

Memory as Theatre

Izutsu and Krapp's Last Tape

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Let me begin by asking you to call to the eye of the mind two stage-images: one is an empty space, a Noh stage, with only one prop, i. e. a small square wooden construct which represents *izutsu* (a well-curb). Besides it stands a young lady, bending slightly forward; she looks into the well, and freezes for a fraction of time. The other image is of an old man sitting in a dark chamber, listening to a tape-recorder, he bends forward, with his head close to the machine. The former is from Zeami's *Izutsu*, and the other from Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*.

Needless to say, there is a world of difference between them: a young, graceful, aristocratic poetess of medieval Japan on the one hand, and an old, sordid down-at-heel, drunken novelist of modern Ireland on the other. Suffice it, at this point, to mark the similarity in the bent figures of the two protagonists, a kind of enigmatic visual echo: she is *looking* into something, he is *listening* to something, each with an intensity that has the power to etch the image indelibly on the retina of the spectator.

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Both plays share the same subject, i. e. memory. Not only that. They also seem to rival each other in the technique of dramatizing that memory. They both use Chinese-boxes structures of time in ways which are dazzlingly complicated.

Izutsu opens with a traveling priest arriving at the ruins of the temple dedicated to the poet Narihira (this is the time present, i. e. the 14th century, in which Zeami sets the play). A woman enters and offers the water which she draws from the well to the grass-covered mound. She denies to the priest that she has any relationship with the ancient poet — how could she, indeed, considering that Narihira, who is the hero of the famous *Tales of Ise* written in the 11th century (the time past), is *already* in that work called the “*mukashi otoko*” (legendary man of the past), who is supposed to have lived in the 9th century (the time pluperfect)?

The woman, however, seems to be extremely well versed in the poet's biography. She begins to tell quite a few episodes in detail. After mentioning the fact that he lived here with his wife, her narrative recedes in time further back to the childhood shared by Narihira and his future wife when they played together besides this same well, then it proceeds a little forward to their adolescence when they met here again. She describes how they first confessed their mutual love by exchanging love-poems. He wrote: “Playing by the well-curb, /I used to measure my height against it; /Much taller have I grown /Since last I saw you”, to which she

replied: "The short hair that I parted /When we compared our heights here /Now flows loose down my back. /For whom but you should it be tied up?"¹ The pun, which defies translation, playing on *izutsu* (well-curb) and *tsuzu* (nineteen, their age), intensifies the effect of time folded upon itself.

Asked by the priest who she is, she "blushingly" replies that she is none other than the ghost of the wife of Narihira's, whereupon she vanishes. Why, it might be asked, does she blush? Probably because she is *ashamed* of her sexuality which, definitely not Platonic, is insistent to the extent that it will not let her soul rest in peace after death but impels her to haunt, even as a ghost, the place of her erstwhile love. Apparently she has been doing this coercive haunting for the past few hundred years!

Left alone, the priest falls asleep. The second part begins with the re-entrance of the same ghostly heroine — but with a difference. A strange case of transvestism here, for she is wearing a male cape on top of her female robe and a male hat on her head. The puzzled audience soon learn that the cape and the hat are Narihira's belongings. She explains her behaviour herself: "I now feel on my body this cape he left me, /And as it touches me, to my blushful amazement, / I am possessed by him, and I dance". An interesting linguistic ambiguity is built into the phrasing: the sentence 「昔男に移り舞」, translated above as "I am possessed by him, and I dance", could also be interpreted as "I have possessed him, and I dance". The ambiguity seems profoundly apt. As phenomenologists of the body have amply shown, to touch is necessarily to be touched, and vice versa.² If so, to don a man's cape would mean both embracing him and being embraced by him. She has possessed him just as much as she has been possessed by him; or, they have possessed each other. Or one could even say, she has become him, and he her. She could have cried, "I am Narihira!" just as Catherine Earnshaw was to cry five centuries later, "I am Heathcliff!"

However, Zeami not being Emily Brontë, his heroine is surprised and blushes (「恥ずかしや」 "to my blushful amazement"). In order to appreciate the rich ambiguity of the expression, we should realize that tonight on this stage something unique is happening to her (which we as the audience are privileged to witness). Tonight she did what she had never done before, i. e. putting on her loved one's clothes. And she is *happily* amazed by what has ensued: a mutual possession. Union with her husband has at long last been achieved, so that she, who earlier "blushed" because she felt *ashamed* at her own insatiable desire, now does so because she is *glad*. Suffusion has been caused now by the joy she feels at her body being literally overlapped with her husband's.

Now she approaches the well-curb and she bends her body slightly forward to look into the well — that characteristic posture I referred to at the outset. The audience know, though they do not actually *see*, what she sees in the water-mirror at the bottom: an androgenous figure, a woman-man. Her eyes are now *seeing* what her body has been *feeling* for some time.

CHORUS: The image down there,
Wearing my dearest's hat and cape:
It is no woman, but a man,

The living image of Narihira.

HEROINE: How dear the face I see!

CHORUS: How dear the face, though it be mine!

The play ends with lines which may sound like an inverted version of Prospero's famous speech³ on life and dream:

The dream is broken, one wakes up,

The dream is broken, day dawns.

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Krapp's Last Tape is no less great a *tour de force* considered as a Chinese-boxes construct. Krapp stores his tapes in "boxes" with serial numbers put to them, and each tape encapsulates memories of a year as summarized by him on each birthday. Each tape contains a reference to an older tape which Krapp needs to listen to before embarking on a new one. So the spectator is faced with several levels of time: the real time on the stage (Krapp on his sixty-ninth birthday, the present), the year which has just gone by (the present perfect), the birthday recorded thirty years ago (the past), the year "at least ten or twelve years" before that tape to which thirty-nine-year-old Krapp was listening (the pluperfect), and so on. "The dark backward and abysm of time" may thus extend itself indefinitely backward, possibly even to that famously Beckettian birth-trauma (Beckett is said to have claimed that he remembered his existence as foetus).

Krapp's meticulously observed habit of self-recording strikes us as almost a *reductio ad absurdum* of two fundamental tenets of modern man, *homo cartesianus*. The first concerns the theory of knowledge: everything, including time, must — and can — be subjected to measurement, division, analysis, and classification; to know an object is to stand apart from it and observe it; to know is to control and manipulate. The second tenet, closely combined with the first, is that the only thing that is indivisible is man himself: the act of thinking is in itself an irrefutable proof of the identity of an individual. Krapp's practice is indeed a whole-hearted dedication to the twin modern ideas of self and knowledge: he demonstrates with devastating faithfulness the belief that one can triumphantly confirm the continuity of one's self by dividing, recording, and reproducing one's past at will.

But what the play actually presents is the last stage in his life, the climactic moment when Krapp's practice as well as the underlying belief begins to fall to pieces. At the end of the play, the audience cannot but realize that *this* one must be what is meant by the title of the play, his "last tape", and that he will never resume self-recording till he dies.

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Differences in the nature of time and memory as theatrically embodied by *Izutsu* and *Krapp* may be too obvious to be laboured on. The similarities detected only serve to set off the vast gap separating the two plays. For instance, we cannot stress the compulsive urge to remember shared by both protagonists without at the same time realizing a salient difference, i. e. the contrast between the tenacity of memory in *Izutsu* and the quasi-amnesia in *Krapp*: the woman cannot forget while the old man cannot remember.

Krapp's impotent fascination with memory is most touchingly revealed when he listens to the central episode on the boat thirty years ago. It is a scene of "farewell to love": 39-year-old Krapp embraces his sweetheart for the last time. The moment of eye-contact ("I bent over her to get her eyes in the shadow and they opened. Let me in."⁴) is of particular interest to us in that the posture of younger Krapp bending over the girl for the last time seems to foretell that of old Krapp bending over the "last" tape. This is followed by what may be taken to be a symbolic description of sexual intercourse: "We drifted in among the flags and stuck. The way they went down, sighing, before the stem!" Then comes the ending: "I lay down across her with my face in her breasts and my hand on her. We lay without moving. But under us all moved, and moved us, gently, up and down, and from side to side".

It might be argued that Krapp and the girl in this episode achieved a "union" of a sort, complete with the sense of attunement to the rhythm of the surrounding element. But the impression is deceptive (for they are about to separate); it is a far cry from John Donne's ecstasy of two "interanimated souls", or Heathcliff-Cathy's passionate mutual identification. On the other hand, the picture of Krapp on top of the girl floating on the water seems to echo, though faintly, the image of that ghostly androgyne of *Izutsu*, which also floated on the water. But again there is no denying that dissonance becomes the more conspicuous for assonance. The androgynous image reflected in the water-mirror first surprises the woman of *Izutsu*, then sublimates her long-frustrated passion to the extent that she "blushes", and finally (probably) releases her from the bondage to time and desire.

The old man, too, is surprised by the narrated vision of the past, and his fascination is evident in the fact of his playing the same passage on the tape two more times. Eventually, however, memory turns out to be sadly impotent to redeem the present. It is true that *Izutsu* and *Krapp's Last Tape* have this in common: the audience cannot *see* the ultimate vision. The androgynous reflection on the water in *Izutsu* and the image of the embracing lovers on the boat in *Krapp* are both deliberately kept invisible by the dramatists. But Zeami's exquisitely graceful female ghost allows the audience a sort catharsis as she disappears at the end, whereas Beckett leaves his old man furiously dissatisfied. Krapp keeps staring before him as the spool of thirty years ago, having concluded with a confident declaration of his power to pursue writing after that farewell to love, goes on reeling silently and hollowly on the machine. His eyes are blank, and this menacing blankness will not let go the audience as the curtain falls.

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Drama is often said to have its origin in the memorial ritual for the dead, and memory has always been great subject of drama. In the history of world drama. *Izutsu* and *Krapp's Last Tape* seem to represent two *extremist* approaches to the subject. In *Izutsu*, we witness on the stage the multifold, fluid, and synchronic way in which time is folded upon itself, the palimpsest structure of memory itself. To twist Beckett's dictum on Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, "the play is not *about* memory, it *is* that memory itself".⁵ That conflict or dialogue with 'the other', which is almost synonymous with drama in a commonly understood sense, is not of

absolute necessity to make this pure 'memory-as-theatre' possible (the priest it a minimal necessity, a cue for the ghostly heroine to appear). It is a special kind of mono-drama, dedicated to *embodying*, not *analysing*, the epiphanic moment of memory. We see how compulsively *physicalized* the heroine's memory is, being closely related to the place (the site of her love), to the object (the well-curb), and most powerfully to the man's clothes which, embodying his body, literally seizes her body and confounds the law of identity. To quote the unforgettable locus classicus from Zeami's late play, *Kinuta*, 「思い出は身に残り、昔は変わり、跡もなし」 ("Memory is inscribed in the body, though time is flown and nothing remains".) In short, we find in *Izutsu* a perfect specimen of "memory-as-theatre".

Oedipus Rex may help to illustrate the point. The play is unquestionably the greatest drama that deals with the theme of memory in the Western or any history, but it would be rash to classify it as "memory-as-theatre". It is impeccable as a dramatized narrative *about* lost memory, *about* the time past re-emerging into — and eventually overwhelming — the time present. But the crucial thing is that memory remains *outside* the protagonist; the dramatic irony lies in the fact that, without Oedipus being aware of it, memory has always been there, inscribed in the body in the form of the wound in his feet (and built into his name meaning "swollen feet"). The drama consists in the admirable tension, the perfect balance, between the *absence* of his memory and the *presence* of his crime.

The tragic heroism with which Oedipus accepts the discovery of the past in the denouement never fails to produce the Aristotelian catharsis in the audience, but the catharsis is, as it were, the end product of a masterful "drama-about-memory"; it does not (and need not, of course) make the play a "memory-as-theatre". In the last analysis, it is the narrative interest in the perfectly logical process of discovery of "truth", as in a detective story, that holds supremacy over "memory inscribed in the body". And Truth, the daughter of Time in classical mythology, does emerge at the end.

It we could posit "drama-about-memory" as a main-stream tradition in Western drama, proudly enriched by masterpieces from *Oedipus Rex* to Shakespeare's romance plays to Ibsen's *Ghosts* and and so on, then *Krapp's Last Tape* might take on the visage of an apocalyptic angel come to announce the end of that tradition. Beckett has stripped memory of all the mysteries that have accrued to it in the course of history. In the hand of the author whose earlier play *Waiting for Godot*, in a different key, questioned the whole set of dramatic assumptions in the West, time and memory have now fallen to mechanical repeatability, while Truth seems powerless to reveal itself with its aura of infallibility. As we have seen, Krapp's memory is both omnipotent (armed with a tape-recorder) and impotent (amnesiac). In other words, memory cannot be a source of the power which, in Sophoclean drama-about-memory, propels the dramatic action. There cannot occur any "dramatic" encounter or dialogue between Krapp and his past since they exist on different time-levels.

Nor do we as the audience witness the moment of classical *anagnorisis* (recognition of truth, as in the case of Oedipus), except as a kind of parody which is grotesquely pathetic, if not excruciatingly funny. It seems as if Beckett is intent upon proving that the assumptions

underlying the traditional dramaturgy of “drama-about-memory” are no longer tenable, and that the only drama that is possible in our time would be a drama about the very impossibility of “drama-about-memory”.

In terms of the body, again, Krapp is nothing if not self-contradictory. He is both cerebral and physical, each to an extraordinary degree. We have seen how grotesquely Cartesian his mind is; another name dear to Beckett crops up here, i. e. Proust. Deeply conscious of the limitations of modern rationalism, Proust would have joyously appropriated Zeami’s phrase about “memory inscribed in the body”, for he thought of memory as something intimately entwined with physical sensations (often seemingly trivial ones), totally out of the control of conscious will. It is, he believes, only through such *mémoires involontaires* that *le temps perdu* can be rediscovered, freeing man from time’s bondage. In contrast, Krapp’s idea that one can have time and memory literally at one’s fingertips, that a mere touch of fingers on a tape-recorder is enough to evoke memory of whatever time in the past one chooses to remember, is inhumanly cerebral; it is nothing less than a parody of the Proustian ideal. It looks as though, by exposing the vanity of human intellect in the person of Krapp, Beckett has dealt an unsparing quietus to the whole Western thought on the problematics of time/memory/body, including not only Sophocles, Descartes, and Ibsen but also Proust himself.

On the other hand, it is true that there is something savagely physical about Krapp. The very decrepitude of his body — weak eyesight and hearing, hoary hair, red nose, big shoes, and shuffling gate etc. — makes him one of the most unforgettable characters in modern theatre in respect of sheer physical presence. And this brings out all the more ironically the fact that this is a body incapable of having scarcely any memory inscribed in it. Old Krapp admits that there is “nothing to say, not a squeak” about the year that has passed. What a difference from the privileged, memory-ridden body of the woman of *Izutsu*.

One might call *Krapp’s Last Tape* a kind of “endgame” (borrowing the title of one of Beckett’s plays), a play which plays on the latter-day situation we live in where belief in the solid continuity and identity of self has collapsed, rendering the traditional “drama-about-memory” no longer possible. The only possibility left to modern (or should we say, post-modern?) man would seem to be to go on facing this impossibility, this void, just as Krapp goes on staring before him at the end of the play. This stark vision of nothingness in fact brings the play closer to *Izutsu* than to any other Western play, even though *Izutsu*, as austere in form as *Krapp’s Last Tape*, is a “memory-as-theatre” par excellence, blessed with a vision of fulfillment.

One wonders if “extremes meet”, as the proverb goes. Krapp’s blank eyes might, by a stretch of imagination, look like a ghastly simulacrum of Oedipus’s tragic eye-sockets. And who knows if the audience looking deep with their mind’s eye into the well-curb on the noh stage may not find, to its surprise, an old Westerner’s face staring back? Or conversely, the spool on the modern machine in the West may be found to contain, *à la* science fiction, a time-tunnel connecting it with the bottom of a medieval Japanese well.⁶

Notes

- 1 Girls in those days tied their hair up when married. Translation from *Izutsu* in this paper is my own. For complete translation, see Japanese Classics Translation Committee of The Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, *The Noh Drama: Ten Plays from the Japanese*, Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1995.
- 2 William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, IV. i. 156-8: "We are such stuff/As dreams are made on; and our little life/Is rounded with a sleep".
- 3 I am indebted in this connection to Megumu Sakabe, *Furerukoto no Tetsugaku* (Philosophy of Touching), Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten 1983, where the author discusses, among other thinkers, Bergson and Minkowski.
- 4 *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works*, London: Faber and Faber, 1986, p. 221.
- 5 Samuel Beckett, "Dante. . . Bruno. Vico. . . Joyce" in Samuel Beckett and Others, *Our Examination Round His Factification For Incamination Of Work In Progress*, Paris: Shakespeare and Company; and London: Faber and Faber, 1929, p. 14.
- 6 Apart from the archetypal imagery of "well" (e. g. Yeats's noh-inspired "Hawk's Well" of Synge's folklorish "Well of the Saints") or its Freudian interpretations, it might be mentioned, for curiosity's sake, that a real *izutsu* is a square wooden framework with a (probably) round well-hole inside it, while the old-style tape-recorder used by Krapp is a heavy square box with two round spools on it. Incidentally, the logotype of the Samuel Beckett Society of America has a shape a little resembling an *izutsu* or a half of a tape-recorder.