations anticipate the observational concerns of "Long Observation," used here to orientate the narrator of *The Unnamable* in order to affirm their centrality to the text. The source of the ray is likewise strikingly reminiscent of the celestial forms to which Beckett gave both early attention and which inform the type of light cast "on earth" in texts such as *All Strange Away*: "Imagine light. Imagine light. No visible source, glare at full, spread all over, no shadow, all six planes shining the same, slow on, ten seconds on earth to full, same off" (73; the phrase "six planes" is also found in UoR MS 2909/2, 1r).

The thematic field of astronomy is further opened up in "Long Observation" through Beckett's choice of "occultation" to describe the ray. Referring to the occurrence of an object becoming imperceptible when blocked by another object, "occultation" is most commonly used to describe "the concealment of a celestial object by another interposed between it and the observer, as of a star or planet by the moon, or of a satellite by its planet" (*OED*). The term is found in a number of ray-related entries in the 11<sup>th</sup> edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (hereafter *EB*) which Beckett owned and kept at Ussy (Van Hulle and Nixon, 192-193). In particular "occultation" appears in the "Algol" entry, a star cluster thought on discovery to "fluctuate in brightness" (*EB*, Vol 1, 655), and the entry "Light" and its subsection "the Nature of Light." Though no reading traces are noted for either entries,<sup>6</sup> the vocabulary of both entries has significant similarities with descriptions of the ray in "Long Observation" and the source from which it emanates, as well as the conclusions associated with the ray, from the speculation around whether or not it operates by "constant intensity" to the process of "extinction or more likely occultation" that dissipates the light in the chamber. These will be considered in turn.

In the entry on "Algol," the star's constant eclipses are the main focus:

ALGOL, the Arabic name (signifying "the Demon") [...] a star of the second magnitude, noticed [...] to fluctuate in brightness. John Goodricke [...] suggested their cause in recurring eclipses by a large dark satellite. Their intermittent character prompted the supposition. [...] Variables of the Algol class are rendered difficult to discover by the incidental character of their fluctuations. [...] continuous occultations by two bright stars, revolving in virtual contact, are doubtfully supposed to be in progress.

655

The star's apparent fluctuations, the durations of illumination, and its "occultation" all resonate with the light source in "Long Observation of the Ray," while the "intermittent character" of the light recalls the "dim intermittent lights" of *The Unnamable*. Further, it is the notion that darkness is required to observe the star's light that seems to pre-empt Beckett's ray in the chamber, one described as bright white, not yellow, on its emission but is in fact without colour. It is also noted that the ray produces a

---

<sup>5</sup> Elements of this "greatest triumph" reappear in different forms in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, *More Pricks Than Kicks*, and *Murphy* (Pilling, 147).

<sup>6</sup> Van Hulle and Nixon note that the *Encyclopaedia's* reading traces are "difficult to determine" across the volumes. However, Beckett confirms in several correspondence that he would dip into them with varying interest when in Ussy from 1958 onwards (193). Beckett also worked from a copy of *EB* for a range of entries in his "Whoroscope" Notebook related to Greek myth and Irish history, among others (192).



smoke-like blur as it travels, in turn blurring the point at which it hits the chamber wall (UoR MS 2909/2, 2r). Beckett's *Encyclopaedia* entry on the "Algol" notes that the light of the star is "yellow white" at its source but "colourless" as it travels and is little affected by the "smoke-veil absorption conspicuous of the sun" (*EB*, Vol. 1, 655), a phenomena which Beckett noted some forty years prior in his "Dream" Notebook as "the grey hairs of the stars" (1999, 150) and which may well inform the "grey air" of *Lessness* (2010b, 129).<sup>7</sup>

Yet to discern these details about the ray, "Long Observation" requires certain parameters that resemble light experiments on a much smaller scale. While descriptive details resemble Beckett's varying interests in light in the field of astronomy, the described scene itself is closer to the theories and experiments found elsewhere in the *Encyclopaedia*, specifically in the entry "Light." The entry opens by describing what in many ways is the crux of "Long Observation" and the "struggle" to achieve objective observation: "'Light' may be defined subjectively as the sense-impression formed by the eye" (608). It goes on to account for the development of various theories for light's attributes and functions, ending its opening section with the assertion that "the school following [James] Clerk Maxwell" provides, at the time of writing, the most promising possibility for a full account of light's properties by disputing the dominant wave theory of the 19<sup>th</sup> century through observations of light's similarity to observed electromagnetic behaviours.<sup>8</sup> However, "Long Observation" also draws on an earlier stage of the science of optics and light, using details from the Newtonian era of observing light as particles (a possible source for the two references to "motes" in UoR MS 2909/2, 1r; qtd. in Renton, 23).<sup>9</sup> As the "Light" entry states, "Newtonian theory can accurately trace the course of a ray of light in any system of isotropic bodies" (*EB*, Vol. 16, 618), a process that "Long Observation" reimagines when it is stated that it will not matter if the observer changes position since the view will be the same from any perspective (UoR MS 2909/2, 2r).

Alongside theoretical inspiration, Beckett also seems to have taken phrases directly from the "Light" entry. In the first draft, Beckett begins by revising his opening phrase: "Long observation of the ~~beam~~<sup>ray</sup>" with the phrase "a bundle of rays" added at the top of the manuscript page; this is then used in the second attempt at the opening: "Long observation of the ray. Long observation of the bundle of rays" (UoR MS 2909/1, 1r; qtd. in Renton, 23). In the *Encyclopaedia* entry on "Light," "bundle of rays" is used to describe the fracturing of a light beam through an opening in an opaque screen in studies of light and wave-length in which a "pencil of light" represents a "bundle of rays" in various conditions, from cubic mirror chambers to the vacuum of space (*EB*, Vol. 16, 619-620). Where this is particularly significant for "Long Observation," and suggests a possible basis for the lantern light source within the chamber, is in the description of light in lighthouses:

Optical apparatus in lighthouses is required for one or other of three distinct purposes: [...] Apparatus falling under the first category produce a fixed light, and further distinction can be provided in this class by mechanical means of occultation, resulting in the production of an occulting or intermittent light.

633

Like the Algol, this phenomenon is observed and measured by way of "occultations" and contains a number of details that suggest the shutter and fixed beam of light of "Long Observation" may well derive from Beckett's reading on the behaviour of light in various conditions: "occultation" occurs in the text meaning that the chamber is left "dark except perhaps within the lantern the imprisoned light suffusing its six planes" (UoR MS 2909/2, 1r; qtd. in Connor, 82). Yet, if the thought experiments and theorems of the *Encyclopaedia* entry provide an origin to the scientific elements of "Long Observation," the text's tension between form, observation and the struggle to confirm or deny what is observed brings about the collapse of any scientific discourse.

<sup>7</sup> "Ashen" also recurs in "dread nay," used to describe the "head sphere" (204).

<sup>8</sup> In time, Maxwell's observation that light shared with magnetism and electricity the same characteristics would prove to be conclusive. It is possible that this entry directed Beckett to the "Demon" experiment cited by Houston Jones.

<sup>9</sup> The word also recalls the third zone of Murphy's mind, "a mote in its absolute freedom" (Beckett 2009, 72).

Most significantly, the scientific accuracy to which the text seems to aspire (or parody) is undermined by the restricted process of a single observation. In a text that is, linguistically, as close to scientific description as Beckett manages, the tension of *any* disruption to the description is all the starker. The derailing of the text's success as an observation is embedded in this tension, one in which corroboration or confirmation is denied in the observation of the ray because, according to the text, the "future observers" that may otherwise provide such confirmation will only appear one after the other (MS 2909/2, 1r; qtd. in Connor, 84). As a result, the objective observation at which the text hints is rendered fallible to previous conclusions or observational determinations; the text describes the ray's movements yet must use the words of those who have come before, such as "saltatoriality" to describe the movement of the ray from one point to the other, as used by "the late Mr Exshaw" (MS 2909/2, 1r; qtd. in Connor, 84). "Saltatoriality" itself proves inefficient in the text, a term handed down by "Mr Exshaw" which describes erratic movements and is most often used to describe leaping insects (*OED*). Though the prospect of "future observers" is removed in Beckett's later drafts, "saltatoriality" lingers as a textual trace of this possibility. The scientific, mechanical method of observation and corroboration are undermined with "Long Observation" parodying scientific language and sabotaging the parameters of observation that the text initially sets out for itself with the prospect of observers only appearing sequentially (MS 2909/2, 1r). Houston Jones identifies this parodic potential, establishing a relation between scientific pastiche and the ethical nature of observation and information gathering, arguing that the text's failures in sufficient observation problematize or even nullify "the [potential] reader's imaginative investment" in the described scenes (127). Yet the reliance on past observers or "some eye to come" suggests that it is the observer whose imaginative abilities are under duress. The reader is able to invest imaginatively but unable to participate in the text's observational processes. As a result, observation within the chamber is plagued by an unceasing fatigue and weakening of which the mind is aware:

More than with the weakness itself the struggle is with the constant degree of weakness. Latent early this adversary could not fully merge till late. Before the mind even weaker then than before and knowing it. Weakened by struggle with other adversaries earlier to emerge.  
UoR MS 2909/2, 2r; qtd. in Connor, 85

Given the intense demand for observation in the text, the apparent absence of being within the chamber beyond the "weak mind" of the observer introduces a problem at once scientific and ontological. The absence of being (or of being perceived observing) produces this "weakness," yet it is ultimately the lack of confirmation for what is observed within the chamber that produces the text's fragility: before revision, the third draft of 1975 records the deduction that the ray's source is central in the chamber because the ray is a nearly constant length in all directions, the variation created only because the chamber is not a perfect sphere (UoR MS 2909/3, 1r). After heavy editing, and subsequent deletion, the provisional remark on the ray's varying lengths is replaced with more affirmative statements; the "mind," however, becomes more explicitly "trouble[d]": "Unvarying length in all directions suggesting central source. Very occasional shortening has none the less been observed. Few observations brought more trouble to the mind than this" (UoR MS 2909/4, 1r; qtd. in Connor, 82). This central source and its emitted "bundle of rays" reimagine the types of scientific and thought experiments found in the "Light" entry in Beckett's *Encyclopaedia*, shifting the emphasis from the scientific observation of the ray to a textual exploration of observation.

If Beckett's potential source and subsequent experiment-like text are comprised of the collection of data and the production of theoretical frameworks of interpretation, such a scientific contract is only partially conceived in "Long Observation," with "the late Mr Exshaw" offering an observational conclusion that fails to ease the "weakness" of the present observer. Indeed, the observer is registered as being incorrect due to this very weakness and fatigue when concluding that the ray derives from an "inexhaustible source," as seen in the full version of the quotation noted previously: "What finally most strongly strikes the observer of this Ray is its constant intensity ascribed in his weariness to an inexhaustible source" (UoR MS 2909/2, 2r; Houston Jones, 127). The narrative corrects this, however, stating that the ray in fact derives from the "nursing of some finite blaze" (UoR MS 2909/2, 2r; qtd. in Houston Jones, 124) which, by UoR MS 2909/4, is described as "if not inexhaustible inexhaustibly

replenished” (UoR MS 2909/4, 1r; qtd. in Houston Jones, 124).<sup>10</sup> Before the ethical question of a world on the brink of extinction to which Houston Jones attends can be raised, the process of observation itself is distressed and destabilised, potentially voiding the data gathered in the process and threatening the very prospect of posing ethical questions.

The conditions of the ray and the process of observation in the text are identifiably scientific in nature. Given the unfinished, unpublished nature of “Long Observation”, as well as certain intertextual relations that signify Beckett’s clear interest in both the form and content of the piece, I suggest that identifying possible sources of inspiration for the text is key for attempting to understand the level of experimentation that “Long Observation” represents. The relation between the micro-space of the chamber and the infinitely larger process of light-based calculation remains central throughout the piece, from the “finite blaze” that gives origin to the “ray” to the demands of observation that are necessary for any account of the scene to emerge. In this, we also return to the possible reasons for the text’s abandonment with the mathematical form unable to accommodate a scientifically-inflected process of observation that is beset by struggle, weakness, and the particular requirements of coherent observation. And yet, Beckett successfully makes use of aspects of mathematical structuring in other works, suggesting that the proximity of form and content in “Long Observation” could well have proved too taxing for what Beckett attempts to explore. As an abandoned text, “Long Observation” points to where Beckett may have come up against his own creative limitations. However, as an intersection of thematic and formal experimentations, many of which are deployed successfully elsewhere, and which return to longstanding preoccupations with scientific methodologies, “Long Observation” proves to be a significant piece through which we can continue to negotiate our conception of both Beckett’s ‘late’ work and the contours of his development as an experimental writer.

## Works Cited

- Beckett, Samuel, “Long Observation of the Ray,” Beckett International Foundation, University of Reading, MS 2909 (1975-1976).
- Beckett, Samuel, *Beckett’s “Dream” Notebook*, ed. John Pilling (Reading: Beckett International Foundation, 1999).
- Beckett, Samuel, *Murphy* (London: Faber, 2009).
- Beckett, Samuel, *All Strange Away*, in *Texts for Nothing and Other Shorter Prose 1950-1976*, ed. Mark Nixon (London: Faber, 2010a), 71-84.
- Beckett, Samuel, *Lessness*, in *Texts for Nothing and Other Shorter Prose 1950-1976*, ed. Mark Nixon (London: Faber, 2010b), 127-132.
- Beckett, Samuel, *The Unnamable*, ed. Steven Connor (London: Faber, 2010c).
- Beckett, Samuel, *Collected Poems*, ed. Seán Lawlor, John Pilling (New York: Grove, 2012).
- Beckett, Samuel, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, vol. IV: 1966-1989*, ed. George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn, Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2016).
- Cohn, Ruby, *A Beckett Canon* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2001).
- Connor, Steven, “Between Theatre and Theory: *Long Observation of the Ray*,” in *The Ideal Core of the Onion*, ed. John Pilling, Mary Bryden (Reading: Beckett International Foundation, 1992), 79-98.
- Houston Jones, David, “So Fluctuant a Death: Entropy and Survival in *The Lost Ones* and *Long Observation of the Ray*,” in *Beckett and Ethics*, ed. Russell Smith (London: Continuum, 2008), 118-133.
- Knowlson, James, and John Pilling, *Frescoes of the Skull* (London: Calder, 1979).
- Nixon, Mark, “Beckett’s Unpublished Canon,” in *Samuel Beckett and the Arts*, ed. S.E. Gontarski (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2014) 282-305.
- Renton, Andrew, “Dwelling on a Ray,” *Lovely Jobly*, 1.1 (1990), 23-25.
- Van Hulle, Dirk, and Mark Nixon, *Samuel Beckett’s Library* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012).
- Various contributors, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11<sup>th</sup> Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1910).

---

<sup>10</sup> The text resonates in particular here with the image of a burning star emitting light, its energy source appearing in any one instance (particularly to a “tired” or “weak” mind) as infinite but, over time, proving otherwise.