Mechanistic and scientific separation of form and content in Samuel Beckett's *Quad I/II* and *The Lost Ones*

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In a 1961 interview, Beckett says: "To find a form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now" (Driver, 1961, in Lorich, 1970, p. 364). Driver views this 'mess' as being "life as Beckett views it … [and the] … social and emotional stress found everywhere and accepted without opposition by everyone" (p. 364). Beckett's 'mess' is a recurrent aspect of his works that depicts a world that is neither static nor final, which exists in permanent conflict and while containing both laughter and tears relentlessly depicts hopelessness, abandonment, decay, loss and death. This essay will show, at least in the case of *Quad I/II* and *The Lost Ones,* that Beckett borrows from contemporary scientific ideas in constructing artistic forms to contain his representation of the 'mess'.

Audiences often feel impelled to make some sense of the 'mess' depicted in a Beckett text. This is a difficult task. It might be imagined that the audience is hoping that Beckett will give them a philosophical insight which will guide them out of the 'mess' into a more ordered and happier world. However, as Moran points out: "Beckett's answer to philosophy is to refuse it, give it a 'kick in the arse'." (Moran, 2006, p. 94). Moran argues that Beckett "was not a philosopher; if he had been, he would not have needed to engage with art" (p. 94). If the audience should not, therefore, seek a philosophical answer, then what should they do with a Beckett text?   Beckett hints at one possibility: "Poets are the sense, philosophers the intelligence of humanity" (Uhlmann, 2010, p. 87). Beckett, as a poet in the most general sense, is extending the audience's means of experiencing his world – by carefully using form, structure, vocabulary and medium. And indeed, if it is the artist's task to use form to accommodate the 'mess' then Beckett is echoing Marshall McLuhan's famous, contemporary statement: "The medium is the message" (McLuhan, 1964).

As part of his artistic task, Beckett searches for new forms within the traditional novel, poetry and dramatic forms. While some critics take the view that "good literature is of timeless significance; it somehow transcends the limitations and peculiarities of the age it was written in, and thereby speaks to what is constant in human nature" (Barry, 2009, pp. 17-18) there is a contrary view however, expressed by Eagleton:

> For any body of theory concerned with human meaning, value, language, feeling and experience will inevitably engage with broader, deeper beliefs about the nature of human individuals and societies, problems of power and sexuality, interpretations of past history, versions of the present and hopes for the future. (Eagleton, 2008, p. 170).

Eagleton's view is that literature cannot exist in a vacuum. He sees it as perfectly reasonable that someone like Beckett would borrow or refactor from other disciplines. Beckett certainly had an ongoing curiosity regarding the scientific world, and the personal contacts to pursue this curiosity. For example, Kishin Moorjani (a particle physicist) recalls one meeting with Beckett where Beckett quizzed him on current thinking about the many body problem in quantum physics (Moorjani, 2016, p46). It is interesting to speculate whether Beckett had encountered a similar scientific model - that of Conway's *The Game of Life*, (Gardner, 1970, p. 120) before writing *The Lost Ones* (written 1966-70) or *Quad* (1984). *The Game of Life* is a cellular automaton zero-player game - i.e., its evolution is determined by its initial state, requiring no further input, and which often results in either a repetitive entry and exit into stasis or in a zero or unchanging entropic final state. Such 'narrative action' is very similar to that employed in both *The Lost Ones* and *Quad.*

The form of the script for *Quad* (Beckett, 1984) looks exactly like a procedural specification for a computer program very much like *The Game of Life*. While the script does not use of a formal programming language it draws on the language of mathematical specification with its use of lists, implicit subroutines and counted execution. Beckett's script also eliminates any form of gender, age, ethnicity, religion, height and weight and reduces the players to a specification of clothing style and colour, and speed of gait. Doing so

follows the computing principle that object properties used should always be reduced to a minimal, orthogonal set. Although two male and two female actors were used in the original production (Brater, 1987, p.109) their genders were a free choice by the production company. The script, therefore, implies that the same outcome (ie audience experience) would have occurred if the players had, say, all been the same gender, or all Australian. The specification of the players is an example of mathematical equivalence.

Just like a computer program, *Quad* is truly algorithmic. When started with the same initial conditions (and these are specified in the script), it will reproduce the same behaviour for the observing audience. It is like a strict musical fugue where once the original melodic pattern is shown to the listener, then all subsequent sounds are already determined. Computer scientists would recognise this as the property of referential transparency in the execution flow in *Quad*. Practically this means that the essence of the experience offered when seeing *Quad* performed in different places and times will be the same.

How then is Beckett's mess accommodated with such structures? One possibility is that the 'danger zone' of the centre (which is noted by Beckett as a 'problem' in the script) is an indication that the mechanistic rules of the machine cannot perfectly dictate the actions of the players. Hans's interpretation is that "nothingness, misery, futility, "danger" are visible for a second" to the players as they circumvent the danger zone, only to forget its presence until their next encounter (Hans, 1993, p. 339).

Porush states that "The machine is a universal symbol of our culture's blind devotion to logical method" (Porush, 1986, p. 87). He sees postmodernist authors as engaged in a battle against this "imperialism of the machine" and expresses the perhaps romantic view that "artists have a special stake in drawing a line around some portion of the soul and proscribing its analysis" (p. 88). Thus, in producing a work of literature, the author should go beyond a simple mechanistic description of the world depicted in that work. Any author that uses the

machine as a straightforward metaphor for the human soul is, according to Porush, failing to do their job properly. Successful postmodern authors should (and do) attack the "imperialism of the machine" using weapons of "self-consciousness, irony, a tacit distrust of language as an effective means of expression, and metaphors" (p. 87). This attack can be seen both in replacement of language with algorithm in *Quad* and in the unusual narratorial style of *The Lost Ones.*

In *The Lost Ones* (Beckett, 2010) it is easy to think that the pitiable inhabitants trapped in the cylinder represent components in an unfathomable machine, driven by cycles of light and heat and governed by a set of proscribed rules and behaviours. Brienza however immediately dismisses the notion that the machine-like nature of *The Lost Ones* is an allegorical representation of something awful. Instead, Brienza views it "as a work in which form and content are one" (Brienza, 1977, p. 148). She further says that if the story is "about man's futile search for order and meaning in the world, … [then it is also about] the reader's futile search for order and meaning in the piece itself" (p. 148). Porush has a similar view and calls *The Lost Ones* a form of cybernetic fiction – a form in which "texts disguise themselves ironically as a cybernetic device and at the same time undermine their own cybernetics" (p. 89). Cybernetic writing "uses the machine to stand for the act of writing itself" and is characterised by, among other things: "a congruence between form and fiction", which "delights in structure for structure's sake" and with "those properties of language which drive a wedge between mechanistic explanation and human experiences beyond "expression or determination" (p. 92). In cybernetic writing the form of the narration is one way in which text questions itself. For example, when the narrator says: "if this notion be maintained" (p. 109, 112, 119, 120) the narrator is undermining the certainty or authority of the narratorial position. When the narrator says: "Imagine then the silence of the steps" (Becket, 2010, p.101) the narrator is inviting the reader to be part of the story; to add their

imagination to the author's efforts. By inviting the readers to examine and question the process of narration itself Beckett makes the readers themselves a component of the work itself.

In conclusion, this essay has shown that Beckett augments and illuminates the 'mess' within his works, by using novel and contemporary ideas in their form and structure and in doing so Beckett also comments on the artistic process itself and expands the means by which his work engages with his consumers.

[1498 words]

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