

“Contenir le vide”:

A Study of Formal and Verbal Structures in Samuel Beckett’s *That Time*

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Introduction

In the French translation of Samuel Beckett’s *That Time*, *Cette Fois*,¹ we can find a strange or problematic expression: “cette dernière fois où tu as essayé et n’a pas pu...plus moyen plus de mots pour contenir le vide” (23). What does this “contenir le vide” mean? At least two meanings come to our mind. First, the words indicate the place of the void (le vide), filling it with them. “Contenir” means “to suppress or put down” (réprimer), or “to hold or keep back” (retenir). Second, the words have the void in them. “Contenir” can also mean “to encompass” (englober) or “to contain” (enfermer or contenir).² In the original English text, “contenir le vide” is expressed as “to keep it [the void] out” (394). Although the first meaning is what is actually meant here, the second has a strong connotation, echoing with or supporting the first one. What is to be noted here is that *Cette Fois* opens up a possibility that can never be produced from the original. This phrase “contenir le vide” means that the words in the play are inside the void and try “to keep it out”, and at the same time, the void is inside the words which are trying to contain or include it. While the words are used to try to fill up the void, preventing it from entering them, they are also used to

try to include it, letting it permeate them. We can never find this interpenetration between the words and the void from the English original. *Cette Fois* is not just a translation of *That Time* but a development of it,³ implying that there is such a reversal force hidden as “contenir le vide” which can be the momentum to change all the notions of what is contained and containing, and what is inside and outside.

The intention of this paper is to analyze the formal and verbal structures of *That Time*. What makes these structures particularly useful for examining the play is Beckett’s almost obsessive preoccupation with permutations and combinations of limited sentences. He arranges and rearranges them, following the strict rules he sets in advance, and he suggests the possibility that these permutations may go on forever. But he intentionally breaks the rules to keep the whole play under his control. By examining the formal and verbal structures, the process of both keeping and breaking the rules will be shown. As a result, we will see a closed and limited system of meaning broken down and opening up other possibilities which are, at first sight, hidden like the French phrase “contenir le vide”.

1. The Formal Structure

In *That Time*, the only thing seen on stage is the face of the “Listener”, and the only things heard are the three voices marked A, B and C. These three voices are recorded in advance,⁴ but this is not demonstrated for us on the stage. The voices speak to the Listener in the second person singular, “you”, and represent the Listener at different points in his life: voice A in middle age trying to remember his childhood, voice B in youth trying to describe certain love scenes with a woman, and voice C in old age trying to recall some occasions on which he has sought shelter in three public buildings. In this way, each voice tells a different story and speaks twelve times in the play. The play is divided into three parts by two ten second breaks, and each voice speaks four times in each of the three parts. According to Antoni Libera’s analysis, the formal structure of the play appears as follows:

- I ACB ACB ACB CAB pause, breath
- II CBA CBA CBA BCA pause, breath
- III BAC BAC BAC BAC pause, smile

(Reading *That Time* 91)

Obviously, there is a strict rule at work here concerning the respective permutations of the three voices. In part I, the first voice's position, voice A of ACB is changed, for the fourth time, from the first position to the second one. And after that, following a pause, voice A again changes from the second to the third position, which marks the beginning of part II. A similar change occurs between part II and III. Again, after three repetitions, the initial order, CBA, changes into BCA, then, following a pause, this order changes yet again into BAC. During that change, voice C's position is changed from the first to the second, then to the third one, which marks the beginning of part III. Contrary to the previous parts, part III remains unchanged until the end of the play. As Antoni Libera points out, if the rearrangement took place at the end of part III, according to the principle established in the first two parts, the order of the voices would reach ABC, completing every sequential combination from the three elements (Structure and pattern in *That Time* 81). Then, after that, part I would start again logically from ACB. Thus, while strictly setting the rule of change, Beckett intentionally avoids closing the circle by keeping part III unchanged, preventing the voices from revolving in an endlessly circular manner.

While these voices are rigorously controlled, they are separated from the Listener whose "face [is] about 10 feet above stage level" (388). So the separation of the voices from the face induces us to unify them, without offering the prospect of complete success. And the problem is that because of the separation, we can't clearly decide to what extent the relationship between the Listener and the voices works with each other. This indeterminacy about the relationship brings about controversies about interpretations of the mysterious smile that the Listener makes at the end of the play. Antoni Libera argues that the Listener is striving to order his memories, and at the end, it is not necessary for him to change the order any more, because the order produced in part III is at least chronologically a correct one, which causes him to smile (Reading *That Time* 91). But Enoch Brater points out that the final failure to change the order gives the impression that, regardless of the Listener's intention, the three voices go on forever, breaking the strict rule about the permutations. And the smile serves as "a definitive closure to the piece" meaning a final relief from a flood of the voices surrounding him (*Beyond Minimalism* 44). As we have already seen,

the voices are prerecorded, and their order is strictly decided, and except for the smile, the only movements of the Listener are the opening and closing of his eyes before and after the voices begin, and the breathing between the eyes' movements. So we can't decide whether the listener is actually striving to correct the order of the voices he listens to on stage, because the voices are entirely dissociated from the Listener. Certainly, the Listener is the same person as all three voices, but he is identical with none of them. So surrounded by the voices, he rather loses himself in the repetitious evocation of different past times.

Moreover, the separation of the head from the three voices emphasizes the internalization of the outer stage space. The visual image of the Listener's head seems to suggest an external view of an old man: "Old white face, long flaring white hair as if seen from above outspread" (388). But, as the Listener closes his eyes to listen to the voices, he seems to be retreating into an inner world. These voices constantly call up memories of the past to him, although he can do nothing but listen to them. While the voices appear to occupy a space that is external to the head, this space can also be seen as an externalization of the inner space of the Listener's mind or memory. The actual space of what we see has been turned into a mental, potential space opened up by the speech, which always refers to the Listener as "you", questioning the illusion of unity and identity. Apart from the head of the Listener, there is no other visual image on the stage surrounded by darkness. All forms, visual or verbal, are isolated from each other and surrounded by space. A space which is usually associated with the visual image is, in fact, dominated by the three voices that are relayed to the Listener across the stage space, as they emanate from three loudspeakers situated at each side and above his face. The solidity of the present moment vanishes, because every moment of time is shadowed by the other times which precede and succeed it. The fixity of the stage space as stable visual ground is disrupted. Thus, the visual image of the head contributes to contrasting the external space to an internal one which threatens to engulf the stage space, conflicting with the external image offered by the head. The Listener's smile can not make a "definitive" end to the play, but, rather, highlights this conflict and irrecoverable distance set between internal image evoked by the voices and the external visual one.

The flawed formalism of *That Time* is not a purely formal game that Beckett plays, but a strictly devised textual strategy for suggesting the stage as a potential space

where the two categories of image, external or physical and internal or imaginative are going in opposite directions, and this conflict brings about the driving force of the play.

2. Separation and Interpenetration

Each voice has and develops its theme according to the order mentioned above. James Knowlson indicates that "each of the three accounts is given its own physical setting, its own season of the year, even its own light, as well as its own range of incidents and images" (*Frescoes of the Skull*, 216). Voice A relates the middle-aged man's journey back to the city of his birth which is recognizable as Dublin.⁵ This journey is a journey through past time to make contact with an earlier space, time and identity: "that time you went back that last time to look was the ruin still there where you hid as a child" (388). But this journey in search of a lost childhood is a failed one because all means to reach the Folly,⁶ the goal of his visit, are frustrated. Compared with other voices, autobiographical references are characteristic of voice A. Voice C remembers wandering in a city, this time, recognizably London, contrasting with the cityscape of voice A, and the wanderings through the three public places resemble each other. In voice C, it was "always winter" and "always raining" (388). Cold and wet, he slips in one of three places as his refuge "when no one was looking" (388), after a period of time, having rested there, he moves to another one. Descriptions of restless movement and static sojourn are always contrasted in voice C. In voice B, there is no action scene, and practically no description of movement except for that of opening and closing of eyes. Instead of a town, the setting is the countryside, and elemental, natural objects such as the wood, the wheat field, and a stone are evoked. Moreover, he is not alone, but with a lover. The two figures are in harmony with their setting, and the scene encompasses earth and sky: "just there on the stone in the sun with the little wood behind gazing at the wheat or eyes closed all still no sign of life not a soul abroad no sound" (388). All is still and calm. The stillness is broken only by the lover's vows or by the movement of their eyes which, like those of the Listener, are either open or closed, but on the blue sky, rather than on darkness. However, there is no reference to the moments when the given situation is supposed to have taken place, but rather to the time when the scenes are contemplated

by him. These recollected scenes are not a reflection of the actual experience, but rather come from his imagination. In other words, they are imagined and expressed like dreams and not memories. Thus the roles the voices play are clearly decided and meticulously separated and distinguished from each other.

But, at the same time, each of the voices repeats elements of the others in ways that make it difficult to keep them separate. Each of the stories the voices tell has, as an element, a motif of sitting on some kind of stone. For example, voice A tells about a child, hiding with a picture book on a stone in the Folly (389), voice B about a young man and his lover together on a stone in the sun (388), and voice C about an old man finding a seat made of marble in the Portrait Gallery (388). In addition, phrases come again and again insistently, not only within each voice, but across voices, sometimes in close proximity. Voice A's phrase "was your mother ah for God's sake all gone long ago" echoes a moment later with voice C's (389), and the phrase "out to hell out of there" is shared by voice A (389) and C (392). Similarly Voice A's "till the truth began to dawn" (391) is echoed by C's "thanking God...till it dawned that for all the loathing you were getting" (394). Voice B's "not a soul is abroad" (388) is also echoed by C's "not a living soul" (389). Voice B's "no stir or sound only faintly the leaves" (392) is repeated in C's "not a sound only the old breath and the leaves turning" (395). Voice B's references to "making it up" (390) are taken up in A's "making it all up on the doorstep" (394). Similar words, phrases and images are repeated among the voices, questioning the apparent distinctions among them. But, as these examples suggest, most of the motifs are shared with only two voices of all the three, giving the sense of asymmetry or incompleteness. The audience or reader is always reminded of words and phrases by repetition and encouraged to form groupings of them to understand the play. But we come to recognize that these groupings always form an unstable relation which is based on leaving out one of the three voices. For example, in voice C, the scene of the Public Library where the voice describes "you" as an old man "poring on the page" (394) is a transformed reflection of the earlier scene of the memory told by the voice A that as a child he used to sit on a stone, "poring" over his picture book (393). Rather than a contrast between a child and an old man, a scene told by a voice is juxtaposed with another one told by another voice.

This uneven relation among the voices can be confirmed by the French version of

the play. In *Cette Fois*, although the actual words and phrases which are repeated are different from the English, and are also distributed differently, each repeated word and phrase is still shared with two voices only.

In every case, similarity is penetrated by difference and coherent continuity is denied. The persistence of contradiction in the repeated words and phrases makes it difficult to see the speeches blended into the unity of a single life of the same person.⁷ Steven Connor argues that there are two kinds of repetition at work in the play, and explains the effect of them as follows:

[T]he effect of these two kinds of repetition, repetition to mark continuity, and repetition to mark contrast, is to twist together sameness and difference indistinguishably, abolishing the grounds by which they may be discerned and maintained as concepts, so that every continuity may be glimpsed paradoxically as a difference, every difference as a continuity (*Repetition, Theory and Text* 136-7)

Therefore, in *That Time*, the problem about the voices is one of an excess of differentiation. Given this over layering of experiences with memories, part of which imagination composes, it is hard to be sure what chronological order the voices form. And there is a further over layering introduced by the figure of the face of the Listener who is, as is already said, the same person as all three voices, but identical with none of them. Each voice exists as a problematic rift between different, even incompatible voices and experiences. These repeated experiences of split or difference lead to a condition in which it is impossible to speak reliably of sameness or difference.

But what is to be noted here is that we must not be content to acknowledge the excess of differentiation as an example of indeterminacy operating in the play. This indeterminacy as to the relationship between difference and sameness comes from Beckett's strictly conceived textual strategy like the formal structure that we have already seen above. So considering the excess of differentiation brought about by the interpenetration of the voices, let's go on to the topic of the verbal structure of the play. Just as the examination of the formal structure discovers Beckett's intention to avoid falling into a vicious cycle of the voices going on forever, so we can find his intention hidden in the verbal structure of the play.

3. The Verbal Structure

In his study of the play's manuscripts, Stanley Gontarsky reveals that Beckett "had from the first both a clear, if almost rigid, format for *That Time*, a triadic structure...and a thematic link for the three incidents..." (the Composition of Samuel Beckett's *That Time* 116). As we have already seen, this "triadic structure" is true of most of the formal structures as well as verbal ones. In voice A, there are three stages to the visit to the town where the narrated "you" spent his childhood. In part I, the voice speaks of his arrival (388-9). In part II, he climbs to the top of the hill and stands there(391), and in part III, he ends up resting on someone's doorstep (394). These three stages are accompanied by three modes of behavior or posture: walking, standing, and sitting. In voice B, there are also three scenes the voice describes: at the edge of a wood (388), on the towpath (391), and on the sand (393). The voice B describes "you" first as being together with his lover (388), then him alone (393), and the absence of them: "and you vanished all vanished" (393). In each of the scenes, three different postures are emphasized: sitting on the stone, standing on the towpath, and lying on the sand. Voice C is composed of visiting three public places. The visiting of three places does not so much consist of three elements, but rather a theme of the "triadic structure" is developed by the voice C three times which repeats the word "dust". First, the voice mentions the word in the Portrait Gallery: "all gone long ago all dust" (389). Second, the word "dust" appears twice, describing the situation in the Public Library: "something to do with dust something the dust said" (394). Then, for the third time, the word appears three times at the last statement of the play: "and then suddenly the dust whole place suddenly full of dust...from floor to ceiling nothing only dust" (395). As these examples show, the "triadic structure" dominates that of *That Time*, and through this "triadic structure", different times and visual environments are evoked and yet descriptions mirror each other, balancing difference and identity.

But as far as the meanings of the words of voice B are concerned, their verbal structure is made in a double sense, not triadic: a passive and involuntary mental occurrence and an active voluntary function to get imagination going on. As we have already seen, in voice B, there is a vision of two people, a man, the narrated "you" and a woman. Most frequently they are seen as two silhouettes or "shades" (391) at

the edge of a small wood, sitting at each end of a long stone. Gradually these images undergo reduction. First, the figure of the woman disappears, and only his silhouette remains in the landscape. Finally, these scenic images fade away and he loses the ability to recall or imagine them:

That time in the end when you tried and couldn't by the window in the dark...and not another sound hour after hour hour after hour not a sound when you tried and tried and couldn't any more no words left to keep it out so gave it up gave up there by the window in the dark or moonlight gave up for good and let it in and nothing the worse a great shroud billowing in all over you on top of you and little or nothing the worse little or nothing (394)

At this point, he is overwhelmed by the great emptiness which he has tried to fight off or keep out all his life. This last stage of the voice B suddenly reveals its significance: the imagination voice B uses and the scenic description it imagines are not only expressions of gradual disappearance of images it evokes but a form of defiance against the emptiness which is always present within him, or rather a form of defiance against the powerful illusion of emptiness. In voice B, this emptiness is expressed as “the void” (390) or the “shroud”. Surrounded by the void, he finds himself in a void as if covered with a shroud. This vision is fundamentally different from all the others evoked by voice B. Here, he is “by the window”, in some house, or in a closed space, whereas in all the other visions he is in an open space. Further, he is “in the dark” whereas he is “in the sun” or at least in the “sunset”.

The singularity of this quotation seems to come from the fact that here he himself accepts his own mortality with an attitude of helpless resignation. It seems that the emptiness or the void eventually overwhelms him. But in fact, here, because voice B is not memory but imagination, his acceptance of the void gives him still another possibility to imagine, this time, his own death. To “let it [the void] in” does not mean accepting death resignedly but taking it in as an element of his imagination. As is already said, the French version of the phrase “contenir le vide” has a double meaning. One is to try to fill up the void. The other is to try to contain the void. Here, by letting him accept his death, voice B gives him the same ability as the latter meaning

of “contenir le vide”. In this quotation, his acceptance of death does not lead to his death but gives him another motive to keep his imagination going on. The death of imagination is not yet pronounced. Rather the more positive working of it is made still operative, because, in this case, death is not an end but an element still to be fully imagined.

On the one hand voice B describes the narrated “you” as a passive victim of the void that is always lurking behind him, on the other hand it gives rise to the opposite occasion on which he is allowed to make use of the void that remains, this time, paradoxically, a productive potentiality for further imagination.

Conclusion

In *That Time*, Beckett sets meticulously detailed rules concerning the formal as well as the verbal structures. Logically, the formal structure can keep operating forever through permutations that are also strictly defined. But Beckett intentionally avoids letting the system go on endlessly by putting a deliberate defect in it. Similarly, while he gives three voices individual roles so that they may perform their parts respectively, these three voices interact with each other, transcending their given parts. But this going over the boundaries is also controlled in the unstable ratio of 2:1, leaving out one of the sequences. Beckett thus destabilizes whatever categories or analyses may at first be offered in order to make a much more complicated, but simpler, structure. This structure of *That Time* is a strictly devised textual strategy for suggesting the stage space as a potential space where a negative meaning can be transformed into a positive one such as “contenir le vide”.

¹ *That Time* was first written in English between June 1974 and August 1975. The play was first performed at the Royal Court Theatre, London, to commemorate Beckett’s seventieth birthday. Patrick Magee, for whom Beckett wrote the play, performed the Listener and recorded the voices. This title *That Time* designates a particular moment in time which varies with the context. *That Time* also means “time in general”. This duality is not contained within a single word in French. So Beckett had great difficulty in translating this play into French. James Acheson shows that this title in English clearly means at once “cette fois” or “la fois où ” and “ce Temps”.

The French title *Cette Fois* was, as Beckett put it, a “recognition of the impossibility of capturing both senses” (The Shape of Ideas 116). *Cette Fois* was published in 1978. All extracts from *That Time* are from *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986). All extracts from *Cette Fois* are from *Catastrophe et autres dramaticules* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1986). Page numbers are given in parentheses.

² All French meanings are from *Le Grand Robert de la langue française*. All English meanings of French are from *Larousse: Dictionnaire Français-Anglais / Anglais-Français*.

³ Beryl and John Fletcher tell that after the English version published, Beckett wrote a letter in which he added an increase and decrease of the strength of stage lighting on the head of the Listener to the stage productions (*Student's Guide to the Plays of Samuel Beckett*, 220). While this addition is not yet in the English version, it is inscribed in the French version from the first. This fact is another proof that *Cette Fois* is not just a translation of *That Time* because Antoni Libera points out that in Beckett's later plays the relationship between the stage lighting and actor / actress is particularly important (*Directing Beckett* 110).

⁴ Beckett uses recorded voices for an important dramatic device. *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958) is the first example. There is a remarkable contrast in the way these recorded voices are used on the stage. Using a tape recorder, Krapp listens to the recordings he made by himself and decides which one to listen to, but the Listener is quite apart from them and has no control over them. While Krapp moves about, eats a banana, and makes a recording, the Listener can only listen to each voice.

⁵ Beryl and John Fletcher point out that the narrated “you” is living in exile away from his home country. And his home country is Ireland. For example, voice A later refers to Harcourt Street Station, a familiar Dublin landmark, whereas voice C refers to the Portrait Gallery which could be the London one (*Student's Guide to the Plays of Samuel Beckett*, 222-3). That is the reason Voice A is characteristic of autobiographical story.

⁶ This is in the sense of an architectural folly (*Student's Guide to the Plays of Samuel Beckett*, 222).

⁷ Katherine Worth, for example, feels that this play “seems in the end a triumphant “weaving” of a life, an achievement” (*The Irish Drama of Europe from Yeats to*

Beckett 264). See, too, John Fletcher and John Spurling, *Beckett the Playwright*, p.126.

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