Evolution of Memory Writing in Samuel Beckett's Stage Plays

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Abstract

This article investigates the evolution of memory writing in Samuel Beckett's stage plays by examining several of his notable works from different periods. Memory serves as a pervasive theme in Beckett's oeuvre. In his stage plays, memory is predominantly characterised by fragmentation, evolving from evasion to reconstruction and eventually to fabrication. Beckett's early plays focus more on characters who are afraid of memories and try to evade them, though involuntary memories persistently intrude. Beginning with *Krapp's Last Tape*, there is a shift towards a focus on voluntary memory, where characters engage in recollections, endeavouring to reconstruct the past while often exhibiting a tendency to forget. In his later plays, Beckett incorporates more technological elements, employing fictional, disembodied voices and spectral images to externalise memory, but the subject of memory becomes increasingly fragmented.

Keywords: Samuel Beckett; stage plays; memory; evolution

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Introduction

Samuel Beckett (1906–1989) maintains a profound and persistent engagement with the theme of memory throughout his entire literary corpus. As early as 1931, in his seminal critical essay *Proust*, Beckett provides a penetrating analysis of the interplay between memory and time in Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*. He asserts that "Memory and Habit are attributes of the Time cancer. They control the most simple Proustian episode" (Beckett 1978, 7). In fact, memory not only underpins the narrative structure in Proust's work but also exerts a lasting influence on Beckett's creative output. As Attilio Favorini puts it, "In his early critical study *Proust* (1931), Beckett virtually set for himself a memory research agenda that he pursued through the end of his writing life" (2008, 9). Indeed, memory serves as both a creative technique in Beckett's subsequent works and a recurring thematic element through which he persistently probes the predicaments of the human condition.

The examination of memory in Beckett's plays has garnered significant scholarly attention. In addition to studies focusing on individual plays, such as Jane E. Gatewood's (2007) analysis of memory in *Endgame* and Chris Ackerley's (2009) examination of memory in *Krapp's Last Tape*, scholars have also explored memory in Beckett's dramas by categorising his works in various ways. For instance, Thomas Postlewait (1978) investigates time and memory in Beckett's early dramas, while Jeanette R. Malkin (1999) explores the fragmented nature of memory in Beckett's later works within the context of postmodern drama. Antonia Rodríguez-Gago (2003) focuses on memory and forgetting in Beckett's plays featuring female characters, and Lucia Esposito (2009) delves into auditory memory in Beckett's radio and television dramas. Moreover, some scholars apply specific research frameworks to explore memory, such as Charles Pullen's (1987) cultural memory analysis and Sabine Kozdon's (2005) psychological interpretation of some of Beckett's plays. Despite these extensive studies, little attention has been given to how memory evolves across Beckett's stage plays as a whole. This article seeks to fill that gap by tracing the development of memory writing throughout Beckett's stage plays, which, comprising nearly 20 works, represent the largest proportion of his dramatic output and span his entire career. Given the frequent blending of different forms of memory in Beckett's plays, it is challenging to pinpoint a clear-cut temporal demarcation to categorise each play according to its mnemonic attributes, such as whether it pertains to voluntary or involuntary memory. However, by examining his stage plays holistically, a general evolutionary trajectory can be discerned: from an initial emphasis on involuntary memory to a progressive enhancement of voluntary memory, and from the exclusive focus on human memory to the increasing incorporation of technological extensions of memory. This article will examine representative stage plays from different periods of Beckett's creation, primarily focusing on *Waiting for Godot* (1952), *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), and *That Time* (1975), exploring the characteristics, causes, and significance of these transformations in his memory writing.

Inescapable Involuntary Memory

Involuntary memory is often described as "memories [that] come to mind spontaneously, unintentionally, automatically" (Mace 2007, 2). In *Proust*, Beckett also underscores the contingency and passivity of this type of memory, describing that "involuntary memory is an unruly magician and will not be importuned. It chooses its own time and place for the performance of its miracle" (1978, 20–21). However, it is precisely this kind of "explosive" involuntary memory that, in Beckett's view, "in its brightness reveal[s] what the mock reality of experience never can and never will reveal—the real" (1978, 20).

In Beckett's early plays, particularly in his significant works like *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, memory, though not the central theme, is a constant factor that perturbs the characters. In *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon exhibit uncertainty regarding their actions—whether they visited the day before, if the place to wait is before the tree, or if Godot will ever arrive. They engage in making comic acts and telling jokes. The topic of memory, like their quarrels and suicide attempts, functions as a means to idle away their time.

> VLADIMIR: Ah yes, the two thieves. Do you remember the story?
> ESTRAGON: No.
> VLADIMIR: Shall I tell it to you?
> ESTRAGON: No.
> VLADIMIR: It'll pass the time.
> (Beckett 1986, 13)

Therefore, to pass the time, the phrases "Do you remember … ," repeated three times, and "Do you not remember … ," repeated seven times, along with the frequent use of the word "remember," become recurrent topics in their conversations. Despite this, they are afraid of really getting stuck in the painful memories of the past. Consequently, they make conscious efforts to avoid delving into such recollections. This avoidance is further exemplified in *Endgame*, where Nell asks Nagg, "Have you anything else to say to me?" When Nagg attempts to reminisce by beginning with, "Do you remember—," Nell abruptly interrupts with, "No," even before Nagg can complete his sentence (Beckett 1986, 99). In Beckett's early plays, the mention of memory often manifests through such dialogues, but characters swiftly interrupt or shift the topic away from memory, underscoring a latent fear of confronting their past. Nevertheless, involuntary memories can still be triggered by unintentional remarks or trivial objects.

> ESTRAGON: What do you expect, you always wait till the last moment.
> VLADIMIR: [*Musingly*.] The last moment … [*He meditates.*] Hope deferred maketh the something sick, who said that?
> ESTRAGON: Why don't you help me?
> VLADIMIR: Sometimes I feel it coming all the same. Then I go all queer. [*He takes off his hat, peers inside it, feels about inside it, shakes it, puts in on again*.] How shall I say?

> Relieved and at the same time … [*He searches for the word*.] … appalled. [*With emphasis*.] AP-PALLED.
> (Beckett 1986, 11)

This is a scene from the first act of *Waiting for Godot* in which Vladimir talks about Estragon's sore feet. Estragon's remark, "You always wait till the last moment," triggers Vladimir into deep meditation with the spontaneous words, "Hope deferred maketh the something sick." Many critics have pointed out that this phrase alludes to Proverbs 13:12, "Hope deferred maketh the heart sick," and serves as "a concise summary of the problem of deferred expectations that constitutes their plight" (Hutchings 2005, 53). Indeed, the phrase is highly pertinent to Vladimir and Estragon's situation, symbolising their protracted wait for Godot, with the sickening feeling of hope continually deferred. Michael Worton further elucidates that "[w]hile we might initially read this as just one example of Vladimir's amnesiac discourse, its rehearsal of an archaic syntactic formulation suggests that we need to fill in for ourselves the gaps in his memory" (2008, 81). These interpretations shed valuable light on the text, providing readers and audiences with a more nuanced understanding of its meaning. However, we argue that Vladimir's substitution of "heart" with the ambiguous term "something" holds deeper significance. Vladimir's later suggestion to repent and his recounting of the biblical story about the Savior and the salvation of a thief reveal his intimate familiarity with the Bible, as evidenced by his recollection of the archaic English form "maketh" from the text. Vladimir avoids mentioning "heart" because the involuntary memory it triggers evokes a deeply authentic experience of pain, particularly fear. This fear arises from the uncertainty of who would be saved, even if Godot or a savior were to arrive. To evade this heartache, they prefer to forget, as they frequently do, and attribute their forgetfulness to the capricious nature of memory: "You see my memory is defective" (Beckett 1986, 37); "Extraordinary the tricks that memory plays!" (Beckett 1986, 47).

Furthermore, the involuntary memory in Beckett's early dramatic works intertwines personal experiences with the broader echoes of collective trauma, particularly the lingering shadows of World War II. In the second act of *Waiting for Godot*, a dialogue between Vladimir and Estragon subtly invokes such memory:

> ESTRAGON: It'd be better if we parted.
> VLADIMIR: You always say that, and you always come crawling back.
> ESTRAGON: The best thing would be to kill me, like the other.
> VLADIMIR: What other? [*Pause*.] What other?
> ESTRAGON: Like billions of others.
> […]
> ESTRAGON: All the dead voices.
> […]
> VLADIMIR: What do they say?
> ESTRAGON: They talk about their lives.
> VLADIMIR: To have lived is not enough for them.
> ESTRAGON: They have to talk about it.

VLADIMIR: To be dead is not enough for them.
ESTRAGON: It is not sufficient.
[*Silence*.]
VLADIMIR: They make a noise like feathers.
ESTRAGON: Like leaves.
VLADIMIR: Like ashes.
ESTRAGON: Like leaves.
[*Long silence*.]
(Becket 1986, 56–57)

This dialogue has prompted various interpretations, particularly regarding the "dead voices." Worton suggests that while "[c]ritics have compared Beckett's 'dead voices' to Dante's souls in Purgatory […] what is most important here is the inability to find the right words to describe existence: the leaves may also be ashes" (2008, 82). In contrast, Llewellyn Brown argues that "[s]ince the voices will never be attached to any past subjective history […] [t]hey simply express the senseless accumulation of memories endowed with no brilliance capable of conferring on them any significant meaning" (2021, 70). While these interpretations all make sense, we align more with Ira Nadel's observation that "[e]lements of *Godot* are rife with Holocaust allusions," from the nightly beatings of Estragon to the whippings of Lucky, "as well as the dialogue about dead voices and their need to speak" (2020, 689). Although Beckett's writing "often appears removed from the overtly political, positioning itself both textually and authorially as an exercise in atemporal, ahistorical, and even apolitical utterances" (Bailey and Davies 2021, 1), its subtle political undertones have drawn increasing scholarly attention. Emilie Morin even asserts, "The idea that Beckett's writing remains inextricably bound to the aftermath of the Second World War and its traumas may well be the only line of interpretation around which his critics have rallied unanimously" (2017, 130). While this argument may seem somewhat categorical, it is reasonable to acknowledge that for a writer as sensitive as Beckett, who experienced the brutality of war firsthand, it would be impossible to remain unaffected by the collective nightmare of the war and to remain indifferent to the widespread fear and anxiety (Tanaka 2018, 174). However, in Beckett's dramas, as shown in the above dialogue between Vladimir and Estragon, the impact of war is expressed subtly. There are no direct references to war, yet Estragon's mention of "kill[ing] me … like billions of others" can invite a reflection on the collective memory of the Holocaust, and "all the dead voices" can be seen as an unconscious echo of a world scarred by loss and death. The war claimed too many lives, leaving behind wounds that cannot be healed. The four instances of "silence" and two "long silence[s]" in the dialogue reinforce the weight of unspeakable, incomprehensible memories, which, although never articulated, continue to haunt the characters. As Beckett writes in *The Expeller*, "Memories are killing" (Beckett 1980, 33); the trauma and "infinite emptiness" (Beckett 1986, 109) of the memories of war are even more unbearable. Vladimir's desperation for words—his plea for Estragon to "say something" or even "say anything at all" (Beckett 1986, 57)—reflects not only the need to fill the void but also the characters' futile attempts to escape the painful involuntary memories that persist despite their efforts to repress them.

This is precisely how memory writing operates in Beckett's early plays. On the one hand, in order to avert active contemplation, characters use memory as a topic in their constant dialogues to pass the time. However, even though there are occasional moments of nostalgic recollection, such as Estragon's memory of "the maps of the Holy Land. Coloured they were. Very pretty" (Beckett 1986, 12), the stark contrast between these fleeting moments of happiness and the grim reality only intensifies their suffering. As a result, characters often swiftly shift their topic of memory when the memory brings them painful recollections. On the other hand, fragmented and uncontrollable involuntary memories intermittently intrude, evoking characters' emotions and bringing past events to the forefront. These interruptions force readers and audiences to acutely perceive the characters' helplessness, particularly their reluctance to confront the embarrassment and anguish inherent in their condition.

Unreconstructible Voluntary Memory

In contrast to the passively triggered involuntary memory, voluntary memory is, as Marcel Proust describes, "the memory of intelligence" (2013, 49). André Maurois also elaborates on this concept, defining it as the memory that "[w]e can try to reconstitute the past by using our conscious intelligence, by reasoning and the use of documents, and other types of substantial evidence" (1960, 145). It is widely acknowledged that "[w]e preserve memories of each epoch in our lives, and these are continually reproduced; through them, as by a continual relationship, a sense of our identity is perpetuated" (Halbwachs 1992, 47). However, the greatest tragedy of voluntary memory in Beckett's dramas lies in the characters' inability to reconstruct their past, resulting in a lack of self-identity. This is because "[i]n Beckett, the past is usually erased or isolated in distant fragments because of the present sense of discontinuity" (Postlewait 1978, 474–475).

Krapp's Last Tape has been regarded as "[t]he first of his memory plays" (Worth 2001, 98) since the protagonist's primary engagement is with recollections of the past. Indeed, from a memory studies perspective, this play occupies a pivotal position within Beckett's dramatic oeuvre. Unlike his earlier works, where memory often emerges through dialogic interactions as a kind of game, *Krapp's Last Tape* marks a transition to voluntary memory as the defining mode of existence for many of Beckett's solitary stage characters. Memory not only serves as the external form of theatrical presentation but also constitutes the primary content highlighted in the drama. Moreover, memory in this play is not confined to the human brain's recollection and representation of the past; it deliberately integrates technological elements, notably through the use of a tape recorder, to extend memory beyond its traditional boundaries. Some scholars interpret the tape recorder as a "prosthesis" for human memory, arguing that "[m]emory, as something that is conventionally located inside the self, and, in particular, as internal to the individual subject's 'mind', is presented as prosthetic and externalised in *Krapp's Last Tape*, while the body itself is marked by a certain degree of impotence manifest in the fact that it cannot recollect the past without the different prostheses it uses"

(Charalambous 2021, 1886). While we concur with the crucial role of the tape recorder in this play, we believe that its inclusion not only accentuates the protagonist's helplessness but also deepens Beckett's exploration of voluntary memory and his reflection on the nature of personal identity.

In *Krapp's Last Tape*, every year on his birthday Krapp listens to recordings of his past and then records a new tape summarising the most significant events of the preceding year. The recordings themselves are Krapp's memories and reflections on the past year's events. Now, at the age of 69, Krapp finds himself absorbed in listening to recordings made three decades earlier, becoming engrossed in the act of reminiscing about the documented memories:

> Spiritually a year of profound gloom and indigence until that memorable night in March, at the end of the jetty, in the howling wind, never to be forgotten, when suddenly I saw the whole thing. The vision at last. This I fancy is what I have chiefly to record this evening, against the day when my work will be done and perhaps no place left in my memory, warm or cold, for the miracle that … [*hesitates*] … for the fire that set it alight. What I suddenly saw then was this, that the belief I had been going on all my life, namely—[*KRAPP switches off impatiently, winds tape forward, switches on again*] … (Beckett 1986, 220)

The recording from 30 years ago captures Krapp's detailed account of his epiphany following his mother's death. However, at the age of 69, Krapp listens to this recording with growing impatience and curses at memories he once believed would endure forever. He fast-forwards the tape three times, unable to identify with his former self or comprehend how he ever thought he could dispel the darkness with understanding and fervour. In contrast to these three fast-forwards upon hearing the epiphany, Krapp rewinds the tape twice and listens three times to the segment recounting his romantic affair with a girl on a punt. This is indeed thought-provoking: at the conclusion of the tape recorded at age 39, Krapp reflects, "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 1986, 223). At that time, he believed he had attained a profound understanding of life. He was confident, ambitious, and driven by a fervent passion and willingness to pursue his dreams, even at the expense of love or happiness. Consequently, he did not desire the return of those happy times. Yet, in his current state, Krapp repeatedly listens to that moment of happiness. Despite his attempts, he finds himself unable to reconstruct the past. Moreover, he comes to the realisation that he now has "[n]othing to say, not a squeak. What's a year now? […] Sat shivering in the park, drowned in dreams and burning to be gone. […] Be again, be again. [*Pause*.] All that old misery" (Becket 1986, 222). Overcome with anguish, Krapp not only crumples and discards the envelope containing this year's recorded prompts but also angrily wrenches off the tape he is currently recording and throws it away from the recorder.

As mediums for preserving memories, recording tapes and documents provide a more reliable form of artificial memory than the natural capacity of the human brain. Douwe Draaisma aptly observes,

> We have armed ourselves against the transience implicit in the mortality of memory by developing artificial memories. […] Nowadays numerous "artificial" memories are available for what the eye and ear take in: cassette recorders, video, CDs, computer memories, holograms. Image and sound are transportable in space and time, they are repeatable, reproducible, on a scale that seemed inconceivable a century ago. (2000, 2)

However, as Daniel Albright remarks, "All media, to Beckett's way of thinking, are mutilated and inept; but the technological media of the twentieth century confess their incompetences in especially striking ways" (2003, 6). The sounds preserved on the recording tape can indeed transcend temporal and spatial boundaries, reappearing in one's auditory experience. However, in *Krapp's Last Tape*, Beckett strategically places the tape recorder and tapes at the centre of the stage, not to suggest that the recording extends human memory, but to emphasise how the recording intensifies Krapp's uncertainty about his very being. This uncertainty arises because "[t]he disjunction between the 'I' present and the 'I' past constitutes the negation of a unified character history" (Aston and Savona 2013, 163). This disjunction manifests not only in the stark contrast between the "wearish old man," who is "very near-sighted" and "hard of hearing" (Beckett 1986, 215) on stage, and the vigorous, young Krapp described as "sound as a bell" (Beckett 1986, 217) on the tape, but also in Krapp's mockery and repudiation of his former self in each recording. Moreover, Krapp's selective engagement with his tapes—"[t]o get what he wants, he plays, skips, plays again, winds back and repeats: in short, he edits" (Lawley 1994, 90)—creates the illusion of controlling his memory by "editing" his past. In reality, however, this editing belies the fact that while the tapes remain unchanged, Krapp himself is no longer the same person. Consequently, even the most significant epiphanies or romantic encounters become difficult to accept or have become obscured. Furthermore, the fragmented nature of the recordings exacerbates the disintegration of his memory, leaving him brooding, confused, and vehement. Ultimately, the recordings on the tape become nothing more than descriptions of memories from each year, while the experiences of that time have long ceased to exist. As Lois Gordon comments, "Krapp can fast forward and rewind his tapes, just as one can summon and reject past events through voluntary memory. However, both on the old tapes and in the present moment of the play, Krapp deludes himself in thinking that he has any control over the associations and memories they unleash" (1990, 98–99).

The protagonists in Beckett's stage plays attempt to reconstruct the past through controllable voluntary memory in a quest for personal identity and security, seeking to counteract the overwhelming anxiety and despair that pervade the outside world. However, despite tangible evidence such as recording tapes, this endeavour ultimately proves futile. Voluntary memory not only fails to alleviate the characters' existential anguish but also deepens their uncertainty about their sense of being. Furthermore, the

subject of memory increasingly becomes detached from the content of memory, rendering the characters' pursuit of meaning and continuity in life even more uncertain.

Fragmented Subject in Confabulation

Whether voluntary or involuntary, "[m]emory is inherently a reconstructive process, whereby we piece together the past to form a coherent narrative that becomes our autobiography" (Bernstein and Loftus 2009, 373). However, in the process of "piecing together" and "reconstructing," memory is not a completely accurate or objective record but often involves uncertainty and fictionality. In Beckett's stage plays, he not only demonstrates the unreliability of memory, as discussed above, but also, through the evolution of his theatrical experiments, highlights its fictitious nature.

Confabulation is defined in psychology as "inaccurate or false narratives purporting to convey information about world or self. It is the received view that they are uttered by subjects intent on 'covering up' [or compensating] for a putative memory deficit" (Berrios 1998, 225). This phenomenon frequently serves individuals' psychological needs, enabling them to escape or alleviate the pain and challenges of real life, or to construct a more favourable self-image. While characters in Beckett's plays frequently display some form of memory deficit, the focus of the fictitious memory discussed here is not on the deficits or inaccuracies in the subject's memory. Instead, it highlights the imaginative and illusory aspects of memory as presented in Beckett's dramatic works. In particular, in Beckett's later stage plays, the subject of memory seems to no longer be the characters, but rather imagined or hallucinatory voices or images. This externalisation of memory from the internal cognition to the auditory and visual domains significantly contributes to the fragmentation and dissolution of the subject.

In fact, in *Krapp's Last Tape*, Krapp mentions the imaginative dimension of memory. At the age of 39, Krapp states during the tape recording that he wants to capture "those things worth having when all the dust has—when all my dust has settled. I close my eyes and try and imagine them" (Beckett 1986, 217–218). Thus, the recordings on the tape represent a blend of Krapp's memory and imagination. However, as the older Krapp repeatedly listens to the tape, despite his efforts to visualise the scenes of the past, a rift emerges between his past self and present self. Beckett does not merely depict this fragmentation between the present and the past selves; he further employs technological means to render not only the visual representations of the characters on stage increasingly illusory and spectral but also to make the subject of memory progressively more ambiguous, ultimately leading to its gradual disappearance.

Although in *Krapp's Last Tape* Beckett had already begun to use the medium of tape to separate the subject of memory from memory itself intentionally, the play explicitly indicates that the voice on the recording tape is Krapp's, and he remains actively engaged in both the recording and the recalling processes. Over the subsequent dozen years, Beckett's exploration of memory not only continued in his stage plays but also extended to his radio plays, films, and television dramas. Among these, his television

drama *Eh Joe* (1966) and stage play *Not I* (1972) are particularly noteworthy. In *Eh Joe*, the protagonist Joe, whose face "[p]ractically motionless throughout, eyes unblinking during paragraphs, impassive except in so far as it reflects mounting tension of *listening*" (Beckett 1986, 362; italics in original), listens to an unseen woman's voice recounting past stories about him. The opening few lines, "Joe … Thought of everything? … Forgotten nothing? …" (Beckett 1986, 362) and the voice's subsequent narration produce ambiguity concerning the subject of memory: whether this is genuinely the woman's voice or a projection from the depths of Joe's own mind remains mysterious. In *Not I* (1972), the mouth that suddenly bursts into speech like a torrent expresses anguish over traumatic memories of the past, yet repeatedly denies that these painful events pertain to herself, exclaiming, "what?.. who?.. no!.. she!.." (Beckett 1986, 377, 379, 381, 382). In these plays, the subject of memory has become increasingly ambiguous. However, Beckett's complete separation of the subject of memory from memory in his stage plays truly commenced with *That Time* (1975).

That Time appears deceptively simple in plot but effectively integrates the auditory and visual elements characteristic of Beckett's radio plays, films, and television dramas. The Listener—an "old white face" (Beckett 1986, 388) detached from any visible body—floats 10 feet above the stage, absorbing the narratives of three voices, A, B, and C, which come from different directions and recount memories representing his childhood, middle age, and old age respectively. As Edward D. Miller observes, "*That Time*, although it is a somber text involving memory and regret, is also a playful text of auscultation, making internal processes audible and transforming the activity of listening into a visual spectacle" (2012, 151). Firstly, the stage directions make it clear that "[v]oices A B C are his own" (Beckett 1986, 388), echoing the recorded voice in *Krapp's Last Tape*. Yet, unlike Krapp's tape, these voices lack any physical medium in *That Time*. Additionally, each voice addresses the Listener's past using the second-person "you," in contrast to the first-person "I" used in *Krapp's Last Tape*. Voice C even reproaches the Listener for lacking a sense of "I" throughout his life: "never the same but the same as what for God's sake did you ever say I to yourself in your life come on now [*Eyes close*.] could you ever say I to yourself in your life turning-point that was a great word […]" (Beckett 1986, 390). As Rick de Villiers notes, Beckett's "merciless use of the self-coincident *you*" in this play "evince[s] a priority of voice over action" (2024, 1000), and "[i]n saying *you* to yourself, you are also saying *not-I*" (2024, 998). Furthermore, the texts of the three voices in *That Time* lack punctuation and are interwoven in a disjointed manner, resembling a stream of consciousness. However, unlike the hysterical self-denial of the Mouth in *Not I*, these voices narrate the past with a "general flow" (Beckett 1986, 388). Chris Ackerley has investigated the enigmatic nature of voices in Beckett's novels, suggesting that "[r]educed to its fundamental sound, that mystery consists of where the voice is located, without or within, and its authenticity, whether transcendent or delusional, a marker of discrete, essential identity, or a cultural echo" (2004, 40). This observation is particularly insightful for interpreting the voices in many of Beckett's plays, especially in *That Time*. Despite their unclear origins, the voices all recount fragments of the protagonist's past, representing different facets of

his identity. Meanwhile, it is worth noting that the Listener—aside from occasionally opening and closing his eyes and displaying a final eerie smile—remains expressionless throughout the listening. Therefore, the use of the second-person narrative "you" by all the voices and the Listener's non-involvement throughout the process create a unique sense of detachment. The memories conveyed by these voices seem to belong neither to the voices themselves nor to the Listener. This narrative technique disassociates the memories from reconstructing the past and breaks any link or significance to the present, leaving behind only fragmented and meaningless traces, devoid of continuity or identity. As Jeanette R. Malkin concludes, "Beckett represents existence as a constant replay of memoried moments through ghostly figments—ever 'slightly off centre'—who can never evoke present selves" (1999, 38). On the dimly lit stage, the only visible figure is the floating head, and the only audible elements are the disembodied voices. Whether these voices originate from within the Listener's skull or are purely fictitious remains ambiguous. However, the separation between the voices, the protagonist on stage, and the fragmented memories represented by the voices, combined with the ghostly stage setting, further intensifies the dissolution of the Listener's sense of self. No longer the master of his memories, the Listener becomes an outsider to his own past, much like the audience.

The portrayal of memory in Beckett's later stage plays basically manifests these distinctive characteristics. As characters age, their lives appear increasingly dominated by recalling the past, particularly as they approach their twilight years. However, both the subject of memory and the memories themselves become progressively more elusive. Firstly, there is the fragmentation of the subject of memory. The protagonist on stage is no longer depicted as a whole man but may be represented as a disembodied mouth, a floating head, or even a spectral presence that is audible but not visible. This disintegration of the character's physical form underscores a deeper disjunction between the subject and their memories. Secondly, memory itself becomes fragmented. This is exemplified by an individual's memories being narrated by multiple disparate and drifting voices on stage, which leads to a lack of unity and coherence in the narrative structure. Each voice may recount different aspects of the protagonist's past, resulting in a disjointed representation of memory. Finally, the spectral figures on stage increasingly distance themselves from the "remembering voice(s)" (Malkin 1999, 7). And the disconnection between the subject of memory and the voices of memory often leads the characters to a state of slumber or death, as illustrated by the old woman in *Rockaby* (1981). This fragmentation and dissolution of the subject not only makes the characters' presence appear increasingly insubstantial but also creates an overwhelming sense of emptiness on stage, leaving readers and audience greater room for reflection on the human condition.

Conclusion

Samuel Beckett's nuanced engagement with memory—whether it involves deeply suppressed recollections, memories triggered by external stimuli, or entirely fabricated

remembrances—reflects his distinctive understanding of the human condition. His early plays primarily depict characters trying to evade memory, yet the intrusion of involuntary recollections compels them to confront their present reality. Beckett later shifts his focus to voluntary memory, where characters actively recall and construct their identities, but the inherent fallibility of memory intensifies characters' uncertainty regarding their personal continuity and identity. In his later plays, the increasing incorporation of technological elements underscores the unreliability and confabulation of memory, highlighting not only the physical fragmentation of characters but also the disjunction between body and mind, ultimately leading to the deconstruction and potential disappearance of the self. Beckett's treatment of selective, fragmented, and unreliable memories reveals the characters' unstable identities and existential dilemmas. While challenging traditional ideas about memory's role in shaping identity, Beckett's treatment also disrupts the expectation of a linear and coherent narrative, evoking deep reflections on life's meaning among readers and audiences.

This article provides a focused examination of Beckett's treatment of memory in his stage plays, contributing to a deeper understanding of his dramatic creations. However, it is limited by its focus on a select number of plays. Future research could extend this exploration to a broader range of Beckett's works, employing memory as a critical lens to further investigate his reflections on temporal, existential, and ontological concerns.

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