

Shape as Metaphor :
Samuel Beckett's *That Time*

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It has always been with Beckett's artistic method to word his philosophy and his attitude in the shape the play takes. Therefore the shape of the play is his metaphor. In *That Time*, philosophically, his contention is that truth may be grasped at moments of instantaneous upheavals of forgotten pasts from the depth of the self. Attitude wise, he has demonstrated that truth can be approached only through a process of action equivalent to contemplation. *That Time* is a metaphorization of the dynamics of "involuntary memory" expressed in a pattern which can serve as a metaphor for the act of contemplation. In other words, Beckett has created in this play a metaphoric shape that dresses both his idea of the workings of involuntary memory, and the process of contemplation simultaneously.

Samuel Beckett's exposition of man is that of a figure stranded between two opposing poles: a desire and urge to be one with the transcendental being, and a desire to run away from it. Beckett always takes the utmost care not to be fettered by an already existing system of thought to approach or to escape that being. He prefers to be the lonely wolf though the way be rugged. He is obedient to the callings of his inner self and is skeptic of tradition. His modesty and feeling of reverence is directed toward the very essential and that is why he must assume a negative posture. Beckett believes that since man's ultimate goal is to confront the one being, it is also his fate to flinch and wince from it. The minute man feels himself to be nearing his goal, he loses all control of himself and throws himself back to where he started from, to begin again.

In *That Time*¹⁾, Beckett gives an account of how this ultimate being may be confronted through a sensation upsurging from memories of past experiences hidden in the subconscious. However, this requires a passivity in waiting, an act comparable to the act of contemplation. The structure and staging of this play, compared to his earlier ones, are more simple, although the thought and tone have become more pensive and speculative. This is the result of a more deliberately calculated and organized method. Its style is regulated and patternized. It is a simplification in expression in spite of the growing difficulty of the quest.

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expressed in a pattern which can serve as a metaphor for the act of contemplation. In other words, Beckett has created in this play a metaphoric shape that dresses both his idea of the workings of involuntary memory, and the process of contemplation simultaneously.

The mind, in complete subjugation to the automaton of involuntary memory in *That Time*, is metaphorized even from the basic structure of the setting. The stage is dark except for a dimly lit pin-point of a circle on the upstage curtain "ten feet above stage level midstage off centre"³). Within that lit circle is the Listener's face whose breath can be heard. It is "slow and regular." He is prepared to take part in a prolonged and reflective speculation to study what is stored in the depth of the subconscious. He must first mould himself into a receptive organ, as St. John of the Cross says, "contemplation is to receive"⁴). This is to assume the attitude of passivity, but for the Listener to have been suspended in the midst of a darkened auditorium⁵) and to have given up all initiative was itself a conscious effort. To be receptive, one must will it.

Thus the Listener waits for some sign from "that . . . inaccessible dungeon of our being"—the Listener's being—where "the essence of ourselves"—the essence of the Listener—"is stored" (P p. 18).

When the curtain opens the Listener is alert and awake in order not to miss the first signs of the deluge that may occur at any moment. This is because the involuntary memory, for whose activity the Listener is waiting, "is an unruly magician and will not be importuned. It chooses its own time and place for the performance of its miracle" (P p. 21). There is at last that sign of emergence in three variations—three voices emanating from the 'inside' of the Listener. The Listener (and the audience) has waited seven seconds—a life time—for the miracle to occur. After listening for a while, he feels he can rely on the Voices to continue. So he closes his eyes to penetrate even more deeply into the propositions of the voices. The Voices speak from "both sides and above" through the darkness murmuring and muttering soberly and sombrely. In spite

of the subdued tone, the effect is violent and tyrannical so that the audience is forced to participate in the Beckettian meditation.

Voice A talks of his childhood and its haunts, and of his attempts to revisit that place much later.

A: that time you went back that last time to look was the ruin still there where you hid as a child when was that (*eyes close*) grey day took the eleven to the end of the line and on from there no no trams then all gone long ago that time you went back to look was the ruin still there where you hid as a child that last time not a tram left in the place only the old rails when was that (TT p. 28)

Voice C⁶ talks about a past experience in old age. It was always winter, cold and raining, and he, a tramp, had to take shelter in public buildings but was soon thrown out.

C: when you went in out of the rain always winter then always raining that time in the Portrait Gallery in off the street out of the cold and rain slipped in when no one was looking and through the rooms shivering and dripping till you found a seat marble slab and sat down to rest and dry off and on to hell out of there when was that (TT pp. 28-29)

Voice B looking back on his youth remembers the sun, the woods, the wheatfield, the quietness and her with whom he made love.

B: on the stone together in the sun on the stone at the edge of the little wood and as far as eye could see the wheat turning yellow vowing every now and then you loved each other just a murmur not touching or anything of that nature you one end of the stone she the other long low stone like millstone no looks just there together 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 (TT p. 29)

Beckett says that those things that float up from "the dungeon of our being" are trivial. They are of "the most commonplace experi-

ences" (P p. 19) little bits of memories of trite happenings barely related to each other. These things, Beckett says, are registered in "our minds by our extreme inattention" and then "coloured" to be made special by "the mysterious element of inattention" (P p. 19). The Listener deems it his duty to gaze at these trivialities, penetrate them and grasp "the kernel—the crystallized" (P p. 55) through his spiritual intuition. His concentration is spirally introspective.

Beckett says that Proust lacked a good memory. But because of that he was able to remember all because he did not forget anything. This interpretation is according to the logic of reflex relationship. What is truly remembered are things that are stored in the "inaccessible dungeon" and there forgotten.

The most trivial experience . . . is imprisoned in a vase filled with a certain perfume and a certain colour and raised to a certain temperature. These vases are suspended along the height of our years, and, not being accessible to our intelligent memory, are in a sense immune, the purity of their climactic content is guaranteed by forgetfulness, each one is kept at its distance, at its date (P p. 55).

What the Listener is trying to catch is "the fine essence of a smothered divinity whose whispered 'disfazione' is drowned in the healthy bawling of an all-embracing appetite, the pearl that may give the lie to our carapace of paste and pewter" (P p. 19). The voluntary memory is a "mere instrument of reference" whereas involuntary memory is "an instrument of discovery" (P p. 17).

The Voices emerge from three different corners of the depth and each Voice, considered time wise, is multi-levelled. "The smothered divinity" can be confronted, says Beckett, when the present is seen with the past, and the past with the present. Voice A at present thinks of the time he went back to see the ruins, to reminisce his childhood. Time is triplicated here. Voice C talks now, of a more recent time of a decrepit period, borrowing shelter at public buildings

from the cold and rain. Voice B looks now, on the days of his youth when he made love in the wide open fields, the wheat yellowing, at the edge of a wood, near the river. Voice C and B's time is duplicated. Childhood, youth and old age connected to the present are periods of life that Beckett is particularly concerned about.

The identification of immediate with past experience, the recurrence of past action or reaction in the present, amounts to a participation between the ideal and the real, imagination and direct apprehension, symbol and substance. Such participation frees the essential reality. . . . What is common to present and past is more essential than either taken separately. Reality, whether approached imaginatively or empirically, remains a surface, hermetic. Imagination, applied—a priori—to what is absent, is exercised in vacuo and cannot tolerate the limits of the real. Nor is any direct and purely experimental contact possible between subject and object, because they are automatically separated by the subject's consciousness of perception, and the object loses its purity and becomes a mere intellectual pretext or motive. But, thanks to this reduplication, the experience is at once imaginative and empirical, at once an evocation and a direct perception, real without being merely actual, ideal without being merely abstract, the ideal real, the essential, the extra-temporal (P pp. 55-56).

Consequently, since the solution is found in the extratemporal, time being multi-layered is a metaphoric device to transcend time.

Beckett lives his art. His idea is that "the artistic tendency is not expansive, but a contraction" (P p. 47). It is not only that his plays have become more simple as he continues to write, but contraction is the guiding principle of the shape of his work. As the faithful in the Christian Church is orientated to the state of receiving grace by being given prayers to recite, the Voices too are given propositions. These prayers are formalized by so many words in a particular style, but as the faithful penetrates into and approaches the kernel of the object of contemplation, his words and thought become more and more simple. This is the stage of prayer of

simplicity or simple regard. To reach this stage is to reach the stage of spiritual growth. Voices A, C, and B 'gaze' at each of their propositions. In the process each Voice expands and diminishes its form most flexibly and elastically, shuffling words and phrases (by repetition, addition or ellipsis) within its own territory. Gradually, words and phrases begin to invade other territories. Thence begin a contraction until at the climactic stage, around the ninth round of the alternate dialogue, there is left only a slight sign of identity. The Voices seem to evaporate and float, so to say, in short clipped phrases.

To give an idea of this process, Voice B will be taken as example to indicate the different characteristics of the stages taken by the Voices. In the first round Voice B states his proposition and is quite radiant remembering how love was a mutual affair, the sun bright, the wheat yellowing, just the two of them together, and all was still and quiet. In the second round, there is already a tone of deflation because love-making, being repeatedly mentioned, loses its impact and recedes further into the background while stillness spreads. There is mention of a tear being dropped but soon dried to let in "that thought" whatever it is. Half of the words here are repetitions of those used in the first round, the order shuffled so as to suit the order of composition. Although no major words are borrowed from other Voices yet, the waning mood of Voices A and C infects B.

In the third round a similar setting is continued. The wistfulness evokes images of the womb, childhood and the old Chinaman with white hair. There begin to exist images and conditions that contradict each other. In the fourth round, C and A have already prepared the way for B, with their repetition of the word "dark" or the phrase "in the dark". "In the dark" B, listening to the hooting of the owl, begins to doubt that he ever even loved and told anyone that. It might have been that he was only making up stories just "to keep the void from pouring in on top of you⁷) the shroud" (TT p. 31). A and C too have been talking and muttering

to "keep the dark out."

Here, A, B, and C all seem to have met in mood and attitude. There seem to be no more to say. There is silence for ten seconds. Another three seconds of silence, then the eyes of the Listener open as if to coax the Voices to continue. They do.

C begins the fifth round repeating "never the same" when B picks up, muttering his uncertainty of the time when 'she' and 'he' were together. Almost every word was used somewhere and sometime before by one Voice or another. The mood is extreme uncertainty. In the sixth round uncertainty develops into a self-contradiction which is almost violent. Voice B has never touched 'her' nor made love to 'her'; they were always situated parallel as if perched on a axle-tree. They were "no better than shades" (TT p. 33) like those in Dante's Hell. In the seventh round Voice B seems to halt. Since there was uncertainty, then a contradiction, fear takes hold of it and it refrains from doing anything. It has given up and remains still. Words to that effect are repeated and thrown back and forth between the three Voices. In the eighth round, they try to assume a calmer attitude. B repeats the major words in rounds one, three and five without giving them much meaning or connection to each other, except that of "sinking" and "vanishing" used in connection to the sun. This is introducing a new aspect, the aspect of "the end". Thus in this round C and A follow in the same negative mood and the Voices become thinner and seem to fade out.

There is silence of ten seconds as before. After three seconds the eyes open as if to inquire, 'is this all?' When Voice B begins the ninth round, the Listener seems to regain peace and he closes his eyes to "penetrate" further. Voice B seems to be in a reverie. It is repeating its own words often inserting those that belonged to A and C. The words and phrases are mostly disconnected and often unfinished, depriving them of all intelligibility. But since we already are familiar with the phrases in its complete form, we catch

the echoes of the unfinished phrases. There is also deprivation in the content, for 'she' is definitely not there any more and 'he' is alone. This round gives the effect of the ethereal. All three voices become disinterested, detached, as if in a dream, murmuring and muttering sporadically. After a high tension, there is a sudden relaxation as if one is thrown into a vacuum. This signals a climax in the process of exposure of the involuntary memory.

... If, *by accident*, and given favorable circumstances (a relaxation of the subject's habit of thought and a reduction of the radius of his memory, a generally diminished tension of consciousness following upon a phase of extreme discouragement), if by some miracle of analogy the central impression of a past sensation recurs as an immediate stimulus which can be instinctively identified by the subject with the model of duplication (whose integral purity has been retained because it has been forgotten) then the total past sensation, not its echo nor its copy, but the sensation itself, annihilating every spatial and temporal restriction, comes in a rush to engulf the subject in all the beauty of its infallible proportion (P p. 54).

The ninth round is taken to be the stage where the "sensation itself" has engulfed the Listener "in all the beauty". In rounds two to eight, the Voices were placed under "favorable circumstances". Starting from the propositions, the Voices used so many words, so many phrases to launch into the act of penetration in the deeper regions. In the process they were provided with "the model of duplication", discarding all unnecessaries on their way. There is a moment of tension before the climax in the eighth round. In any contemplation there is a moment's rest after a process of meditation and reasoning and then one reaches the stage of the utmost purity in contemplation where the prayer becomes formless. At this stage there is no need of a formal mental framework. Also, it is a stage when the mind is set in motion by the mere thought of the object of contemplation. In *That Time*, as the play develops, repetition increases in variations

but the number of words and phrases in their kind decreases; words also begin to be restricted to monosyllables. Toward the climax the alternative dialogue seem to begin to rotate automatically.

When prayers in contemplation become simpler, it is thought that by an almost subconscious recognition there is a direct contact with the object pursued. So, as the Voices are contracted more and more, they sense "the central impression of a past sensation" recurring "with the model of duplication". We may take it that there is a clue to "total sensation" in *That Time* in the metaphor of such phrases as "making it up," "giving up" or "no one" when they begin to be reiterated most often. "... When the imprisoned microcosm is besieged in the manner described (quoted previously from P p. 54) ... we are flooded by a new air and a new perfume ... and we breathe the true air of Paradise" (P p. 54).

Beckett has not explicitly pointed out that this play is an exposition of the dynamics of involuntary memory. However, I have taken it as having enough evidence to that effect. The evidence is seen in the setting, the features of the Listener, and in the varied methods and style given to the Voices. Beckett is no physiologist, nor philosopher to give a scientific and logical exposition on this subject. He is an artist placing prime importance on intuitive impressions. Even in his dissertation on Proust he argues in terms of metaphor, as much as he shapes his play in the metaphoric style. Therefore both his dissertation on Proust and his play *That Time* must be simultaneously consulted for clarification. These two works assist mutually.

Beckett's metaphoric shape of contemplation has affinity with the Neoplatonists' conception of contemplation of an orderly advance to an ending in ecstatic union.⁸⁾ They said that the mind or spirit can only be elevated to the One Being by "a series of negative resolutions by which all sight and sound at every level of the external world is progressively blotted out..."⁹⁾ On the other hand, when the obstacles of sense and intellectual perception are

removed the mystical light is always ready to flood into the spirit. The condition in which the spirit receives this mystical illumination in the One Being comes suddenly and is very brief but at its climax there is ecstasy. The 'goal of mystic illumination' is open to all endowed with moral and intellectual purity and the strength to persevere. In other words, a receptive and open mind is necessary. The object of contemplation in established religions is set, whereas Beckett sets out to contemplate 'what is to be contemplated'. Nevertheless, his attitude of contemplation is in accord with the archetypal.

Then, what next after the ecstasy in "Paradise"? As the Neoplatonists indicate, that condition is "sudden and brief". Beckett is aware of the very quality. He says, "so new in the exaltation of his [Proust's] brief eternity. . . ." (P p. 57) The extent of reverie in the ninth round becomes distinct when compared to the tenth round. Confrontation with the real is only possible in a vacuum, says Beckett, and in that realm the Listener's condition is impersonal, disinterested, detached and 'extratemporal.' That was the ninth round.

In the tenth round Voice B becomes suddenly aware of the concrete external world of time. Beckett knows that a pure act of cognition in vacuum is incapable for man, because man on this earth is fated to live according to the march of time. The Listener is immediately thrown back into time and is, more than ever, painfully aware of it.

Time here poses another theme. More than forty percent of the number of words projected by Voice B has to do with time. There is a constant fluctuation between certainty ("that time", "soon after" etc.) and uncertainty ("that time when was that", "soon after long after" etc.). The method of fluctuation is more effective in annihilating the subject altogether than an explication of negation. Thus Voice B loses the sense of time and does not know when all the things happened. It is the same with the other Voices. Things "vanish" with Voice B. Voice A is "forgetting it all", and Voice C has never "been there at all." With the loss of sense of time, those

things of the past, just mentioned, sink back into the "inaccessible dungeon".

In the eleventh round the Voices resume a tone which is more practical and reasoning. They still construct their speech on repeated words and phrases, but by variations of juxtaposition of words they indicate a returning to reasoning. However, mysteriously, they argue that all that were said were not true but "made up." In the last round, every word each Voice utters is one repeated within their own territory. Each one for the last time, reminisce the path it has trod and toward the very end, it professes a negative view. Voice B "lets in the void" which it tried so hard to keep away. Voice A "will never come back" to the ruins of childhood haunts. Voice C hears the old breath murmuring that something had "come" but was "gone in no time." All, Folley's Folly, the reeds and the dead rat, the round table in the Public Library, will have sunk deep down, be forgotten, and perhaps never to be ejected again.

The Listener does not think that this is the end though. He feels that his inner powers must retain complete silence and inaction to wait for the next surge from deep down. He must make himself a vacuum to let in the next visit of a past sensation at any time. To evacuate the material from the dome of the mind, the self, is a part of the process of contemplation. One must rise above sense-perceptions and the dialectical process and become a receptive organ to grasp the momentary apprehension of the one being. Although paradoxical to the passive attitude, at the highest moment there is attainment. Attainment of this kind is possible only in reflex activity. Beckett has worded this process thus:

The most successful evocative experiment can only project the echo of a past sensation, because, being an act of intellection, it is conditioned by the prejudices of the intelligence which abstracts from any given sensation, as being illogical and insignificant, a discordant and frivolous intruder, whatever word or gesture, sound or perfume, cannot be fitted

into the puzzle of a concept. But the essence of any new experience is contained precisely in this mysterious element that the vigilant will rejects as an anachronism. It is the axis about which the sensation pivots, the centre of gravity of its coherence. So that no amount of voluntary manipulation can reconstitute in its integrity an impression that the will has—so to speak—buckled into incoherence (P pp. 53-54).

Plotinus said that the relationship of the One Being and man was bound by a perpetual reflex movement. "...The emanation from a super-essential Being, was in perpetual outward and reflex movement. In it, the individual spirit aimed at purification and union with the One, in effect an impersonal Deity, by means of contemplation and ecstatic love."¹⁰ The Listener will be suspended ten feet above stage level forever because of "the emanation from a super-essential Being". But the opposite inclination will coax him to "vanish" and to make an end of it all. There is and always has been within Beckett two opposing poles. These poles, unlike Yeat's gyration, pull at each other with never a laxity. The tension is always there. The more he negates the world of time and space to investigate or enter into the transcendental world, the more the world of time and space pull back. In return, the transcendental world would equally pull him back again. He sees himself constantly fluctuating, uncertain and unsure of himself. Therefore he is 'stranded' between two opposing poles, a desire and urge to be one with the essential Being and a desire to run away from it.

As the lights dim out at the end of the play, the Listener smiles, sans teeth, as if satiated for the time being but prepared to submit himself again to another round of contemplation, perpetually hungry for that "brief eternity", which is his fate to be so.

Hamm in *Endgame* is the forerunner of the Listener. He is constantly irritated; he is not as detached as the Listener. He needs to be in the midst of things, controlling them, as he shouts that he must be wheeled and be placed in the exact center. He suffers his

condition violently in his "dripping head". The Listener is more composed with his "white hair." Could it be that Beckett's whole life has been a prolonged contemplation and that his attitude in waiting for "brief eternity" has mellowed with age? Could it also be that, if his whole life were an extended contemplation, he is nearer his goal now because he has hinted that his work has tended toward contraction? He has admitted that the more he writes "the area of possibilities gets smaller and smaller."¹¹

From *Waiting for Godot* to the more recent plays, the muttering of Beckett characters have become more complicated because the probing into the inner world has become deeper but inversely unrewarding. On the other hand, the structure and technique of his plays have become simplified and regulated. This process seen in his practice of art also corresponds to the pattern of contemplation. His penetration into his own self in quest for the Being is continuing and the intensity with which he pursues his goal in a desacrilized world seems, paradoxically, almost sacred. The sense of responsibility of the artist has been goading him on, and now over seventy, he is still obeying the artist's call. Webb says of Beckett, "there is probably no other writer, in any period, who has worked out so thoroughly the implications of the desacrilized vision" and yet the intensity with which Beckett's works "explore possible avenues of exit from it [desacrilized vision]," is such that "the new vision toward which they probe, though it is never directly pictured, begins to take on some qualities of the sacred."¹²

Beckett's quest is a solitary quest, and yet in studying the metaphoric shape with which he experiments the paths to transcend the world, we find that his method is the time-old way, the way in which man has always turned his mind to the divinity. His way can be equated with the process of contemplation generally taken by the contemplatives of the world.

Footnotes

- 1) *That Time* was first performed at the Royal Court Theatre in 1976. It was a special occasion marking the author's seventieth birthday.
- 2) Samuel Beckett, *Proust* (N.Y.: Grove Press, 1981), pp. 17-21. Henceforth all quotations from *Proust* are from this edition, and the reference will appear in the text as P.
- 3) Samuel Beckett, *That Time* (included in Samuel Beckett, *Ends and Odds: Eight New Dramatic Pieces* [N.Y.: Groves Press, 1978]), p. 28. Henceforth all quotations from *That Time* are from this edition, and the reference will appear in the text as TT.
- 4) E. A. Peers ed., *Complete Works of St. John of the Cross* (London, Burns and Oates, 1934), p. 162.
- 5) Beckett's anti-Aristotelian dramaturgy allows him to conceive the stage, the auditorium, or its mechanics to stand for itself and be metaphorized.
- 6) The alternative dialogue is never A, B, and C. The whole play is consisted of twelve rounds of alternative dialogue in the following order: A, C, and B repeated thrice; C, A, and B once; C, B, and A thrice; B, C, and A once; and B, A, and C four times.
- 7) The Voices and the Listener are one but the Voices never say 'I' except once. The Voices address the Listener as if they were a separate entity.
- 8) Plotinus' doctrines on contemplation which finds its roots in Plato greatly influenced the early Christian thinkers in search of a system, especially St. Augustine. Neoplatonic elements thus was incooperated into the Christian ideas of contemplative life in the Middle Ages.
- 9) M. D. Knowles, *The Nature of Mysticism* (N.Y.: Hawthorn Books, Inc., 1966), p. 111.
- 10) *Ibid.*, p. 110.
- 11) Israel Shenker, "Moody Man of Letters," *New York Times*, 6 May 1956, sec. 2, p. 1.
- 12) Eugene Webb, *The Dark Dove* (Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1975), pp. 63-64.