

The Concepts of Time, Memory and Identity in Beckett's Essay on Proust

Anna Stegh Camati

“...you went along making yourself up again for the millionth time forgetting it all...”
(Samuel Beckett *That Time*)

Abstract: *Beckett's essay on Proust, in which he examines the philosophical concepts of time, memory and identity, has exerted enormous influence on modernist and post-modernist writers, who have consciously adapted and re-synthesized the ideas he developed not only in the essay but also in his plays in general. Although he was not the creator of the “memory play”, Beckett has helped to establish the new genre by reflecting upon philosophical problems and adapting psychological phenomena for dramatic theory, besides extending the limits of the dramatic. His theatrical experiments have been considered as examples of the strictest form of the “memory play”.*

Although Beckett has refused to be involved in literary exegesis of any kind,¹ he has, nevertheless, agreed to participate in several interviews and has written three, long critical essays entitled “Dante ... Bruno, Vico” ... “Joyce, Bram van Velde” and “Proust”. The latter appeared in English in 1931, having been subsequently reprinted in London in 1965 and 1970.² It shows Beckett's concern with the aesthetic and epistemological implications of time consciousness, an issue that had also obsessed Proust to such an extent that he translated it to the level of aesthetic form in his novel *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. In *Proust*, Beckett makes an extensive analysis that is one part description of the “inner chronology” of Proust's artistic development, and another part an assessment of his own personal perspective on time, memory and identity.

Proust has invariably been considered the novelist of time *par excellence* – the literary interpreter of the phenomenon that Henri Bergson (1859-1941) called “duration”: real or lived time intuited by sensibility, as distinguished from the abstract, chronological time given by the conceptual intelligence. According to the French philosopher, time is

mobility, everything moves – the external reality, which he denominates “durational flux”, and the reality of the mind or “inner duration”. In order to provide us with a concrete image of this process of constant becoming, he uses the analogy of a river flowing incessantly, a river without bottom and banks. In one of his seminal works, *The Creative Mind*, Bergson postulates that there is no consciousness without memory (179). If there were no “survival of the past in the present there would be no duration but only instantaneity”. He argues that our present thought and feeling is always mediated and modified by the memory of past events, since there is an uninterrupted prolongation of the past into the present, which simultaneously is already blending into the future. Immersed within the flow of “inner duration”, “the past becomes identical with the present and continuously creates with it – if only by the fact of being added to it – something absolutely new” (156).

Bergson has also pointed out that not only does the past transform the present, but the present also tends to modify the past.³ He explains that “backwards over the course of time a constant remodelling of the past by the present, of the cause by the effect, is being carried out” (104). And this backward and forward movement is, according to him, necessary, since “the human mind is so constructed that it cannot begin to understand the new until it has done everything in its power to relate it to the old” (108). Thus, he asserts, all knowledge and understanding is relative, because it is our mind that imposes the order we find in things.

To understand Beckett’s critical analysis of Proust’s work, it is important to recall another important theoretical premise of the Bergsonian vision, that concerns the several possible ways of apprehending reality. The French philosopher distinguishes between two modes of cognition: the “spiritual-mental” and the “instinctive-intuitive” consciousness⁴, which are polarities, being at the same time opposite and complementary. He believes that the intellectual consciousness impels us to go all around the object, apprehending the relative, while the non-rational intuition allows us to enter the object, thus attaining the essence or absolute (159). However, in the course of evolution, intuition and instinct have been sacrificed in favour of the development of the intellect, resulting from the excessive mechanization of the industrialization process. Thus, man has been set apart from the natural sources of life, becoming too deeply rooted in habit and the utilitarian process. Nevertheless, Bergson argues, if we turn our attention away from the reality that interests us from a merely utilitarian viewpoint, and turn it back towards what serves no practical purpose, by an “effort of intuition”, we can develop a “supplementary attention” that will enable us to transcend ourselves, thus getting immersed within the very flow of duration. This intuitive impulsion, once seized, carries us forward of itself (178).

Throughout the essay on Proust, Beckett refers to the quasi-mystical experiences, described in detail by the French novelist, mainly in the last volume, *Le Temps Retrouvé*, of his novel. He reports that these occasions provided the writer with a spiritual technique for transcending time, and as such enabled him to escape from time’s domination.⁵ He

also reports that Proust believed that these transcendent moments contained the seeds to the ultimate nature of reality, and he desired, through the medium of his art, to communicate the full impact of these moments of revelation, as he himself had felt them.⁶ For Proust, a sound, an odour or any other sensory stimulus is apt to discharge a series of associations in the mind which bring the past flooding back in order to fuse it with the present. At such moments, the past is recovered and apprehended as it actually has been, and not as we might think it was if we forcefully try to recall it. It is possible to grasp past and present simultaneously in a moment of “pure time”. The famous Proustian incident of a spontaneous revival of a childhood memory, through the taste of what has become known as the “madelaine cake”, is an example of what the French novelist has denominated “involuntary memory”, a kind of explosive, spontaneous, mystic experience or epiphany (Beckett 1970, 34-9).

To agree or not to agree whether Proust’s art achieves such a triumphant transcendence is a personal choice; however, any reader who is well acquainted with Beckett’s *oeuvre* will reckon that such a victory over time is completely out of question in the latter’s cosmivision. The outlook of the Irish dramatist is completely different from the Proustian equation: in his universe time does not grant release nor enables salvation. He does not believe in such direct and purely experimental contact between subject and object because our mind is utility oriented, and as such the object loses its purity and becomes a mere intellectual pretext or motive.

In the part of the essay where he outlines his personal vision, Beckett discusses extensively the utilitarian tendency of the human intellect, rooted in habit⁷, that is always censoring new experiences and rejecting all the elements that do not fit with its pre-conceived ideas, rejecting them as being irrelevant, illogical or insignificant. He reckons, however, that this constitutes a necessary defense mechanism, because reality would be intolerable if we had to face it as it really is. To circumvent the boredom of the interminable hours and days of our existence, our mind is always manipulating reality, distorting, suppressing threatening details, creating fictions, adapting, falsifying and faking evidence in order to adjust our organism to the conditions of its existence. This adaptation is achieved with the aid of “voluntary memory”, a mental process that, according to Proust, is of no value as an instrument of recovering the past, since “the images it chooses are as arbitrary as those chosen by the imagination, and are equally remote from reality [...] There is no great difference, says Proust, between the memory of a dream and the memory of reality” (1970, 32-3). Proust’s concepts of “voluntary” and “involuntary” memory roughly correspond to what Bergson has denominated “spiritual-mental” and “instinctive-intuitive” consciousness.

Proust and Beckett have given expression to the Bergsonian view that time is not simply an attribute of reality, but reality itself. They have disseminated the theories of the French philosopher among the literary milieu, where their work has been the inspiration and source of a number of literary techniques and devices. Beckett’s essay

on Proust has exerted an enormous influence on contemporary writers that have tended to experiment with form and time consciousness. Concerning contemporary British and American drama, the list of representative playwrights presenting variations on the “memory play” is endless: Peter Shaffer, Christopher Hampton, Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard, Shelagh Stephenson, Brian Friel, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Edward Albee, Paula Vogel, Margaret Edson – to mention only a few. As far as drama is concerned, the achievement of Beckett and his disciples is twofold: first, they have reflected upon philosophical concepts and adapted literary phenomena of novelistic practice for dramatic theory and, second, they have contributed to the creation of a theatre of the mind, establishing the “memory play” as a new genre.

Tennessee Williams has been appointed by drama critics as the creator of this new genre. He has coined the term “memory play”, which first appears in the production notes of his play *The Glass Menagerie* (Browne, 229). In the stage-directions that introduce the first scene of the play, he strives to conceptualize the newly created term: “The scene is memory and is therefore non-realistic. Memory takes a lot of poetic licence. It omits some details; others are exaggerated, according to the emotional value of the articles it touches, for memory is seated predominantly in the heart” (233).

As concerns literary criticism, the term “memory play” was first mentioned by Paul T. Nolan in his article *Two Memory Plays*, in which he examines Tennessee Williams’ *The Glass Menagerie* and Arthur Miller’s *After the Fall*. He argues that this kind of play attempts to go beyond the traditional drama in order to reach the source of action, i.e., the mind itself. He provides a tentative definition of the genre: “The new “memory play”, unlike the dream play and expressionistic drama, is a projection of the conscious mind; and, unlike the traditional drama of action, it is concerned only with that action that is understood and retained in the mind of the protagonist” (Parker 144).

There are many possible variations upon the basic technique for dramatizing the mind’s activity, and no modern dramatist up to now has employed them more effectively than Beckett. *Krapp’s Last Tape* (Beckett 1959, 9-20),⁸ written in 1958, foregrounds the problem of the ever-changing identity of human beings and the impossibility of recovery of selfhood by means of retrospection. The play consists of a monologue delivered by old Krapp, which comes over as a dialogue conducted between his present older self and his middle-aged more hopeful former self. There is even a shadowy presence of a third self of his in the late twenties.

Krapp is the writer-protagonist, who tries to recollect what exactly happened to him when he was younger by playing back a set of reels on which he had recorded his impressions over forty years. As he listens to the tape-recording, an act which constitutes a kind of ritualistic re-enactment of the experience of his earlier selves, he is intrigued particularly by a certain moment, when fearful of being invaded by someone else, he rejected love which probably ensured his present loneliness. However, none of the tape-recorded memories of the past trigger anything close to a Proustian

revelation, in which time and meaning are recovered and a sense of unity of being is achieved. The self-performing voices on tape do not help Krapp to connect the past, present and future into a meaningful causal chain. There are “only questions without answers, suffering without purpose, consciousness without identity”, as Thomas Postlewait has aptly put it (476). For Beckett, the past is essentially irretrievable.

Echoes of Beckett can be found in several of Harold Pinter’s plays, notably in those where he has inclined towards the internal monologue, such as *Landscape* (1968), *Silence* (1969), *Old Times* (1971) and *No Man’s Land* (1975). His debt to Proust can also be fathomed, since he devoted a whole year to writing a screenplay for Proust’s novel *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, a project that had been idealized by Joseph Losey, but was never concretized.

Old Times notably experiments with the effect of the past on the present through memory. The same story is told by three characters from different points of view and time. The ideas of the play converge upon the major premise that “one can never be certain that the past existed as one remembers it, for the past is gone and only memories of it remain. Furthermore, one’s memories are not necessarily accurate recordings of the past, for they often redefine it, either distorting it to hide what is threatening or creating a totally fictitious past, to fulfill one’s current psychological needs” (Colby 80).

In *Old Times* we have a love-triangle: a verbal battle goes on between Deeley and Anna for the possession of Kate. The past is the battleground where the conflict takes place, and memories are the combatants’ weapons. What makes the play exciting is that each character has a different version of what actually happened during the period when Kate gradually transferred her affection from Anna, with whom she appears to have had a lesbian relationship, to Deeley to whom she decided to get married. The play shows a power-struggle; the question is whose version will be accepted as true, whose story will predominate and control the future lives of the people involved. There is evidence throughout that recollection can be misleading, memory unreliable and truth impossible to uncover.

By the end of the play, Anna turns out to be victorious in the battle for possession, because she is cunning and knows how to manipulate reality. She is very self-conscious when she professes that it is not important whether certain incidents actually happened in the past, what is vital is that she believes they did occur, and if she is able to contrive means to convince other people they took place, then it follows that they do happen in the present, because they can be experienced in the minds of all those who gave credibility to her story. It is worthwhile to quote her own words from the text: “There are some things one remembers even though they may never have happened. There are things I remember which may never have happened, but as I recall them so they take place” (Pinter 31-2). The reversal of roles that takes place by the end of the play denotes that Anna has succeeded in turning her version of the past into reality. Her victory shows how subjective and utilitarian we are with “truth”.

Tom Stoppard is also indebted to Beckett, as he himself has declared in several interviews and personal pronouncements. In *Travesties*, he devises means to portray his protagonist's stream of consciousness visually and aurally on the stage. However, he complicates the communication between stage and audience by constructing a series of overlapping frames to indicate the limited points of view within each (Groff 274-277). These complex framing techniques dramatize, in highly ingenious theatrical language, the philosophical concepts of the unreliability of memory and the illusive nature of reality that the playwright had wished to project in the play.

Some critics have seen the outer frame of *Travesties* as a respectful parody of Proust's *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. In fact, to show that the past cannot be recovered, Stoppard portrays his protagonist, Henry Carr, as the opposite of Marcel in many respects. Whereas to Marcel the past presents itself unbidden with the lavishness of a revelation (involuntary memory), Carr struggles to extract the past events by a conscious act of the mind (voluntary memory). Unlike Marcel's past, the routine of Carr's days has been unadventurous and intensely monotonous. This unbearable monochromatic landscape is precisely what motivates Carr to reconstruct his past in a forcible way. He not only creates a fictional version of his life to flee from the uneventfulness of his existence, but also, in his dotage and state of confusion in old age, tries to create an order of what he perceives as chaos. However, he is never certain of facts, letting fantasy take over.

Furthermore, to compensate for the lack of glamour of his life, he sets the real world against a fictional scheme, seizing upon Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, a play in which he had once enacted the role of Algernon Moncrieff and which he remembers as a personal triumph and success, as a superstructure, in which to reassess his personal experience, assuming the functions of author-narrator, character and stage-manager. Besides assuming the part of Algernon once more, he casts James Joyce and Tristram Tzara into the fictional roles of Lady Augusta and Ernest, entrapping himself and the historical characters into someone else's order.

Travesties is a play-within-a-memory-play: through the superimposition and juxtaposition of different framing devices, Stoppard reveals to the audience the mechanisms of vision creating (Camati 95-125). The play constitutes an interesting commentary not only on the unreliability of memory, but also on the fictionality of the practice of writing memoirs, biographies, autobiographies and even history.

Of the three plays briefly discussed in this essay, that dramatize the mind's activity, Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* can be regarded as the strictest form of the "memory play". In addition to the Irish playwright's specific influence on modernist and post-modernist writers, who have consciously adapted and re-synthesized his vision of time consciousness, memory and identity, which he expressed not only in his essay on Proust but also in most of his plays, Beckett has established a new frame of reference for the contemporary theatre by redefining and extending the limits of the dramatic.

Notes

- 1 When Alan Schneider, who directed the first American production of *Waiting for Godot* asked Beckett who or what was meant by Godot, the author answered: "If I knew I would have said so in the play". (Quoted in Esslin 1980, 40).
- 2 Beckett's essay on Proust translated by Arthur Nestrovski was edited in Brazil in 2003, by Cosac and Naify. It came out more than seventy years after its first publication.
- 3 The ideas expressed in the published works of Bergson, in French and other languages, had been disseminated by himself in lectures and essays in literary magazines since the turn of the twentieth century. His philosophical theories have exerted great influence on literature and art in general. The voice of the French philosopher reverberates in T.S. Eliot's essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent* (1951), first published in 1917, in which the poet states that all great art involves "a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence", and that "the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past".
- 4 D. H. Lawrence has also valued and written about the "instinctive-intuitive" consciousness in his work. He has denominated this mode of knowing as "blood-knowledge", which he defines as a kind of pristine, immediate consciousness, prior to mentality, that roughly corresponds to the Bergsonian concept of intuition. See Lawrence's essay entitled *Hector St. John de Crevecoeur*. (In: Arnold 60).
- 5 Beckett asseverates that the solution that Proust offers consists in "the negation of Time and Death, the negation of Death because of the negation of Time. Death is dead because Time is dead". (Beckett 1970, 75).
- 6 The idea of the Proustian revelation is similar to the Joycean concept of epiphany, a moment of insight or illumination into the ultimate nature of reality. (See Baker; Staley, 1969, p. 8-11).
- 7 In his reading of Proust, Beckett also investigates the nature and importance of habit in human life, consisting of "a perpetual adjustment and readjustment of our organic sensibility to the conditions of its worlds" (Beckett 1970, 28). Habit, for Beckett, is not only a "great deadener" (Beckett 1979, p. 91), but a redeeming grace. He believes there is no recovery of selfhood possible by means of retrospection and no revelatory moment to provide us with a sense of coherence and purpose.
- 8 Besides *Krapp's Last Tape*, Beckett has written a great number of works where he shows his concern with time, memory and identity, mainly *Embers* (1959), *Cascando* (1963), *Eh, Joe* (1965), *Come and Go* (1966), *Not I* (1973), among others.

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