

**Beckett's "The Lost Ones":  
The Middle Passage between Late Modernism and Science Fiction**

**Paul March-Russell**

Postmodern critics such as Scott Bukatman, Brian McHale and David Porush, for whom science fiction (in McHale's words) is "the ontological genre par excellence", readily take Samuel Beckett's short fiction, "The Lost Ones" (1970), as an instance of a late modernist/early postmodern writer adopting sf tropes in what McHale has also described as the "feedback loop" between sf and postmodernism. This alleged adoption of generic tropes, however, is somewhat glibly described, focusing upon a superficial description of Beckett's evocation of a cylindrical device, into which are crammed "the lost ones" of the title, governed by a machine-like intelligence, and may instead be seen as a further instance of postmodern criticism's appropriation of sf so as to justify its own critical paradigms. Instead, this paper will examine more closely Beckett's possible use of an sf trope – the generation ship – so as to locate his story within a dialogue between sf and modernism that stretches back into the late 19th century. The paper will not argue for sf's direct influence on Beckett's work but will instead argue for the pervasiveness of sf tropes within modernist discourse, and offer a comparison between Beckett's story and one of the most notable generation ship stories, the novel "Non-Stop" (1958) by Brian Aldiss, a writer known for his mimicry of Beckett's style and for his own peculiar relationship between modernism and sf, as a writer of sf and fantasy published in the 1950s and '60s by Faber (whilst T.S. Eliot was still on the editorial board). I will argue that Beckett's story represents a "middle passage" (I use the term advisedly with connotations of the 18th and 19th century slave ships) between Theodor Adorno's "torn halves" of minority and mass culture. The non-generative ship of Beckett's story, as embodied by both the characters' inability to procreate and the over-determined theme of entropy, expresses the frustrated desires rather than the "jouissance" of McHale's alleged feedback loop, frustrations that find articulation in the New Wave sf of the same period, for example, Aldiss' "Report on Probability A" (1968) and "Barefoot in the Head" (1969).

**Short Bio:**

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