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Remembering as Re-reading: Time, Memory and Stages of Identity in *Krapp's Last Tape*

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Abstract: This paper is based on *Krapp's Last Tape*, a play by Samuel Beckett in which the attempt is to focus on Krapp's act of listening to his past as an act of re-reading an old text, once authored by his own self that has undergone changes with time. Throughout the play, we notice Krapp reviewing his past, recalling his relationship with his mother and other women, his early aspirations and ambitions with which he can hardly identify at present. There are instances when he forgets his memories, times when he interrupts the older voices by rewinding or forwarding the tape recorder, or when he cannot even recognize the words he had used once upon a time. Time plays a crucial role in separating the various stages of Krapp's life, in positing obstructions to memory, thereby opening up newer regions for multiple interpretations, leading Krapp towards activating his imagination in enabling him to read newer meanings into the gaps. To re-read is also to repair, to re-create the events from the past one can no longer change. Krapp tries to repair his past as he struggles to close the distance among the several splits of his identity and reconcile the separated facets of his life and in doing so only experiences another form of failure, much evident in reading. The re-reading of a text reshape the identity of an individual as well as the individual's act of reading takes him to that point of certainty where he can gratify his desires or at least attempt to do so.

Keywords: Time, Memory, Author, Reader-response, Reading, Text, Self, Identity

> Time adds something new to being, something absolutely new. But the newness of spring times that flower in the instant is already heavy with all the spring times lived through. (Lévinas 283)

Martin Esslin (1980) puts forth an extremely relevant question in his seminal text *The Theatre of the Absurd*: "Can we ever be sure that the human beings we meet are the same today as they were yesterday?" (51) Likewise, can we ever be sure that the texts read today will reveal similar meanings to us tomorrow? Reader-response theory engages in the acts of reading where reading is a reciprocal transaction between the reader and the text, rather than a one-directional flow of information from the text to the reader. Literary work, as Roland Barthes puts it, "is experienced only in an activity of production" (Barthes 1977, 157). Drawing the ancient meaning of the word 'text', he asserts that the text is a 'spun phenomenon' made up of 'quotations, references, echoes'. The text must be conceived of, not as a product but rather as production, an active process such that it acquires the status of a polysemic space in which several meanings intersect, thereby casting off the monological, legal status of signification. On his first visit to Tokyo, Barthes mentions: "to visit a place for the first time is thereby to begin to write it: the address not being written, it must establish its own writing" (Barthes 1983, 36). In a similar way, a text ought to invite the reader to draw his temporary structures, patterns and meanings upon the text and a text should be produced as much by the reader as by the language of the text itself. In this paper, I would like to focus on one of Samuel Beckett's memory plays, *Krapp's Last Tape*, first published in Evergreen Review (Summer 1958) and first performed at the Royal Court Theatre on 28th October 1958 in which Krapp's remembering and reviewing of his early days almost become an act of re-reading a text, once authored by Krapp himself who has now stepped into the role of a reader. His experience of listening to his voice from the past, his silences and pauses, his forgetting and anticipations, restlessness and patience, resonate the experience of reading a text. The machine which reveals 'memories' of Krapp can be read as a text that Krapp returns to

annually on his birthdays, drawing his own patterns and reading newer meaning into the gaps.

Memory is figured as a force in Krapp's otherwise fragile and worn out life – he always returns to those words on every birthday. For Krapp, to start a new year of his life, he has to confront his past first, no matter whether or not he remembers it correctly. This also means that Krapp is afraid of forgetting his past, of losing his memories of loved ones, a reason why he cannot proceed without listening to his old voices time and again. This fear of forgetting the past as well as the inability of get rid of them creates a menacing force, epitomized in the form of the tape recorder. Krapp turns out to be more miserable without his tape, without the voices which have become a necessity for him. It is not the return of the memories that count so much as does the complex net of memoried states of being – the simultaneity of past and present, the multiple modes of repetition and recall, the plurality of self-perception that creates and constructs identity. The alternate engaging and escaping, which is so integral to the act of reading, heightens the emotional attachment and detachment, separation and reconciliation in Krapp's relationship with the women of his life like his mother, Bianca, and the unnamed girl he once made love to. It also brings out his struggle to reconcile with his own self and to close the split in his identity that the tape recorder re-confirms as it continues to play in the end.

With the constant flow of time, it is never possible for us to attain identification with our older selves at any one particular moment. Thus, we have several Krapps at several points of time: Krapp the enthusiast, and Krapp the old, failed man; Krapp the memory box from the past, and Krapp the banana-eating man on stage; Krapp the author, and Krapp the reader. Wolfgang Iser (1988) writes: "The convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence, and this convergence can never be precisely pinpointed, but must always remain virtual, as it is not to be identified either with the reality of the text or with the individual disposition of the reader" (189). The voices from the past come into being only when it is heard and realized by the hearer. The voices once-spoken cannot be completely identical to the text (voices, now heard) since the text takes on life only when it is read

(heard, in this case) and thus realised. However, there are instances of identification with the past self as found in the state of loneliness that has come not with age but has always shrouded him all his life. One of his younger voices speaks with the same sense of solitude as of now: "Celebrated the awful occasion, as in recent years, quietly at the Wine-house. Not a soul. Sat before the fire with closed eyes, separating the grain from the husks" (Beckett 1960, 217). This is further emphasized by the interplay of light and dark on stage, "With all these darkness around, I feel less lonely" (Beckett 1960, 217) and Krapp's repeated looking into the dark where a dead one or death itself lurks. The playing of the tape or the return of the voices from the past corresponds to the return of many of Krapp's scattered memories and scattered selves from the past.

In a Beckettian world, time is never chronological; every day is identical to the other such that one cannot tell apart yesterday from tomorrow. The flow of time makes us stand face to face with the nature of our self, which being a subject to this constant change of time is itself in a constant flux and thus, outside our grip. And yet, there is no escape from 'yesterday' since, as Beckett himself puts it in his 1931 essay on Proust: "Yesterday is not a milestone that has been passed, but a daystone on the beaten track of the years, and irremediably part of us, within us, heavy and dangerous" (Beckett 1957, 2-3). Time stands in between the old and the new, between yesterday and today, conjuring up memories not as they were but the way they appear now. Thus, the meanings fail to hold onto their original self, never original enough and evoke newer interpretations when recalled again. Wolfgang Iser (1988) writes, "Whatever we have read sinks into our memory and is foreshortened. It may later be evoked again and set against a different background with the result that the reader is enabled to develop hitherto unforeseeable connections" (192). This is particularly true in the context of reading a text more than once, for the second or a third time. Krapp listens to his old voices from the past multiple times – voices read time and again at different points of his life, voices to which he returns every year. It is his inability to grasp the meaning of his once-woven texts in its totality, the failure of attaining completeness in the act of reading, the desire to seek newer meanings which might justify his present disposition that drives Krapp toward a second reading. No

single reading can grasp or tie to a single meaning and thus, the reader goes on to seek multiple meanings in a second reading, that Iser calls, is nothing but an 'advance retrospection', the repeated looking back to establish the 'virtual dimension of the text' by realizing a new time sequence. One recalls Augustine concept of memory in this context, as found in *Augustine's Confessions: Philosophy in Autobiography* that interested Beckett which compares the recalling of a memory with the ruminating of food: "The memory doubtless is, so to say, the belly of the mind: and joy and sadness are like sweet and bitter food, which when they are committed to the memory are, so to say, passed into the belly where they can be stored but no longer tasted" (Mann 2014, Book 10, Chapter 14). Food resembles the memories and the act of remembering is similar to that of the acts by which cattle brings up the food from their stomach to chew all over again.

Krapp is portrayed as a lonely, old man in his late sixties, with a cracked voice and disordered grey hair, reviewing his early days, 'separating the grain from the husks' (Beckett 1960, 217). The act of reviewing is however not as smooth as it appears initially; it is not just listening to the voices from the past as the tape recorder unfolds them, rather the process is met with a play of imagination: "I close my eyes", the past voice speaks "and try and imagine them." Krapp realises his past only by activating his imagination that results in his pauses and silences, winding forward and backward, sudden brooding and moving back to the darkness. For the realisation to work, imagination actively participates in the process of reading, as Iser writes, the reader through his imagination will be able to stimulate the 'unwritten parts of a text', something 'what is not there' (190). It has been his age old habit to spend his birthday by listening to his past and at the same time recording memorable incidents from the present year for future playing. Each recording also includes its response to a previous recording. For instance, the thirty-nine year old Krapp recalls incidents from 'an old year' which he thinks 'must be at least ten or twelve years ago' when 'I think I was still living on and off with Bianca in Kedar Street' (218). Thus, there are voices heard within voices, memories within memories. This is reminiscent of Vladimir's song from *Waiting for Godot* (1953) – the infinite distorted reflections between two mirrors. Memory, as Emmanuel Lévinas writes in *Totality and Infinity*, not only brings back

the past to our present thoughts but also adds a new meaning to it: "But does not the memory arisen in each new instant already give to the past a new meaning?" (Lévinas 1969, 282) In other words, the past returns not as it was but as it seems to us now. This can explain to a certain extent why Krapp finds it hard to believe in his younger self who is "that stupid bastard I took myself for thirty years ago..." who further found it equally difficult to believe in the Krapp from his twenties "I was ever that young whelp. The voice! Jesus! And the aspirations! And the resolutions! To drink less in particular!" (Beckett 1960, 218) Besides, Krapp literally forgets words from the past which he himself had used with much ease once upon a time. He even has to look up to a dictionary to find the meaning of the word 'viduity' and after certain contemplation, he settles upon the last meaning "Black plumage of male... [He looks up. With relish.] The vidua-bird!" (219) albeit the other meaning 'of being- or remaining a widow or widower' seems more appropriate to the context. Lévinas further states that "better than clinging to the past", the act of adding new meanings to the past "therefore already repairs it". The reader distorts the past to suit the present and "in this return of the new instant to the former instant, lies the salutary character of succession" (282). Thus, the act of remembering the past, just like rereading of an old text finds new meanings in the events that one can no longer change such that it doesn't merely join the self to a dead past, rather it attempts to repair the past. It is in this process that time acts both as an obstacle to older memories as well as opens up the possibilities for more interpretations, the freedom.

Iser says that literary texts are full of twists and turns such that the reader is confronted with an interruption in the fulfilment of his expectations, "Even in the simplest story there is bound to be some kind of blockage, if only for the fact that no tale can ever be told in its entirety" (193). Krapp has been referred to as a "notorious self-interrupter" (130), someone whose whole life has been an interruption, by the actor Rick Clutchey, a Co-Founder of the San Quentin Drama Workshop directed by Beckett in 1977, Berlin. In Beckett's play, we find Krapp constantly interrupting the tape as well as his own self. He switches off the tape at crucial junctures, to brood or think, to sing or go for a drink, or simply to wind forward and back. To fulfil his present

expectation of reading, he constantly skips, plays, repeats, plays again. The reader thus steps into the role of an editor who not only (re)writes his text through his present imagination but also edits it according to his own need as a listener. This reminds us of the Reader/listener dyad from *Ohio Impromptu* (1980) in which the listener, who almost resembles the reader in all aspects and perhaps are in a way, single entity, repeatedly interrupts reading with powerful 'knocks' on the table. The 39-year old Krapp's voice resembles the performer while the 69-year old Krapp is the listener/regulator. In both the plays, the texts concerned are fixed just like the analogy of stars drawn by Iser who says, "The 'stars' in a literary text are fixed; the lines that join them are variable" (195); it is the process of execution, or delivery that is variable (dual). Krapp perhaps tries to manipulate his last tale just like the listener will regulate the last sad tale in Ohio Impromptu.

It is significant to note that Beckett's readers and Krapp, as a reader, are participating together in this reading process, of unfolding voices from the past. The play thus no more remains the monologue of an old man because interestingly, as in most of Beckettian monologues, in *Krapp's Last Tape*, the monologue paradoxically yields more voices than one. Far from revealing and confirming individual identity, the monologue tends to destabilize and disperse it. Krapp listens to the voice recording the death of his mother "...there is of course the house on the canal where mother lay a-dying, in the late autumn..." while he sat in the biting wind "wishing she were gone" (219). Perhaps he did not want his mother to suffer anymore or, perhaps it reflects his inability to mourn for his mother. This is further emphasized by his later actions where he tries to deviate from his mother's illness to the nursemaids, infants, old men and dogs. It is an emotional disguise that Krapp takes on to convince himself that he is pleased with the way the detachment took place. As he waits outside, he stares at the nurses, one of which is described as "one dark beauty, I recollect particularly, all white and starch, incomparable bosom, with a big black hooded perambulator" (219). When the nurse scorns by threatening to call the police, Krapp begins playing ball with a little white dog as he sits on a bench outside his mother's window. Krapp's waiting is ended when "the blind went down" and it was "all over and done with, at last" (220). Krapp appears relieved that the event is over, but instead of

confronting death, Krapp focuses on the dog in his narration to avoid the potentially painful topic. Krapp meditates: "Moments. Her moments, my moments. [Pause] The dog's moments" (220). His returning back to this voice, his selection of this particular memory points out Krapp's failure to come in terms with the circumstances related to his mother's death. By choosing to listen to this part of the memory, Krapp attempts to relive the incident, to feel the sorrow, to reshape the emotion felt at the time of his mother's death. However, he merely focuses on the things and people surrounding his mother rather than his mother, even when he is playing the voice on the tape. His listening to the voice after thirty years, his reframing the emotional response to suit his present predicament further reinforce his attempt to detach himself from his mother. He tries to compensate this gap by taking refuge in his imagination, reading newer meanings into the text: "His lips move in the syllables of 'viduity'. No sound. He gets up, goes backstage into darkness, comes back with an enormous dictionary, lays it on table, sits down and looks up the word" (219). By refusing to recognize the meaning of the word 'viduity', he not only denies his mother's widowhood but also the death of his father. While struggling to come to terms with the death of his father and mother, he redefines his identity by re-reading the text. This is both his attempts to justify his love for his parents as well as his inability to do so.

The next memorable incident that he switches over to is his epiphanic moment: 'the vision at last.' Krapp switches off impatiently and winds forward to reach that part of the memory which he desires the most: an erotic experience which he listens for three times, every time reliving the memory. While on one hand, he wants to persuade himself that the relationship was "no good", on the other hand, his repeated listening to the same part shows that he is not ready to let the memory die. Krapp focuses on the detailed description of the sexual act that took place 'under lake, with the punt, bathed off bank' where 'we lay there without moving. But under us all moved, and moved us, gently, up and down, and from side to side.' He doesn't wait to listen to her name, reducing her identity to a faceless woman and by refusing to do so he detaches himself from the intimacy of their relationship which has now turned meaningless. The earlier mention of Bianca with whom he was living 'on and off' at Kedar Street had been reduced to a pair of

eyes by the thirty-nine year old Krapp. He referred to their relationship as a 'hopeless business', thereby attempting to deny the seriousness of their love with another verdictive statement. Although Krapp, at the age of sixty-nine has partially replaced the two women with Fanny, "bony old ghost of a whore" with whom he can be intimate without having to form an emotional intimacy, he is unable to let him free of the memories of these women from the past. This is evident in his words with respect to the punt trip "One wasn't enough for you. Lie down across her" (223), followed by the sudden throwing away of the tape and returning back to the same memory which runs on at the end of the play.

Krapp's relationship with his own self is also that of reconciliation and separation. While listening to, what he calls the 'memorable night in March', Krapp behaves in a restless fashion. He doesn't even wait for the voice to name the 'belief' he had been going with all his life. He turns away from listening to the revelation that was once so important to him because the revelations will only lead him to more interpretations and disagreements with his younger selves over meanings. Stanley Fish, another eminent figure of Reader-response theory writes in his essay "Is there a text in the class", "... disagreements cannot be resolved by reference to the facts, because the facts emerge only in the context of some point of view" (338). Krapp's disagreement with his younger selves is manifested in his interruptions and pauses which cannot be settled by establishing one single fact or one single meaning but, rather are the means by which we attempt to settle the fact which is never a final settling. After forwarding the recording, Krapp turns the machine on again. While the younger Krapp's voice utters his realization that "the dark I have always struggled to keep under is in reality my most -", the older Krapp reacts more violently this time – "[*Krapp curses, switches off, winds tape forward, switches on again*]" (220). He helplessly struggles to keep away his prior aspirations and insights, refusing to acquire a full recognition of his self.

In his attempt to reshape his identity and his subsequent failure to do so, Krapp once again takes refuge in the memory of the erotic experience with the punt girl. Beckett advised the actor Pierre Chabert,

'Become as much as possible one with the machine' (Chabert 105) which further highlights that for the broken Krapp who is 'drowned in dreams and burning to be gone', his machine, with its "reassuring bulk and its twin revolving spools, has become a maternal—erotic substitute" (Lawley 93). The recording ends with an extremely powerful resolution by the thirty-nine year old Krapp: "Perhaps my best years are gone. When there was a chance of happiness. But I wouldn't want them back. Not with the fire in me now. No, I wouldn't want them back" (Beckett 1960, 223). After moving to and fro between the role of a reader and an author, at the end of the play, Krapp stares motionlessly as he allows the tape recorder to run on in silence. While talking about authors' intentions, Stanley Fish writes that authors take up a set of corresponding strategies "to educate the reader or humiliate him or confound him or, in the more sophisticated versions of the mode, to make him enact in his responses the very subject pattern of the poem" (345). The last words uttered by the younger author-Krapp seems to humiliate the older Krapp in a similar way and throughout the play, Krapp has expressed all the above-mentioned responses of confoundment, humiliation, enacting and re-living the older days through the "patterns of expectation and disappointment, reversals of direction, traps, invitations to premature conclusions, textual gaps, delayed revelations, and temptations" (Fish 344-345). The mocking voices of memory, his sole possession that invades Krapp's den will continue to haunt him, as the running on of tape indicates. Krapp's striving to fit everything together in a consistent pattern, which Iser calls 'the formation of the gestalt', relies upon his language to fit his past into present, to edit his memories, always already edited.

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