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Voluntary and involuntary memory in Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*

Abstract. Even though *Krapp's Last Tape* presents a single character on the stage, it does not seem to adhere to the typical characteristics of a monodrama since, in fact, we become acquainted with three different Krapps. On the one hand, there is the 69-year-old Krapp visible on the stage, celebrating his birthday, and on the other, there are two more Krapps, who are not present physically, but only aurally – the first one existing as a voice on a recording made thirty years ago, and the second mentioned by the voice. These are his alter egos preserved on some tapes from the past. The drama presents the sameness and the change of Krapp over several years. At the same time, it deals with the concepts of voluntary and involuntary memory which are explained by Beckett in his *Proust* essay. The first kind of memory is dominated by a person's will to preserve certain things for the future. The remembrances, thus saved, are static and do not change with the passage of time. The tapes indicate what Krapp decided to commemorate in the past. As the play progresses the clash between the past, as he wanted to remember it, and the past as he actually recalls it, becomes evident. The present Krapp does not recall certain things, which were of vital importance to the past Krapp. The dynamic interplay of voluntary and involuntary memory seems to be one of the most intriguing features of the drama.

Keywords: Beckett, *Krapp's Last Tape*, voluntary and involuntary memory.

Krapp's Last Tape (1958), originally entitled *Magee Monologue*, was written after Samuel Beckett had heard Pat Magee reading fragments of his fiction during a radio broadcast. The play was inspired by “the actor's distinctive whispering with its evocation of unrelieved weariness” (Cohn, 165). This short drama was later translated by Beckett himself into French, the title being changed to *La dernière bande*. Similarly, the German version of the play, co-directed by Beckett, was entitled *Das letzte Band*. The omission of Krapp's name in the German and French versions is indicative of Beckett's meticulous attention to detail, and his perfect command of several languages, all of which enabled him to take advantage of the specific quality of a given language to create concrete associations and meanings. The online *New Oxford American Dictionary* defines “scrap” as “a small piece or amount of something, esp. one that is left over after the greater part has been used”, and thus the protagonist's name, indicated only in the English version, may bring to mind

associations with scrap, which skillfully describes Krapp's impoverished identity and ongoing deterioration. What the play actually presents are scraps of information about Krapp as he is at present, at the age of sixty-nine, as well as bits and pieces telling us what he was like at the age of thirty-nine and even earlier, the latter being stored on the tapes he recorded in the past.

The play lacks the status of true monodrama even though on the stage we see only one person – Krapp celebrating his birthday and continuing his habit of commemorating this day by producing a recording indicating the most important events of the passing year. The structure and the overall meaning of the play are based on a number of binary oppositions: listening and not listening, separation and reconciliation, sameness and change, sound and silence, the Manichean duality of matter and spirit reflected in a specific use of light and darkness, as well as the presence of the sixty-nine-year-old Krapp and his past discernible in the metaphorical presence of the thirty-nine-year-old Krapp, whose voice we hear from a recording made thirty years ago. The last of these binary oppositions is the one presenting the past as Krapp wanted to remember it (the recordings), and the past as he actually remembers it now, that is the difference between voluntary and involuntary memory. The distinction between the two kinds of memory was introduced by Beckett in his *Proust* essay (1931), an essay about which Lee (196) writes: “Beckett’s *Proust* has the double fascination of throwing light on Proust while revealing Beckett himself ... *A la Recherche du temps perdu* serves as a sort of Rorschach test in which the young critic discovers his own fetishes and his own *bêtes noires*.” *Proust* is not really so much a discussion and interpretation of the famous French novel but rather an investigation of Beckett’s own ideas concerning “Time cancer” and its attributes, “Habit and Memory” (Beckett 1987, 18). Writing about “the double headed monster of damnation and salvation – Time” (11), Beckett concedes:

There is no escape from hours and days. Neither from to-morrow nor from yesterday. There is no escape from yesterday because yesterday has deformed us, or been deformed by us. The mood is of no importance. Deformation has taken place. Yesterday is not a milestone that has been passed, but a daystone on the beaten track of years, and irremediably a part of us, within us, heavy and dangerous. We are not only more weary because of yesterday, we are other, no longer what we were before the calamity of yesterday.... The aspirations of yesterday were valid for yesterday’s ego, not for today’s.

... But what is attainment? The identification of the subject with the object of his desire. The subject has died – and perhaps many times – on the way. For subject B to be disappointed by the banality of an object chosen by subject A is as illogical as to expect one’s hunger to be dissipated by the spectacle of Uncle eating his dinner. (13-14)

Beckett perceives human life as a constant struggle between the dull Boredom of a controlling Habit and the immediate perception of things as they really are, intrinsically connected with suffering, which is a punishment for “the eternal sin of having been born” (67). Memory, as described in the *Proust* essay, is strictly connected with, and subject to, the laws of Habit. Since all living

is Habit,¹ Beckett warns us that this filters our perception and distorts our view of reality. For Beckett, memory becomes conditioned through perception. Rather than serve us as a moment of discovery and contemplation of reality, it becomes distorted through awareness. “Strictly speaking we can only remember what has been registered by our extreme inattention and stored in that ultimate and inaccessible dungeon of our being to what Habit does not possess the key” (31). This kind of memory is called involuntary memory by Beckett, and it is contrasted with voluntary memory, which “is of no use as an instrument of evocation, and provides an image far removed from the real” (14), and which, furthermore, “is not memory, but the application of a concordance to the Old Testament of the individual” (32). Voluntary memory is

the uniform memory of intelligence; and it can be relied on to reproduce for our gratified inspection those impressions of the past that were consciously and intelligently formed. It has no interest in the mysterious element of inattention that colours our most commonplace experiences. It presents the past in a monochrome. The images it chooses are as arbitrary as those chosen by imagination, and are equally remote from reality. Its action has been compared by Proust to that of turning the leaves of an album of photographs. The material that it furnishes contains nothing of the past, merely a blurred and uniform projection once removed of our anxiety and opportunism – that is to say, nothing. (32)

The binary opposition of voluntary and involuntary memory is the structural kernel stone of *Krapp's Last Tape*. On the one hand, there is the past as he wanted to remember it (the recordings) while, on the other, there is the past as he actually remembers it (indicated by his reactions while listening to the tape). It could be argued that the play presents two distinctive moments in Krapp's existence. While the Krapp visible on the stage exists in the present, the one whose voice is heard from the tapes belongs to the past of thirty years ago. The latter's existence is limited to its aural aspect solely, and depends on the presence of the tape recorder, which enables us to hear the recollections and remarks of the younger Krapp. In this context it seems justified to concentrate on the tape recorder, a machine on the meaning of which Beckett made some remarks in his *Theatre Notebook*, written during rehearsals at the Schiller-Theater Werkstatt, in Berlin in 1969, featuring Martin Held. His memoranda read:

Tape-recorder companion of his solitude. Masturbatory agent ... Anger and tenderness of Krapp towards the object which through language <becomes> has become the 'alternen Idioten' ['stupid bastard'] or [erasure] the girl on the lake.

Krapp-tape-recorder relationship both fundamental and almost impossible to convey through the acting without descending to the level of the sentimental.

¹ “Breathing is habit. Life is habit. Or rather life is a succession of habits, since the individual is a succession of individuals” (1970, 19).

Tendency of a solitary person to enjoy affective relationships with objects, in particular here with the tape recorder. Smiles, looks, reproaches, caresses, taps, exclamations ... A little throughout. Never forced. Like many lonely people he tends to have an emotional rapport with material objects.² (Beckett 1992, 181, 205, 248)

The first of the above remarks indicates that the tape recorder is an object which, in a sense, becomes the Krapp from the past, or the girl recalled in the farewell to love episode. In this sense the machine revives the past and makes it alive in the present, as it were. On the other hand, however, the inanimate machine is the only thing which the sixty-nine-year-old Krapp has as his companion, and thus the protagonist's terrible solitude is underlined.

When the play begins we see Krapp

Sitting at the table, facing front,<> a wearish old man: Krapp.... White face.<> Disordered grey hair. Unshaven. Very near-sighted (but unspectacled.) Hard of hearing. Cracked voice. Distinctive intonation. Laborious walk. (3)

Having gone to the cubby-hole three times to bring the ledger, the tin boxes containing reels of recorded tape and, finally, the tape recorder, he sits down again:

KRAPP: *(Briskly.) Ah! (He bends over the ledger, turns the pages, finds the entry he wants, reads) Box ... three ... spool ... five. (He raises his head and stares towards the front. With relish.) Spool! (Pause.) Spooooo! (Happy smile. Pause. He bends over the table, starts peering and poking at the boxes.) Box ... three ... three ... four ... two ... (with surprise) nine! Good God! ... seven ... ah! Little rascal! (He takes up box, peers at it.) Box three. (He lays it on the table, opens it, peers at spools.) Spool ... (he peers at ledger) ... five ... (he peers at spools) ... five ... five ... ah! The little scoundrel! (He takes out a spool, peers at it.) Spool five. (He [stands up,] lays it on the table, puts it back with the others, takes up the spool.) Box three, spool five. (He places spool on machine, looks up. With relish.) Spooooo! (Happy smile. He bends {threads tape} on machine, rubs his hands.) Ah! (He peers at ledger, reads entry at foot of page:) Mother at rest at last ... Hm ... The black ball (He raises his head, stares blankly front. Puzzled.) Black ball? ... (He peers again at the ledger, reads) The dark nurse ... (He raises his head, broods, peers again at the ledger, 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? ... (Pause. He shrugs his shoulders, peers again at ledger, reads) Farewell to – (he turns page [and raises his head]) – love. (4)*

² The typographical note states: "Text between square brackets [] has been added to the original English text. Text between pointed brackets {} has been revised. A pair of angle brackets<> indicates that a section of text has been cut from the original English text" (Knowlson 1992, 2).

Even though Krapp has been looking for a concrete tape, much of the description on the ledger seems to be strange to him, and thus he is puzzled. At the age of thirty-nine he wanted to preserve by means of voluntary memory his mother's death – the black nurse – but also the black ball and the memorable equinox, the inscriptions about which now puzzle him. Thirty years ago he recorded the following text:

throwing a ball for a little white dog as chance would have it. I happened to look up and there it was.... I sat on for a few moments with the ball in my hand and the dog yelping and pawing at me. *(Pause.)* Moments. Her moments, my moments. *(Pause.)* The dog's moments. *(Pause.)* In the end I held it out to him and he took it in his mouth, gently, gently. A small, old, black, hard, solid rubber ball. *(Pause.)* I shall feel it, in my hand, until my dying day. *(Pause.)* But I gave it to the dog. *(Pause.)* (7)

Thirty years ago he deemed the scene with the dog to be very important, he thought that he would feel the ball in his hand forever, yet now the inscription on the ledger does not ring a bell. The situation with the memorable equinox is similar. In the past he said:

Spiritually a year of profound gloom and indigence until the memorable night in March, at the end of the jetty, in the howling wind, never to be forgotten, when I saw the whole thing.

([Impatient reaction from KRAPP])

The vision at last. This I fancy is what I have chiefly to *([Violent reaction from KRAPP.])* record this evening, against the day when my work will be done and perhaps no place left in my memory, warm or cold, for the miracle that *(hesitates)*. *([KRAPP thumbs on table.])*... for the fire that set it alight. What I suddenly saw then was this, that the belief I had been going on all my life, namely – *(KRAPP switches off impatiently, winds tape forward, [mechanical with gabble, 2 seconds,] switches on again.)*

great granite rocks the foam flying up in the light of the lighthouse and the wind-gauge spinning like a propeller, clear to me at last that the dark I have always struggled to keep under it in reality my most – *(KRAPP curses, switches off, winds tape forward, [mechanical gabble, 2 seconds], switches on again.)* – unshatterable association until my dissolution of storm and night with the light of the understanding and the fire – *(KRAPP curses louder, switches off, winds tape forward, [mechanical with gabble, 4 seconds], switches on again, [lowers head].)* – my face in her breasts and my hand on her. We lay without moving. But under us all moved, and moved us gently, up and down, and from side to side. (7-8)

Thirty years ago he thought the memorable equinox to be of extreme importance. Now the recording referring to this event infuriates him and he switches it off and rewinds the tape to get to the last point of the ledger entry – “farewell to love”: “I said again I thought it was hopeless and no good going on and she agreed without opening her eyes” (8).

Having listened to the “farewell to love” episode, Krapp goes to the cubby-hole for a second time to have a drink and then he starts to record a new tape: “Just been listening to that stupid bastard I took myself for thirty years ago, hard to believe I was ever as bad as that” (9). It is worth

mentioning that on the tape recorded then, he said nearly the same about himself “at least ten or twelve years” earlier:

Hard to believe I was ever that young whelp. The voice! Jesus! And the aspirations! (*Brief laugh {tape alone}.*) ([KRAPP looks at tape-recorder.])

And the resolutions! (*Brief laugh in which KRAPP joins, [without moving].*)

To drink less, in particular. (*Brief laugh of KRAPP alone.*) (5)

Looking from the perspective of both the thirty-nine and the sixty-nine-year-old Krapp, the resolution to drink less, taken by the twenty-nine-year-old Krapp, is ridiculous, as indicated both by the visit to the Wine-house in the past, and his going twice to the cubby-hole in the present. The sameness of Krapp despite the passage of time, visible in his addiction to drink and women, is balanced by the simultaneous change of certain elements of his psyche, thus reflecting the already quoted sentences from the *Proust* essay: “We are not only more weary because of yesterday, we are other, no longer what we were before the calamity of yesterday” and “The aspirations of yesterday were valid for yesterday’s ego, not for today’s” (13 and 14).

Discussing the drama as “the alteration of solipsistic monologues,” Aston points out: “The disjunction between the ‘I’ present and the ‘I’ past constitutes the negation of a unified character history” (163). Krapp himself must be aware of the discontinuity of his self since on the tape he is recording on his 69th birthday he avoids using the “I” pronoun in English and French versions, as well as in the authorised German version (Libera, note 78, 647). This leads us back to Beckett’s essay on Proust, where he wrote about the novel’s narrator:

... and he thinks how absurd is our dream of a Paradise with retention of personality, since our life is a succession of Paradises successively denied, that the only true Paradise is the Paradise that has been lost ...
... and we breathe the true air of Paradise, of the only Paradise that is not the dream of a madman, the Paradise that has been lost. (26 and 74)

At the age of thirty-nine Krapp rejected love in favour of another paradise – his opus magnum. This paradise, however, did not materialize either, as his words on the present birthday indicate: “Seventeen copies sold, of which eleven at trade price to free circulating libraries beyond the seas” (9). He finishes the present recording with the words “Be again, be again. (*Pause.*) All that old misery. (*Pause.*) Once wasn’t enough for you. (*Pause.*) Lie down across her” (9). Who or what do the words “be again” refer to? Are they a comment on himself, his beloved or the moments on the punt while parting with the girl? It is not easy to answer these questions, and the replies may vary. What appears to be clear, however, is that he seems to want to relive his past, the past which he rejected thirty years ago. In a letter to Alan Schneider, his friend who directed *Krapp’s Last Tape* and many other plays written by him, Beckett wondered what would have happened “if instead of sacrificing the girl in the boat for the *opus ... magnum* he had done the reverse” (Harmon 57).

Discussing the black-and-white juxtaposition in *Krapp's Last Tape* in reference to Manichean philosophy, Knowlson argues:

Krapp is only too ready to associate woman with the darker side of existence and he clearly sees her as appealing to the dark, sensual side of man's nature, distracting him from the cultivation of the understanding and the spirit. Krapp's recorded renunciation of love is then no mere casual end of an affair. (Knowlson 1976, 59-60)

After finishing the recording on the day of his 69th birthday, Krapp turns on the tape from thirty years ago and listens to it again attentively and motionlessly:

TAPE – gooseberries, she said. 'I said again I thought it was hopeless and no good going on and she agreed, without opening her eyes. (Pause.) I asked her to look at me and after a few moments – (pause) – after a few moments she did, but the eyes just slits, because of the glare. 'I bent over her to get them in the shadow and they opened. (Pause. Low.) Let me in. (Pause.) We drifted in among flags and stuck. The way they went down, sighing, before the stem! (Pause.) I lay down across her with my face in her breasts and my hand on her. We lay without moving. But under us all moved, and moved us, gently, up and down, and from side to side. (26)

A remark must be made here about the directorial change introduced by Beckett during the Théâtre Récamier production of the drama, stated in Jean Martin's annotated script: "after 'Nous restions là, couchés, sans remuer' ('We lay there without moving'), Jean Martin noted, 'il a la tête dans l'appareil. La joue contre l'appareil' ('he has his head on the recorder, his cheek against the machine')" (Quoted in Knowlson 1992, 33). The tape recorder, preserving the happy memory of the moments spent with the girl friend, in a sense becomes the beloved. Having described his rejection of love, a moving moment of tenderness in the past, Krapp continues his recording, now referring to the present moment:

(Pause. {Face frozen till end.})

Past midnight. Never knew such silence. The earth might be uninhabited.

(Pause.)

Here I end this reel. Box – (pause) – three, spool – (pause) – five. (Pause.)

Perhaps my best years are gone. When there was a chance for happiness. But I wouldn't want them back.

Not with the fire in me now. No, I wouldn't want them back.

(Krapp motionless staring before him. The tape runs on in silence. [Slow fade of stage light and cubby-hole light till only the light [that of 'eye'] of tape-recorder.] (Curtain.) (10)

The stage directions added in the Schiller Theater production, referring to the fade out of all the lights except the magic eye of the tape recorder add, it seems, an extra significance to the

play. Thus the tape recorder, the tool by which voluntary memory becomes obvious, dominates the stage image now. It must be remembered, however, that the phrase “I wouldn’t want them back” is repeated twice. It might be argued that Krapp repeats this phrase twice at the age of thirty-nine because he wants to convince himself that he really means it. He wants to preserve in the voluntary memory the conviction that choosing the opus magnum and rejecting love is the right decision. Taking into account the behaviour of the sixty-nine-year-old Krapp, it becomes obvious that his involuntary memory has preserved a different opinion. This outlook may be supported both by his search for the “farewell to love” episode in the recording, listening to it twice, motionlessly and attentively, and finally putting his cheek against the machine. Most critics agree that the final image of the drama presents a beaten man who regrets having devoted himself to the pursuit of intellectual fulfilment over love. Knowlson contends that Krapp’s life is “ruined”: “the final confrontation between the younger and the older Krapp evokes, then, more than mere sadness at the inevitable decline that occurs in man. For Krapp shows us a man who is torn by conflicting forces and whose life has been ruined by this conflict” (1973, 90). Similarly, Morrison (64-65) contends

It is all too clear, both to the motionless man on the stage and to the audience, that Krapp *does* want them back; that he forfeited the only real fire he ever had (that woman moving gently with him) for the sake of an illusory fire of the imagination which did not produce an opus magnum but rather left him with merely a narrated residue of himself, repudiated yet intensely desired.

Katharine Worth (98) has labelled *Krapp’s Last Tape* a memory play, and rightly so. The play presents a kind of dialogue, as it were, of two (or more precisely three) Krapps. This dialogue can also be viewed as an exchange between voluntary memory (the recordings) and involuntary memory (the recollections of Krapp present on the stage). Sabine Kozdon (179-180), on the other hand, in her book *Memory in Samuel Beckett’s Plays. A Psychological Approach*, contends that *Krapp’s Last Tape* is not a memory play, and furthermore concedes that “...Krapp’s memory, which is present in two forms, seems to suggest a comparison with Proust’s *mémoire volontaire* and *mémoire involontaire*. Such a comparison is problematic, however, as no *mémoire involontaire* as defined by Proust can be found in this play” (179). This article may be considered a proof that this critic’s opinions are unjustified.

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