The Lost Ones, like other works by Samuel Beckett, reflects two separate but parallel realities, one objective and one subjective, but the latter is only another way of perceiving the former. In other words, while the narration of The Lost Ones is a description and a source of information, apparently objective, it is at the same time an interpretation and a commentary. Someone—whom we shall call the observer—finds himself in an unrealistic, seemingly underground universe ruled by its own internal time so that we cannot determine how long he has been there. His observations enable him to establish a synthetic image of this strange world. After explaining to himself the life and laws of this universe, he reports them on the basis of his own inferences. The text of The Lost Ones is the result, and it resembles a report or a treatise. It is at once an account and a speculation. Analyzing it, one has to distinguish information from interpretation, fact from hypothesis, and to bring to the fore those questions that the observer avoids.

The universe is described as a cylinder some sixteen meters in diameter (fifty meters circumference) and sixteen high, made of an unknown, rubber-like substance, which produces no sound when hit and which somehow emits light and heat. In the upper half of the wall, all the way round, there are twenty niches, disposed in four irregular quincunxes. Many of them
are connected by tunnels hollowed in the wall, but some are blind. The niches and tunnels are something of a mystery. We never know whether they were made by the inhabitants of the cylinder or are natural features. Their irregular patterns as well as the fact that some are blind make the observer believe that they were probably drilled or dug by the cylinder dwellers: some "completed" by meeting other tunnels, one simply abandoned, "as though at a certain stage discouragement had prevailed" (p. 12). The observer, however, never speculates about the discouragement. In fact, he avoids a series of significant questions. He does tell us that the wall is so hard that even scratching a mark into it seems impossible and that the only tools available to the cylinder’s inhabitants are their hands and the rungs of the ladders. But he doesn’t speculate about how the niches might have been dug or what happened to the excavated substance? These are the sorts of questions the observer should be asking himself. He does, for example, explain a similar phenomenon, the missing rungs, which "are in the hands of a happy few. . ." (p. 10). But how could the bodies arrange the niches so harmoniously, since, we learn, they plant their ladders randomly, without looking at the walls? Moreover, according to the observer, no one in the cylinder can appreciate this harmony. The origin of the niches and tunnels finally remains a mystery.

But there are aspects of the cylinder that we know with some certainty. It contains fifteen ladders that are part of the environment. The interior of the cylinder fluctuates with light and heat, which oscillate origin-less but regularly from wall, floor, ceiling, and even tunnels. The light increases and decreases four times per second, and the temperature changes from five to twenty-five degrees and back in eight seconds. From time to time suddenly and unexpectedly, both vibrations cease. This period never lasts more than ten seconds, in which time all activity in the cylinder stands still.

The cylinder is the abode of two hundred and five naked bodies of either sex and all ages. They differ in their motion and in the types of activities they perform and are divided into four groups: those who are in motion, those who pause sometimes,
those who lead a sedentary life, and those who remain perfectly still. We learn that the first group contains twice as many members as the second, the second three times as many as the third, the third four times as many as the fourth, and the fourth group consists of 5 members. Thus one can easily calculate that 20 of the cylinder dwellers sit (4 x 5), 60 pause (3 x 20), and 120 are in motion (2 x 60). Four of the five still bodies ("the vanquished," as the observer calls them) sit with their backs against the wall in the position that "wrung from Dante one of his rare wan smiles." It is the position of Belacqua (a version of whom we saw in Beckett's early short stories) in Dante's Purgatory. Seeing him, Dante smiled and described his posture as follows: "one of them, who seemed to me weary, was sitting and clasping his knees, holding his face low down between them." Beckett echoes the image with the description of "the first among the vanquished": "She squats against the wall with her head between her knees and her legs in her arms. The left hand clasps the right shinbone and the right the left forearm. . . . The left foot is crossed on the right" (pp. 56-57).

The bodies in motion either circle around the arena, wait their turn to climb the ladders, look for an appropriate queue or an appropriate place to plant the ladder, stand in line or on the ladder, climb it, sit in the niches, or crawl in the tunnels. All these activities, and the order of performing them, are subject to certain rules, which the observer attempts to reconstruct. However, he is only partly successful. The helpless questions he asks prove that certain things remain unexplained.

All activities seem to have one purpose: finding a way out of the cylinder. But is there evidence that this is indeed the motive pushing the bodies to act? The various movements and actions may be merely a disorderly bustle. One has to admit finally that in the description of the life in the cylinder there is no proof that the action is purposive. Besides, a purely behavioristic description cannot in itself constitute a proof, since behaviorism does not explain intentions. All that we know about these motives comes from the observer.

He says, "From time immemorial rumour has it or better still the notion is abroad that there exists a way out" (pp. 17-18).
Those words are followed by a characterization of two fundamental beliefs shared by the inhabitants of the cylinder concerning the type and location of the exit: "One school swears by a secret passage branching from one of the tunnels and leading in the words of the poet to nature’s sanctuaries. The other dreams of a trapdoor hidden in the hub of the ceiling, giving access to a flue at the end of which the sun and other stars would still be shining" (p. 18). But how does the observer know about all this? We assume he does know because he gives the information so categorically. Whenever he does not know or only suspects something, he never fails to make that clear. He states repeatedly that there are things he does not know—what is beyond the cylinder, for instance ("nothing but mystery")—and he does not find the ultimate explanation to many phenomena. There are no grounds, therefore, to believe that in this case his abilities are out of the ordinary. His intelligence and cognitive possibilities seem to be average. So how can he know the content of their beliefs? Granting that he does not possess supernatural powers, the only source of information is speech or writing, but the bodies in the cylinder do not use language (this is why the phrase "rumour has it" has been replaced by "the notion is abroad").

In such circumstances the observer's knowledge comes from introspection. We shall discuss shortly how this knowledge is possible, what it means, and what results from it. It is worth noticing now, however, that it casts a new light on the observer. It means that in a way he belongs to the cylindrical universe and that he is neither an outsider nor a stranger. Moreover, he seems to be connected or even tied to it. "The fact remains," he notes, "... that of these two persuasions the former is declining in favor of the latter but in a manner so desultory and slow and of course with so little effect on the comportment of either sect that to perceive it one must be in the secret of the gods" (p. 19). And earlier, "... Here all should die but with so gradual and ... so fluctuant a death as to escape the notice even of a visitor" (p. 18). The observer is then not a visitor, but is in a privileged position, "in the secret of the gods."
The description of these beliefs, however, does not explain why the bodies look for the exit. It is not clear whether they want to leave their abode in order to find out what lies beyond its limits or simply to learn whether or not there is an exit. The members of the first group want only to satisfy their curiosity, since they believe that the mythical trapdoor in the ceiling would lead to a long chimney that itself would be impossible to climb. The others are closer to having the desire to leave the cylinder. However, considering the ambiguity of the expression "nature's sanctuaries" (p. 18), one does not know what they really expect on leaving their abode. It seems, however, that both beliefs indicate a longing for a world of nature as we understand it. For the first group, it is symbolized by the phrase "the sun and other stars" (p. 18), for the second by the abstract notion of "a sanctuary."

Let us now return to the observer's hypothesis. He believes that the process he discerns is the principle of life in the cylinder. The fact that the bodies are divided according to motion and that the immobile ones formerly moved like the others leads him to conclude that the quest is not perpetual and invariable, but is diminishing and one day will cease completely. This deduction, "the notion" as he calls it, enables him to create a general theory of life in the cylinder. In the very beginning, all the inhabitants were in motion: "all roamed without respite" (p. 34); but finally, after a long period of constant bustle, the first body ("the woman vanquished") gave up. What was the reason? Was it due to the lack of force or rather to a lack of belief in the existence of the exit? We have no direct answer. However, the fact that the observer names the still bodies "the vanquished ones" and their attitude "abandonment" (p. 31) suggests that it was the second case, a failure of belief. He also stresses that the perfectly still cannot be considered as blind, that is, as people unable to continue to search. Significantly he attributes such a mistake to a "thinking being coldly intent on all these data and evidences" (p. 39), who seems to ignore the cylinder's fundamental secrets. These observations are further proof that the observer is not a mysterious stranger but a native.
After "the woman vanquished" (p. 56) came others, and the slow process—in which the bodies, one by one, grew motionless—was begun. The process suggests deterioration; the body begins to stop; then it assumes the sedentary position, and finally stops moving altogether. Sometimes the transition is more violent. In most cases, however, the change from one stage to another is neither abrupt nor irreversible. The body that assumed a sedentary position can continue its search just as before, until finally, having exhausted this need, it becomes immobile. Before it becomes perfectly still, however, it resumes the sedentary position and tries to search with its eyes. In order to describe the pace of this evolution, the observer uses the following simile: "Even so a great heap of sand sheltered from the wind lessened by three grains every second year and every following year increased by two . . ." (p. 32). But no one comes back to the state of perpetual motion. Those who paused will never circle incessantly again. This is perhaps the grain by which the metaphorical heap diminishes every second year.

The gradual abandonment of the quest leads inevitably to complete cessation. Considering that each body requires a different amount of time to go through the whole cycle, the body that will remain will be the one that requires most. The observer suspects that after waking from lethargy the most persistent body will begin its last search. By this time, the others will have renounced it long ago. After performing some movements (it is difficult to predict which), it will finally approach "the woman vanquished" and look into her eyes, where it will see nothing but "calm wastes." Then it will leave her and squat somewhere, becoming immobile forever. At the same time, the light will fade and the temperature will drop to zero. The supposition is astonishing, since it assumes that the light and heat depend somehow on the bodies and their quest. But according to the laws of the cylinder, the relationship should be reversed; motion should depend on energy fluctuation. But the future is finally beyond the observer, except for a creative (fictional) possibility: "Then light and climate will be changed in a way impossible to foretell. But the former may be imagined extinguished as purposeless and the latter fixed not far from freezing
It is also worth noticing the observer’s attitude to the notion of the exit. His description of life in the cylinder and his vision of the end make us believe that there are two possibilities: he is convinced either that there is no exit or that there is no possibility of finding it, at least in the time allowed to the most persistent body. However, we never learn the observer’s direct opinion on this question. Whether an exit exists or not, and, if it does, where it is located, are questions never settled. He says only that the abode is “vast enough for flight to be in vain.” The force of this statement is pragmatic. It neither explains the reason for this futility nor provides information. It only shows the observer’s ignorance on this matter. We can assume that if he did have something in mind, he would put it forward. Once more we are led to believe that he belongs to the world of the cylinder.

Now that we have characterized the life in the cylinder and learned how it is seen and understood by the observer, we may try to determine the meaning of this world. What do the cylinder and its inhabitants represent? Who is the observer? And finally, how are we to understand the interpretation that he calls “the notion”? We have already suggested that the observer belongs to the world of the cylinder and, at the same time, uses human language and is familiar with Western culture (he knows Dante, for example). He symbolizes, therefore, a form of humanity in its weird abode, and the cylinder may be interpreted as the human world, or more precisely, its allegorical image. The two hundred naked bodies inhabiting the cylinder would be the humans living on earth, and their situation and behavior would represent the human condition and activity. Life in the cylinder is a model of human history. The anonymous observer, who is not one of the bodies, but knows at least as much about the cylinder as its inhabitants do and, moreover, can draw conclusions and speculate, is the personification of the human mind, which, in spite of being tied down to the earth, can, nonetheless, grasp it and learn the truth about it. He is the spirit of humanity—its power of self-analysis, its self-knowledge—which, though restricted by the boundaries within which man is confined, goes far beyond the individual con-
sciousness. It is the sum of human experience and therefore a common property. This is why the result of its speculation, the observer's report (the text of *The Lost Ones*), is not written in the first person. His attempt, which we are shown, to gain both descriptive and interpretative knowledge constitutes not an individual observation but a myth, the myth of the history and destiny of humanity. His "notion" is a theory of history, and the final vision, an apocalyptic prophecy.

But what then is the significance of the myth? How does it help us interpret man and his life on earth? The gradually ceasing search for the exit, which is the essence of the bodies' lives, has a double meaning. It shows that the inhabitants of the cylinder long for a world different from the one they know. The need to leave their abode indicates that they are not "comfortable" there (there is not enough space, and it is at the same time too hot and too cold). This feeling is not, however, eternal and after some time dies down. Hence adaptation to these conditions is possible. The abandonment of the search means that the bodies have grown accustomed to the situation and no longer seek change. Adaptation, however, means closing one's eyes and ceasing to see, that is, not accepting the surrounding reality. This total renunciation leads to a final disappearance of the whole environment. After the last body becomes motionless, everything will turn into darkness, which in a way will annihilate the cylindrical world. It seems that the cylinder is not a cage into which the bodies were crammed but a lighted space created by the bodies themselves. The cylinder is just a glow that assumes an illusory shape in the middle of the neutral and boundless darkness. The cylinder is not, therefore, a necessary condition of the existence of the bodies but rather their function, or, still better, merely their way of being. The fact that this way of life restricts and compels the inhabitants of the cylinder and provokes them to run away, or alter their situation, means that its foundation—that is, the essence of being—is corrupt, false, and unfulfilling. Since the source of the erroneousness is the mere fact of existence, the only way of eliminating it is complete annihilation. This will not be attained immediately, but slowly, due to the gradually growing, albeit at first absent,
awareness of the dependence. It is a process of purging, and this is the essence of the bodies' life.

What will happen when this process reaches its end? Or rather, putting aside the destruction of a given form of being, what is this end? The answer is to be found in the position the bodies finally assume, the position of the vanquished ones. At this point, let us notice that this very position is assumed by the two bodies in the white rotunda in Imagination Dead Imagine; there it suggests the fetal stage of life. Hence one can view the liberation from one form of life as a return to the starting point or to an even earlier phase. The two bodies in the white rotunda, however, and the two hundred bodies in the dark cylinder are something completely different. So the liberation is not quite a return to the original starting point, but rather the approach to the beginning of a new one. It is like a return to a point situated in the same place but on a different circle of a spiral.

Beckett gives us no hint of the future. What is going to happen next? One can only guess. If we assume that in Beckett's late prose the human body symbolizes the potentiality inherent in the world of being something like man, and the eyes, by opening, the means by which that potentiality is realized, then the general vision of existence suggested by Beckett would be as follows: the world as substance wants to find a form for itself. It does this by lighting up its darkness with the light it can produce. However, the world as substance does not know what this form should be. In other words, it does not know how to go about illuminating itself, and by what light. This is why the comportment of the world resembles a persistent process of experimentation.

Originally it assumed the form of a rotunda, as in Imagination Dead Imagine. But the form was not satisfactory. The memorable words, "there is better elsewhere," express this. "Elsewhere" means here "differently," a different way of self-illumination. So the world "opens" itself anew and becomes the reality of the cylinder. But this again proves unacceptable. From this perspective it longs for a "natural" reality, with the sun and other stars. But there is no possibility of passing from the cylinder to
that reality. There can only be a new "opening," a new self-illumination. This is why, the moment the world assumed the form of the cylinder, the light began to fade, which in practice meant a gradual abandonment of the quest. When the light disappears completely, the world comes back to the starting point and everything may begin again. What will be the result of the new attempt? What reality will the eyes see when they open once more in another way? Perhaps they will see that much-desired reality with the sun and other stars. Thus instead of the cylinder there will be the boundless firmament and the bodies will find themselves on the earth as true human beings. Will this be a successful and final attempt? Is it a successful and final attempt? Is the world satisfied with this world? To judge from our experience as human beings, it is not. If it were, the work entitled The Lost Ones could never have been created.

The dialectic of the world manifests itself not only in the ontological sphere but also on lower levels of cognition. The fluctuating substance of life that during millions of years appeared in various shapes, only to be subsequently rejected, assumed finally the human shape. Each of those forms—a protozoon, an alga, a Neanderthal man—was concentrated only on itself. Everything it did was meant to prolong the life of the species, to ensure its survival. In fact, however, this always resulted in the abandonment of that form and its attributes, and the passage to a different stage. Such was also the case with our predecessor, the Neanderthal man. He, gathering all the force he could muster, fought to withstand nature, to struggle for existence, to propagate his own kind, such as it was—hairy, a little stooped, and seemed with the very breath of his being intent on preserving his species, his Neanderthal world. And yet so intent, he destroys it with every step, with every act of propagation; so intent, he removes himself from it, razes it, thrusts it into oblivion. Instead of preserving his essence, he dissipates, annihilates it; instead of remaining himself, he becomes man.

Man’s behavior is similar. He gradually exhausts all the possibilities of his existence. He becomes, for instance, the man of antiquity: he creates religions and laws that he retains for some
time and then rejects in order to become a Christian. He is successively the man of the Middle Ages, the man of the Renaissance, the man of the Enlightenment. Each of these stages or forms of humanity is different, each has a different foundation, each represents a different kind of quest; each gives a different cognitive perspective and reveals a different vision of the world. For some this is a progression. For Beckett it is a regression. It is the elimination of various paths leading back to some starting point. The history of the world is in fact the history of "depopulation." It is the history of man's freeing himself from himself. Such a conviction is expressed in the very first sentence of The Lost Ones: “Abode where lost bodies roam each searching for its lost one” (p. 7)—in the French version, "son dépeupleur." The entire text seems to support this thesis. The mysterious word dépeupleur, which appears only in the sentence quoted above, may finally refer to the way of getting out of oneself, a search for a radical way of enabling one to stop being oneself. The bodies search for an exit, but in fact each searches for its lost one. They want to leave their abode, but in fact they relinquish the search, which is the essence of their life. People build and expand man's kingdom on earth, but in fact they are leading to the exhaustion of their possibilities and attributes. They want to be more human and leave behind the world of animals, but in fact they begin to turn into a species that has nothing in common with man.

Does this myth utter a truth? There can be no final answer to this question. However, as opposed to other myths created by man, it does not pretend to be ultimate and unshaken, nor does it require blind faith. On the contrary, it seems to stress its own relativity. The constant refrain-like repetition, "if this notion is maintained," suggests the observer's skepticism toward his own ideas, which is quite understandable; for if he maintains the inconstancy and relativity of everything, he cannot exclude himself from this rule, and must question his own "notions."

Finally, it is also worth considering that the vision of man's history presented in The Lost Ones has much in common with the conceptions of Giambattista Vico. It might even be said that The Lost Ones is a poetic representation of his famous argument
that all human actions lead to goals different from the original motivating force of those actions, namely, to the realization of the goals of divine Providence. And in this case, divine Providence is the will to change from one form of existence to another.