In this paper, I will discuss Samuel Beckett’s abandoned text ‘Long Observation of the Ray’ (MS 2909) and the various sources that may have informed the attempts at unmediated observation in the piece. In the manuscripts, referred to as ‘Long Observation of the Ray,’ Beckett makes repeated attempts to construct observations of a cubic or spherical chamber illuminated by a ray of light. In turn, the text then attempts to construct observations on the observing presence. Beckett uses a strictly mathematical approach to construct the text, designating set amounts of sentences to eight themes which are to be ‘observed’. Beckett took up this text twice, first in 1975 and again in 1976. In 1975, he only wrote as far as the first theme, “Observation,” in any depth. In the second attempt at the text in 1976, “Observation” is re-named as “Eye-Mind,” though again he does not get beyond this first theme and abandons the project.

This paper suggests that Beckett’s difficulties with the text lay in two areas: his attempt to construct the text mathematically and his attempt to address distinct aspects of the cylinder’s environment without succumbing to a subjective mode of observation. This paper discusses how Beckett’s problems with the text and the focus on observation may well derive from the artistic and scientific sources that informed the text. Drawing on Beckett’s interest in the visual arts and astronomical science, I will show that this prose piece stands as one of Beckett’s most extreme attempts to overcome the subject-object dichotomy whilst also providing a significant bridge between several of his later published texts.