

## Who Searches for Time: Krapp's Last Tape Re-evaluated

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In all his dramatic works, Samuel Beckett tends to relate the characters' crisis to the monster of time. Perhaps these characters are dramatically confined to one specific role they play over and over. And they are quite cognizant of this fact so they become integral parts of it. Martin Esslin reveals that "tension between the transient unending decaying nature of the material universe and the immaterial aspect of consciousness which incessantly renews itself in ever recurring self-perception plays an integral part."<sup>1</sup> They, however, give some impression to break the vicious circle of time, yet deep inside the mind of each there is a total submission to the iron clip of time.

Samuel Beckett as an Absurdist virtually treated the concept of time in almost all his plays. As he was obsessed with it since his writing of the first poem 'Horoscope' which meditated over Decarte's mathematical treatise, in Krapp's Last Tape he did not only manipulate time but also overused the newly invented (at that time) tape recorder..

Krapp's Last Tape, indeed, represents a random hypothesis that naturally classifies time into four casual parts, i.e., the ancient past, the recent present, the first present, and the second present. And the corpus of Krapp's criticism is mainly against the past in its two kinds, it is the present, however, that re-designs the fate, if any, of the main and only character, Krapp. However, one should distinguish between the

two kinds of 'present', the natural one in which Krapp finds himself quite trapped and the other one in which there is the dream of realizing the very moment when Krapp becomes aware of the surrounding time.

In Krapp's Last Tape Beckett mentions the first 'present' when he is able to confine himself to the mere listening to the various memories. His voice over year was recorded several times. Yet the speaker is still the same one though he aims to duplicate his identity. All this is carried out while Krapp is enjoying banana , probably the only fact that is suggestive of the sexual impotence, hence, mental failure.

Indeed, the format of time recorded seems to institute a concept of characterization that counterparts Krapp. The 'present' time, furthermore, has become more dominant as it entangles Krapp to stay where he is. In other words, the spatial embeddedness is much determined by the bits of time that have formed different identities of the same Krapp. It is in this way, the audience have to accept more than one Krapp and more than one time. And the feeling that juxtaposes these embodied moments works as a link that is meticulously tested by Krapp. Beckett, henceforth, manipulates every effort to fix the second 'present' though he does not simultaneously underestimates the two kinds of 'past' of the first 'present'.

The idea of the second or real 'present' is derived from the memory recorded on tape which is representative of the present moment ad hoc. And such present memory does not yield to the impact of the past as it is virtually repeated without any change or transformation. Hence, Samuel Beckett was rather infatuated by the mechanical ability to invoke the various 'bits' of time and condense them in one moment which is, in this case, the moment of listening, the moment of fake realization.

However, like any of his full length plays, Beckett's Krapp's Last Tape presents a static crisis of indefinite listening to pseudo or rather artificial selves recorded. And this process continues infinitely exactly like the indefinite waiting in his

masterpiece Waiting for Godot. The playwright, therefore, changes the tempo of the play into something quite proportionate to the various speeches of the tape recorder. He hypothetically attempts to let Krapp revolve around time spheres which are already delineated. Perhaps, he seeks some outlet when he makes Krapp enjoy listening to the past; yet knowing that he probably has listened to that some indefinite numbers of time would precisely leave no doubt that Krapp's joy becomes bare, mechanical, horrible and barren. He, in this way, is looking at his other selves in an attempt to find out who he 'was' or who he 'is'. One, yet, is not daring enough to ask whether Krapp ever likes to know who he 'will' be'. James Knowlson, in this respect, presumes that "Krapp's Last Tape pursues an explanation or rather a further development of the theme of man's basic dualism that has already been embarked upon in Murphy."<sup>2</sup> This suggests that the idea of future is always eliminated due to Beckett's pessimistic view. And in this way, one can easily trace the impact of Marcel Proust's Le Chercher de Temps Verdu in which the most impressive part of time is the present.

Krapp's identity is, therefore, correlated with the mechanism of time.<sup>3</sup> And Beckett is hard at work to find out the various identities which can be supposedly three, the id, the ego and the pseudo-ego. However, the sense of impotence works always as a common factor that relates these identities because, Robert Brustein believes, "life is a string of aimless, inconsequential and momentous events".<sup>4</sup> All three identities seem to have been triggered or activated by Krapp's 'voluntary memory' which Beckett, quite depending on the Proustian classification, calls an "application of a concordance to the old Testament of the individual."<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps, impotence which is an apparent factor in the play is metaphysically attributed to the fact that 'Krapp is incredibly ancient'.<sup>6</sup> That is the reason why he finds it quite difficult or futile to cope with the present. Krapp is indeed alien among the present circumstances which are rather mechanically

dominated by sound repetition of the tape recorder. So Krapp can not depart further from his 'hermetic cell'. He is quite busy examining his keys, books, vocal organs, gurgling whiskey down his throat and toothlessly devouring or rather sucking banana. All this is because, Eugene Webb believes, that "the Krapp of the present does not even remember the language of the man he once was."<sup>7</sup>

So the two factors seem to divulge considerably domination over the present Krapp who uncovers a desperate attempt to cope with the constant flow of time. These factors are habit and memory. Of course, the influence of Proust is quite pertinent because Beckett, like Proust, believes also that life is a habit. Or rather life is a succession of habits, since the individual is a succession of individuals; the world being a projection of the individual's consciousness...the pact must be continually renewed... the creation of the world did not take place once and for all time, but takes place everyday.<sup>8</sup>

And, indeed, it is rather impossible to separate the habit from the memory as the latter becomes 'the bowl' of the former. So memory records every habit and transforms it with time into a 'self' of some kind. In this way, man becomes quite consistent of multiple 'selves' that all serve the outspoken purpose of showing the heart of man's matter. And any attempt to look back on past life is to see the various selves made through habit or habits we have assumed. Yet, naturally, one does not always manage to invoke the tape of memories as to remember the minute details. Here one becomes unable sometimes, if not impotent, to recall memories. That is the reason why Krapp assumes the aid of the tape recorder to hinder any possible mental weakness to maim the stream of memories. This, however, explains the joy represented in the shadowy smile he draws on his face; and also explains the coherent insistence to stay around to do nothing except listening to the tape.

which Krapp seems to live. In this regard, Krapp seems to move in time according to certain meticulous plan so as to come to a certain realization or rather cognizance that enhances his feeling of loneliness, isolation and boredom. Perhaps it is the first time that Krapp feels trapped in the net of time. This is quite clear through the sense of repetition one can obviously notice recorded on the tape. In other words, 'the present Krapp' Eugene Webb thinks, "seems to feel the same way".<sup>10</sup>

However, this embeddedness in the element of time does in fact form the motif in all the literary works of Beckett. In Godot, for instance, characters are fighting against time that does not change much, in Not I the female character denies time in which she was and so forth. So any embeddedness has virtually hinders Krapp from moving forward or backward but to stay only where he can listen and symbolically see or imagine himself. The stay in the valid and authentically Proustian present moment is the same that let Vladimir and Estragon stay on the same spot on stage without being able to leave.

Krapp: Thrity-nine today, sound as a bell, apart from my old weakness, and intellectually I have now every reason to suspect at the...(hesitates)... crest of the wave – or thereabouts. Celebrate the awful occasion, as in recent years, quietly at the wine-house. Not a soul. Sat before the fire with closed eyes, separating the grains from the husks. Jotted down a few notes, on the back of an envelop. Good to be back in my den, in my old rags.

(p. 11-12)

Beckett in this respect seems to create some strange correspondence between the present moment and the spotlight technicality used to show the character on the stage. This character, therefore, can not leave the stage as he ca not escape the present moment because in this case it is his existence, his life and his sense of survival. Hence, leaving light of the stage is symbolically diving into some terrifying darkness where he may be tortured by the omnipresent ruthless people. So such

characters worry about the sense of time as they worry about the sense of survival, though, indeed, they seem to think of survival more than they live it up. Besides, everything else related to this life is also barren. And this interprets the sense of emotional and sexual impotence Krapp suffers from. Partly this impotence is created in him as his thought mainly concentrate on one preoccupation: time. So his emotional sexuality is suppressed and he is let to live in a "sterile, self-centered abandon as he reads his own book."<sup>11</sup>

James Knowlson, however, believes that Krapp bears witness to the separation of mind and body, and yet, though he regards the mind as spirit alien to the body, he tries with the only instrument that he possesses, namely his mind, to understand this separation and to effect a possible reconciliation between the two. He can, of course, do this only by seeing the two elements in terms that are comprehensible to the mind, that is as rational and irrational.<sup>12</sup>

Of course, this separation is so much enhanced by the already separated time that annoys Krapp with its nagging insistence :

Krapp:(pause) Be again, be again. (Pause) All that old misery. (Pause) Once wasn't enough for you. (pause)....

(p. 9)

Yet this separation becomes a pre-requisite for Krapp as it is the only possible medium by which he achieves the embodiment of the past although Hugh Kenner believes that the play "feels, however, like any Beckettian present."<sup>13</sup> The past is not and should not be conceived as a vital part that forms the present. Rather it is the sole preoccupation that changes with time into an "object of a poignant, yet vacuous nostalgia which is expressed by Krapp as he stands on his familiar threshold situation".<sup>14</sup> This nostalgia is only depicted through the return to the repetitive and auto-citational devices like the tape

recorder. Yet it is believed that Krapp's Last Tape "demonstrates how little is kept in such a 'faithful' recording. For Krapp to listen to the tape of himself as a man of thirty-nine is to reveal clearly his ironic non-coincidence with himself."<sup>15</sup>

However, Beckett's stay with the present is mostly determined by the necessity of 'keeping going' because in spite of the character's heavy reliance on the past he is busy with the present. Beckett thinks that the present is "the Proustian moment of insight which was like the moment of conversion".<sup>16</sup> But the present is bound to make the dramatic situation quite static as it is manipulated to uncover or review the past and all its relevant happenings. E. Webb thinks that Krapp is a person who through various choices at different times, has made his life into a prison and who is driven in old age to the realization that he is about to die without having really lived.<sup>17</sup>

Therefore this realization indeed gives him very clear willingness to capture the present without any attempt to leave the past. The past is used as a proof of his own vitality, sexual potency and lively participation in the moody affairs of life, though G.C. Barnard does not go in line with this considering Krapp a "disillusioned old man looking back on a life of failure".<sup>18</sup>

Krapp, hence, tries hard to stick to the present and to rebuild it on the basis of the shattered memories of the past although, E. Webb believes that "Krapp of the present does not even remember the language of the man he once was."<sup>19</sup> Krapp's remembrance of the past is rather adhered to by the fact of his 'voluntary memory' responsible for reactivating the past with its 'special freshness and force.'<sup>20</sup> And this is done rather to recollect or re-amass the shattered memories and with them the shattered selves. Krapp is a keen concentration on egoism that is rather overlapping sometimes although Beckett through the subtle use of the tape-recorder counterpoises these parts of the self or selves. He is, nevertheless, hard at work to separate them, hence working contradictingly as if he enjoys the game of separating and amassing the parts of the human self. He is, in

other words, dallying with the hypothetical synopsis of psychology. And this psychological game is only achieved through the attempt of Beckett to push far or close the parts of time. That is why Krapp may appear at a certain time a creature of the past and at other times a creature of the present. In all cases, however, his proof of the unification of the two or more Krapps engenders the possibility of his attempt to revitalize his consciousness of the two parts of time, the past and the present. Accordingly, Krapp seems to reduce all other characters, specially women into a retrospect where they fade or flourish as memories in his mind. He, nevertheless, tries hard to capture the moment where he can balance between past memories and present impotence. That is the reason why he sticks to the tape-recorder as a device that juxtaposes the two times. His reliance on the recorder, therefore, has become a kind of addiction, like that of his addiction to banana eating though Beckett's characters generally have no indisposition to vary their food. Critics, in this respect, tend to associate the banana with some phallus symbol which is always present in Krapp's mind probably to make up for the impotence of the present which is rather inescapable.

At the same time, his memory seems to be speculative when he remembers certain things:

Krapp: ....The dark nurse...(He raises his head, broods, reads) Slight improvement in bowel condition....Hm....Memorable...What?(He peers closer) Equinox, memorable equinox.(He raises his head, stares blankly front puzzled) memorable equinox...?

(p.11)

And impotence is only associated with his sexual vitality but with his emotional life in general. E. Webb, for instance thinks that "his emotional life remains undeveloped and consequently infantile." Having been afraid to ever get deeply involved with emotional side of life, he has never learned how



to deal with it except crudely by either suppressing it altogether (last fancies...keep 'em under) or by wallowing in it in sterile, self-centered abandon. Whether he realizes it or not, it is the story of his own failure to live.<sup>21</sup>

Hence, any possible connection with time is bound to make the character grapple confusion as he/she has innately lost any control over the recognition whether he or she lives in the present or the past. Peter Gidal, in this regard, strips Beckett's characters of any such connection although Dieter Wellershoff believes that this connection is done through a mechanical device, the tape-recorder, which turns to be the 'spoken diary'.<sup>22</sup> He believes that it takes time, or, rather, the narrative being enunciated here is that it takes time to construct an inexpressivity, or even the possibility of expressivity as a concept.<sup>23</sup>

Therefore, this 'inexpressivity' is definitely bound to time which appears to yield to no stop although in the case of Krapp it slows down and temporarily halts only to restart delineating the infinite turning. It is, Ross Chambers believes, "moving forward even more slowly and as it moves closer still, it can only get still closer, without however ever reaching the absolute stop".<sup>24</sup>

## NOTES

1. Martin Esslin (ed.) Twentieth Century Views: Beckett. London: Printice-Hall Inc., 1965, p.7
2. James Knowlson. Light and Darkness in the Theater of Samuel Beckett. London: Turret Books, 1972,p.21
3. "that double-headed monster of damnation and salvation"  
Quoted in Lawrence Graver and Raymond Federman (eds.)  
Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage. London: Routlage and Kegan Paul, 1979, p39
4. Ibid., p. 39
5. Ibid., p. 192
6. Ibid., p. 193
7. Eugene Webb. The Plays of Samuel Beckett. London: Peter Owen, 1972, p.67
8. Proust, quoted in Webb, p. 68
9. Ibid., p. 68
10. Ibid., p. 71
11. Ibid., p. 75
12. J. Knowlson. Light and Darkness, p. 21
13. Hugh Kenner. A Reader's Guide to the Plays of Samuel Beckett London: Faber & Faber, 1964, p. 129
14. Op.cit., p.27
15. Steven Conner. Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text. New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988, p. 128
16. Hugh Kenner, A Reader's Guide, p. 134
17. Eugene Webb, The Plays... p.66
18. G.C.Barnard. Samuel Beckett: A New Approach. London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1971, p.113

19. Op.cit., p.67

20. Ibid., p.67

21. Ibid., p. 75-6

22. Martin Esslin, Twentieth Century Views. p. 105

23. Peter Gidal .Understanding Beckett. London: Macmillan Press, 1988, p. 15-16

24. Op.cit., p. 159

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8. Knowlson, James. Light and Darkness in the Theater of Samuel Beckett. London: Turret Books, 1972
9. Webb, Eugene. The Plays of Samuel Beckett. London: Peter Owen, 1972