Krapp's Last Tape: A New Reading

Lois Gordon

> I could be bounded in a nutshell and
> count myself a king of infinite space,
> were it not that I have bad dreams.
> --Hamlet

Krapp's Last Tape portrays the extreme loneliness and fragmentation of identity which a man devoid of religious, social, or biological purpose will endure. Sixty-nine-year-old Krapp, despite obvious intellectual and emotional potential, has never experienced more than a momentary sense of fulfillment or peace of mind. No religious or secular ideals, and no sexual or creative urges, have sufficiently energized or motivated him toward a sustained life goal. His parents' deaths have served only as reminders of the meaninglessness of life, and although one senses their mutual affection, Krapp has gained no sense of purpose from their world--in terms of social, cultural, or religious convictions, the ideals of art, or even what Karl Popper calls that most "democratic project of all," the wish to create and sustain a family.

From time to time, Krapp has tried to soothe or stimulate himself with romance, creativity, and religion, but in the end, has found transient comfort in only the ritual reiteration of his recorded past and the obsessive ingestion and fondling of words and bananas. He has no wish to be young again, because he has found no mature wisdom that would better enable him to invest the vigor of youth. Unlike Oedipus at Colonnus, he will never say that

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regardless of the tragedy that has befallen him, there is something right in the universe. And unlike the skeptic Hume, he will never calmly await death knowing he has accomplished what he set out to do in life. He is not, nor will ever be, Yeats's old man sailing to or arriving at Byzantium to hail the superhuman, "death-in-life and life-in-death." On the great Chain of Being, Krapp has no rung from which to rise or fall.

In the midst of what seems to be an endless stream of lonely evenings, he begins his birthday ritual. There have been many such private ceremonies and, one suspects, many different scenarios and resolutions. Tonight, however, we witness the confession of an aging writer brought face to face with at least the trappings of the wasted life, and emotionally truncated Job confronting the inner whirlwind. Set in "the future," Krapp moves in and out of past time through the constructs and illusions of a life presumably dedicated to art and intellect. The intricate choreography of past-present-future, however, reveals --at least for the audience--that the emotional life, forsaken for "light" and "fire," is not only an urgent life necessity but the unacknowledged foundation of artistic achievement. Krapp may have closed his eyes to the green-eyed beauties of his youth and the rapture attainable through love, but his only worthy poetry has been stirred by his moments of passion. Even now, as he listens to their poetic transcription on tape, they are capable of moving him to self-awareness, although the play maintains to the end his ambivalence toward his various life choices. *Krapp's Last Tape* portrays the modern condition wherein the mind-body disjuncture and the emotional fragmentation that ensues are the ultimate correlatives of the dissolution of a coherent and validating world view.

"Time present and time past/Are both perhaps present in time future . . ." runs through the play as Beckett borrows images (water, fire) associated with time, the psyche, and personality--from Heraclitus to Einstein, the Bible to William James and T.S. Eliot. "In my end is my beginning" permeates this stage poem, a composition as musical as Eliot's *Four Quartets* or Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. Beckett demonstrates that at any given moment, life is repetitive and "becoming." It is only in the most conventional terms of the rational mind that one exists between time "past" and time "future," although these are the obvious specifics in which the play is cast.

Once again, consciousness is Beckett's subject, in a sense his protagonist, and time, the antagonist. Their relationship is ingeniously plotted: Krapp's tape recorder functions as both stimulus and response to voluntary and involuntary memory. The tapes both contain and stir rational and unconscious associations, and because of the nearly infinite number of verbal and nonverbal conjunctions they release on stage, they reveal the rarely-penetrated core of self that each of Beckett's figures seeks.

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. He fails to realize that voluntary memory falls easy prey to involuntary memory, and the storehouse of mind can release a limitless reservoir of unwelcome material. The machinery of mind operates as inexorably as the machinery of body.

The old tapes, first of all, are crammed with contradictions and ambivalences. The 28-year-old Krapp sneers "at what he calls his youth and thanks . . . God that it's over," but 39-year-old Krapp observes: "False ring there." As if this were not enough, present-day Krapp goes on to undermine each earlier tape, and the layers of ambiguity thicken. Certainly Krapp's selection today of intensely self-critical material from a vast, 45-year collection implies an entirely different set of tapes that he has set aside. In another mood of self-scrutiny, he might make a different selection.

On each of three tapes an older man thus assesses his youth: "Just been listening to that stupid bastard I took myself for thirty years ago," he says on one, and on another: "Hard to believe I was ever that young whelp." Specific motifs recur, concerning his career, love and sexual interests, and health. There is also a climactic or "recognition scene" on each. This night, however, a "reversal" appear possible: Krapp is 69, "the day is over," and "night is drawing nigh."

Krapp is, in fact, the last of Beckett's tragicomic clown-tramps. He stumbles, curses, coughs, and sighs throughout--an aged version of *Godot*'s Vladimir and Estragon. He too has searched for meaning (i.e., Godot) over many years but has settled for compensatory rituals. Because there is nothing in which he truly believes, he structures his life as a series of meticulous routines: he times his pleasures (when he drinks and reads), literally measures every step (taking only four or five at a time), and even assumes a "listening posture" in playing the tapes. Unlike Beckett's other gamesters or pattern-makers, however, Krapp lacks the companionship of a comforting partner (or "self-other"). perhaps for this reason, he seems closer than, say, Vladimir and Estragon or the figures of the trilogy to fashioning a candid image of himself. but he is surrounded by mirrors in the form of the tapes. And as they represent time, memory, and in general, Krapp's life, they resemble Yeats's and Eliot's unwinding "spools"--concrete emblems of potential wholeness,[1] which take on different meanings philosophically and emotionally. First, because Krapp has lived devoid of a motivating belief system or the comfort of personal relationships, the tapes concretize that circular movement which is Beckett's trademark of human endurance--*Godot*'s "Let's go/[They do not move]," Beckett's version of *King Lear*'s "going out and coming hence." On a more personal and immediate level, the tapes are the mosaics of Krapp's identity. Each is a fragment of the total man, a year of his life sketched in highlights and shadows whose true form, like the primary shapes and colors in a postimpressionist painting, can be seen only at a distance, whose value can be perceived only in the context of all the other colorations into which each merges.

Although in Beckett's earlier work, each character followed his "inner voices" (*Watt*, *Molloy*, *Godot*), these are defined in *Krapp* in a unique way--in emotional terms. Beckett redirects his famous "I can't go on. I'll go on" from the limits of knowledge and language to the extremities of the affective life. The dialectic of failure and persistence, usually portrayed through speech and silence, now extends to passion and emotional withdrawal. In this sense, Krapp is unusual. For Moran and the Unnamable, intellect was fortress against a decaying body; Krapp's unceasing sexual potency, by contrast, along with the sensuous imagery of his last remarks, are symptomatic of his enduring emotional potential, regardless of his rationalized disdain of passion.

Krapp is actually one of Beckett's few ambulatory and sexual figures; he is also unique in suffering from waning intellect. As the tapes make clear, he *has* pursued the life of the mind, separating the "grain" from the "husks" following his "vision" that would, so he thought, survive his infirmity. But this has brought him minimal success and, more importantly, little satisfaction. Today, it is Krapp's particular burden of existence to acknowledge the bitter fruits of unpursued passion, the oppressive truth that in his old age, he has neither the comfort of creative endeavor nor of personal relationship. The ultimate irony--or ironies--lies in his present indifference to the intellectual "miracle" that was to hold "against the day when [his] work [would] be done" and in the stronghold which passion has retained in his life. In fact, his very denial of love, which he called "hopeless and no good," has brutally defined his present condition. Krapp summarizes his life as "the sour cud and the iron stool," a graphic portrait of his life of few words and of bodily distress (constipation), a powerful image of a man whose few pleasures include the childlike mouthing of words ("spooool") and whose only offspring are the "rascals" he calls his tapes.

Reading the play is like reading a poem or deciphering a dream, with every detail integral to meaning, particularly costuming, lighting, sound effects, and gestures.[2] Perhaps because it concerns the universal extremities of existence--life-death, the past-future, ambition-failure, recovery-loss--it depends metaphorically and visually upon the stark contrasts of black and white.[3] That it takes place as well in the mindscape of conscious and unconscious thought processes also accounts for its abundance of shadows and light. The mind, whether in dreams or logical thought, does not function in color, a concept the Cubists well understood.

Before us is the fragmented presence of the 28-, 39-, and 69-year-old Krapp--and the years contiguous to these stages of his life. Krapp wears a white shirt, white boots, black waist-coat, and black trousers. As he shuffles through his tapes and broods on the many years they contain, he moves on and off the stage and between areas of light and shadow. Significant moments of his past are similarly defined in shadows and light: the "dark nurse" (a "dark young beauty" also dressed in "white"), the "black" ball (thrown to a "white" dog); Bianca ("white"), with whom he lived "on and off" Kedar ("black") Street

and whom he rejected; the woman in the boat, who sexually and emotionally "let" him "in," her eyes "in shadow" from the blazing sun; the confident writer, Krapp at 39, with the "new light above [his] table."

Moving between past and present, between opportunities and loss, Krapp repeats certain words ("eyes," "yelp," "gently") and makes associations with warmth and cold. These words and sensory perceptions, like the light and dark, function like musical motifs. Meaning varies with the pitch or timbre in which they are spoken: they are flattened or muted, for example, when the mannered Krapp-as-actor (on tape) obscures his words to indulge in the sound of his voice. At these moments, the audience places the words in their previous contexts, which allows their closure in Beckett's typical triadic structure.

There are at least four distinct Krapps in the play, and each, while estranged from the others, is clearly profiled. At the end, a single identity begins to emerge, as 69-year-old Krapp approaches an insight regarding the mind/body division from which he has suffered. Until then, there is (1) the man before us at age 69, an existential witness of both krapp during this 69th year and the younger Krapps; he has no script; (2) the recorded Krapp at 39, who occupies most of the play recalling his mother's death, the epiphanies of artistic/intellectual insight, and the woman in the boat[4]; (3) a Krapp 10 or 12 years earlier (recalled "at random" on this tape) who "swears off" excessive drink and sex, and mentions, perfunctorily, his father's death; he also pays "tribute" to Bianca's eyes, as he simultaneously admits that his only sustaining memory from what was a miserable year is his last image of her at the railway station; and finally, (4) an even younger Krapp, referred to briefly, who sneers at his youth.

Each tape, and each detail or mosaic chip within, is weighted with the complexity of Krapp's psyche. Examining any one in detail reveals his deepest ambivalence both to the life pursued and the one rejected. The very first minutes of the play, for instance, raise questions that recur throughout. Why must Krapp go through a vulgar banana eating/stroking/and mouthing sequence before playing his tapes? Even if one accepts his so-called onanism[5] (i.e., the banana routine, which leaves him "motionless [and] staring vacuously before him"), it is still difficult to understand why he must preface his birthday "retrospect" with this particular activity. And this is not his only preparatory ritual: he also exits into the darkness, guzzles the first of three increasingly alcoholic drinks, and returns to read his ledger--all before playing the tape ('fore-play[ing]?). He then smiles and "with relish" reads the word "spool." Only at this point, and tickled by the sound, does he look for spool 5, in box 3.

But why does such a significant portion of the play postpone his tapes? Is his greatest pleasure in the *anticipation* of the nostalgic look at his landmark (39th) year? Or are we witnessing an act of self-destruction? ("Fatal things," he says of the bananas, "for a man with my condition.") Does Krapp associate

the banana with sex or love? Are food and "art" (his ledger description) more sustaining than past experience?

Krapp's subsequent activities embellish these questions by characterizing his fragmented identity. Although Krapp was "at the crest of the wave" at age 39, he has--today--forgotten why. Although, at age 39, he felt "unshatterable associations" with the "memorable equinox [half day/night]," he is--today--barely interested in these events. He may well be completely indifferent (consciously) toward the literally traumatic "farewell to love" incident, since he "turns the [ledger] page" when he approaches it. He also fast forwards the tape at the equinox section to the aborted "clear to me at last that the dark I have always struggled to keep under is in reality my most--" at which point the audience is compelled to ask: "my most--what?"

The possible reasons for Krapp's elaborate preliminaries are complex on both conscious and unconscious levels. He is perhaps too indifferent and bored to listen, just as he is perhaps too distracted, pained, scarred over to listen. His "constipation" prohibits him from consummating even his listening pleasure, and--perhaps most significantly--his once poetic but overly alliterative description of his creative commitment ("great granite rocks the foam flying up in the light of the lighthouse") now fails to stir him--because of the quality of the prose and/or the experience associated with it. On the other hand, when the tape reaches the punt incident, presumably of no significance to him, he rewinds and replays it: "my face in her breasts and my hand on her. We lay there without moving. But under us all moved, and moved us, gently, up and down, and from side to side." The gentle and lyrical sensuality--of the words and/or this experience--has clearly moved him, unlike the "great granite rocks" passage.

Only now does Krapp begin his "retrospect," twice recording silence. At his third effort, despite some sarcasm toward the younger Krapp and a brief summary of his present lonely year, his excuses for rejecting passion weaken. The climax of the play occurs when Krapp switches off the tape, throws his notes (his writing envelope) away, and spontaneously defines his life as "the sour cud and the iron stool." Moreover, he goes on to say, "Night is drawing nigh--igh." (When Martin Held acted the Berlin role directed by Beckett, he was instructed to periodically look over his shoulder. "Old Nick's there," explained Beckett; "Death is standing behind him and unconsciously he's looking for it."[6] This perhaps explains his "nigh--igh [I].") Krapp then "wrenches off [the new] tape" and listens for a third time to the punt sequence. As the reel (and play) ends--his rejection of love are the last words heard--Krapp sits motionless and "staring" into silence.

It would appear that Krapp's birthday ritual is over--at least for now, with all his rationalizations (and in words). While there are numerous possibilities regarding his future--if he has one--most productions emphasize the emptiness of his closing remarks.[7] Our only certainty is that today's "chapter" is ended,

and there will be no additional, at least articulated, light and dark revelations tonight.

But to say "today" is always anachronistic in Beckett, and the time and space dimensions of the play, even in the title, reinforce the difficulty of an easy resolution. Krapp's name--with his constipation, spools, black ball, and "unattainable laxation"--certainly concretizes the man's emotional life. It is a fitting description of how he feels about himself--a comment, in the Cartesian scheme of things, on the excremental nature of old age. It is, in addition, a fitting name for a man who has withheld himself from life. Krapp refers repeatedly to his isolation and loneliness: "Not a soul" joined him at the Winehouse on his 39th birthday; "hardly a soul" sat with him during his mother's illness; now, in his 69th year when he takes a brief respite out of doors "before the . . . cold," there is "not a soul" (another triad). The musical Miss McGlome has long since abandoned him, and Krapp has rejected the storm, water, wind and jetty--nature in any form--for the "less lonely" fire and comfort of his room, where he can work for impersonal fame and immortality, "those things worth having when all the dust--when all *my* dust has settled." He has turned away from women--even (and perhaps defensively) the incomparably-bosomed nurse whom he watched during his mother's illness. In his old age, he lives mostly in fantasy with the fictional "Effie [sic] Briest" and with paid sex from the whore Fanny (with whom he performs prodigiously), because, as he says, he has "saved up" this kind of activity his entire life.

"Last" is an even more difficult and ambivalent word, for it points both ahead, meaning "final" or "ultimate," and backward meaning recent ("That's my last duchess . . ."). Neither meaning, however, is sufficient to explain Krapp's footing: Is he progressing or regressing in his quest for self-knowledge (And what do these terms mean anyway)? In his identity becoming more fragmented or integrated?

If Beckett had intended the first meaning of "last" ("final" or "ultimate"), there would be no reason to set the play in the future (unless, in his meticulous attention to detail, he was troubled by the anachronism of creating, in 2958, a septuagenarian who began recording 45 years ago, which would bring us back to 1913); as for the second meaning of the word, this could not be Krapp's most "recent" tape since his "poling" through box 7 and 9 indicates subsequent recording after he was 39. "Last" could, of course, refer, as Ruby Cohn believes, to Krapp at his death.[8] That the recordings are "postmortems" is also interesting in this regard, just as one may ponder if Krapp is another version of the Unnamable. Our only certainty is that "last" invokes past-present-future, which is in keeping with the fluid nature of time throughout the play. Indeed, Krapp's tapes, like memory, when played in the present, become a part of his psychological present; his "future," contemplated or played out in the theater, becomes the present and imminent past. Time in this play, as in a significant body of contemporary painting, music, and science, is relative, depending upon the location and speed of one's measurement.

And yet, since this is set "in the future," Krapp lives entirely outside time --in a no-man's land, in Belacqua's antepurgatory of a repeated past and anticipated future. Resolving these contradictions and ambiguities is like measuring events on a time-space continuum. As Krapp "plays" before us in sequence, his experiences occur the instantaneous present, as one lives in the fragility of the present, which instantly slips into the past (although there are always psychological moments--like Krapp's mother's death--when one can try to hold the existential isolation and personal meaning of "her moments, my moments [and even] the dog's moments"). The more one tries to pinpoint time, to finalize meaning, or to characterize "the complete Krapp," the more one persists in the futile endeavor of fixing *Watt's* dot in the center of the circle, since every effort in centering it, in a continuously moving universe, only serves to retain it in its same (comparable) distance from the center. "Meaning" and the core of self, like past-present-future, continuously manifest themselves and recede.

Time and space thus become virtual "characters" in Beckett's mise en scène, with the various facets of Krapp alternating as protagonist and chorus, and as subject and object: whatever is past or anticipated and then played out in the present becomes transformed into a new reality, an "interpretation," in a sense, through Krapp as witness. It also becomes another facet of Krapp, an addition to the mosaic whole. As time and space thus move in spiralling patterns and an aged Krapp mingles with earlier personae, each part of his divided selves is both estranged and more closely aligned to every other part. It is richly provocative that Beckett defines Krapp;s recorded voice as "pompous." An artist offering "posterity" his bit of grain--both as writer or actor--must necessarily transform felt experience into the arbitrary structures of language and grammar. And following each such translation, he will inevitably forget some "unshatterable associations" behind the carefully honed script, i.e., like "memorable equinox." It is similarly inevitable that experiences stirred by and yet buried beyond words--i.e., Bianca, or the woman in the boat--will deeply affect him.

In the midst of this rich portrait of the divided self, Krapp's earlier failures surface. Throughout, his silence, nervous laughter, fumbling, drinking, grunting, cursing, and sighing have provided a powerful counterpoint to his recorded statements.[9] They have served as foils to his naivety, rationalizations, and denials, for they are the undisputed truths of old age. They finally coalesce with what appear to be more spontaneous and authentic remarks that expose Krapp's deepest feelings, and the beginning of a true confrontation with his past. Beckett even stretches time *beyond* "the future" in which the play is already set as Krapp has first "spontaneous" voluntary recollection (That is, it is not on a tape): The passion of the past--the punt scene and the poetry in which it is described--stirs his longing for future pleasure.

In what appears to be the beginning of a confession, Krapp admits that thirty years ago "Everything [was] there, everything . . . on this old muckball,

all the light and dark and famine and feasting." And "in a shout," he reaffirms "Yes!" But he immediately rationalizes his earlier rejection of love with "Maybe he was right." As he reveals that his present life gives him "nothing to say," and "not a soul" for comfort, he longs for something more personal--if it is not too late. He admits his need for family, color, nature, and perhaps even faith--for everything he has rejected or be denied:

> Sometimes wondered in the night if a last effort mightn't--[be made] . . . Lie propped up in the dark--and wander. Be again in the dingle on a Christmas Eve, gathering holly, the red berried. (*Pause.*) Be again on Croghan on a Sunday morning . . . and listen to the bells . . . Be again, be again.

If his longing is obvious, so is his fear of pain--the light/dark, feasting/famine. He thus balances his "Be again" remark with a reiteration of "All that old misery." This may be one of Krapp's most honest moments, but he will neither write nor comment on it. Having already "crumpled" his envelope, he now "wrenches off [the] tape": he abandons his ritual of creating a new birthday record(ing) and instead replays the punt sequence.

Krapp's last tape, at least today, will be the tape of his 39th year. That the play closes "in silence," although there may be a profound emptiness in his present silence. Despite the gentle lyricism of the punt passage (" . . . the earth might be uninhabited"), Krapp's repeated reference to this "misery" and "drivel" underscores the ambiguity of this moment and the difficulty of predicting his "future." That is, he may, or he may not, accept the permanent loss of darkness and passion; he may rationalize it in a balance of shadows; he may then better tolerate the "chapters" of his life/art. He may even create an art of fewer words, like Beckett in his later career. Beckett does not resolve any of these possibilities; instead, he reinforces the permutations and combinations that can repeat, alter, and repeat again over a lifetime--in the ebb and flow of light and dark.

If he suggests anything permanent within human experience, it is in the unconscious terrain that activates human ambivalence. Krapp may appear to have chosen and controlled his life, but a subterranean level of functioning has motivated him as well and dictated the quality of the fictional and real selves the tapes contain. As reservoirs of pure unconscious primary process, the tapes further elucidate the nature of his past-present-and-future ambivalence toward sex, writing, women, physical and mental experience, youth and age.

Although we have discussed the light and dark stage set as a stylized backdrop that choreographs Krapp's past, present, and future, it is also a meticulously designed setting that concretizes his unconscious mind. *Krapp's* "den" evokes, like *Endgame* and Knott's house, the claustrophobic, womblike quality of dreams, where ordinary time and space is distorted, and acts and words take on personal and magical meanings. It is like the world of primary

process thought, where ordinary activities take on ritualistic performance, where the dreamer, like Krapp, can watch over himself as if he were two separate persons, an "I" and a "me," or a "me" and a "he." (At times, Krapp even speaks as though he were split into several selves, referring to "his," "me --Krapp," and "me--Jesus.") In such a world, Krapp identifies himself *as* (not "like") a dog and even as the (black) vidua (song)bird. If his happiest moments are revelling in words like "spool," it is because the words--and the tapes--have concretely become, rather than represent, his life.

Since in the dream world associations by similarity and contiguity abound, and "important" and "unimportant" events are juxtaposed, Krapp recalls his father's death dispassionately, and juxtaposes in the ledger "Mother at rest at last" and "slight improvement in bowel condition." Events and ideas transform into one another, unified by the most unlikely similarities: Krapp's spool is shaped like the eyes and black ball which also fascinate him. Ordinary activities take on the magic of myth, or more precisely, superstition: Krapp thus paces four to five steps at a time, drinks in ten to fifteen second periods, tallies his expenditure of 1,700 out of 8,000 hours at the public house; the rituals are enacted three magical times: rubbing his hands together, leaving his den for the darkness and alcohol, and listening to his "farewell to love" reel.

Every object, with its private meaning, becomes part of this contemporary morality play--the struggle between mind and body, sexuality and intellect. The envelope, for example, like the banana, takes on the attributes of sexual functioning: it is a receptacle, the sort which Krapp might once have filled with sexual ardor, as it is also the place on which he once productively recorded his notes. But the envelope has not provided him the means to immortality: he has rejected the women who offered him a reason to sing, and the very vehicle of transmitting his words into the world has become useless and, like his watch, a mere prop. The envelope, which thus condenses the interdependence of passion and writing, is now empty, both inside and outside. Krapp's open "drawers"--a curious word suggesting art, clothing, and a desk --also evokes, pictorially, the mechanical quality (and anatomy) of his sexuality and is another concrete image of his ambivalence. Placed as it is on stage, it assaults and provokes the audience, like Krapp's mouthing of the banana.

Minute details also condense Krapp's writing/sexual ambivalence: one drawer of his desk contains tapes; the other, bananas. As these further suggest his onanism (He must open the drawers with his keys), one also senses Krapp's vicarious pleasure in the ritual uncorking of the wine, and notes that his third drink escalates to whiskey accompanied by soda water from the even more sexually graphic siphon (a complimentary image to the dam portrayed near his mother's house). Drink and food, uncorking, unlocking, and bananas --sex (or onanism) and food--would appear to precede his creative ventures.

Krapp's drinking/sex/writing/art/and self-punishment is even apparent in his explanation that sex with Fannie is "better than a kick in the crutch." Fanny's name, in sound and spelling, rhymes with Effie--perhaps why he

"misspells" *Effie [Effi] Briest*, and the rhyme underscores the "F" sound. Krapp paralogically equates "crutch" with "crotch" (just as "spool" becomes "stool"). As a writer, he has tried to separate wheat from the husks, the husk another phallic reminder and variation of the crutch and banana. Husk is also shaped like any writing tool, and the confusion of the traditional metaphor (husk, rather than chaff) suggests any number of additional contradictions and ambivalences. Even the frequently-mentioned eyes, through which Krapp describes his spiritual/physical union, respond to light and shadow by opening and closing and as "slits." Mentioned ten times in the play, "eyes" function as sexual as well as spiritual entries. Long ago Krapp rejected Bianca, despite her "incomparable" and "warm eyes"; the nurse's eyes were like "chrysolite" (green), a word used by the black Othello (a role model or punitive figure?), who blindly misread Desdemona as a "strumpet."

That the "retrospectives" occur on Krapp's birth-day recalls the womb-tomb theme that has dominated so much of Beckett's work (like *Godot*'s "They give birth astride of the grave . . .") and the pain of the birth thrust out of silence and water. Krapp's very appearance and behavior on this birthday, in many ways like an overgrown child (He wears trousers "too short," as he probably did as a child attending vespers), bears additional comparison with Beckett's other clown figures, for he lacks the durability that assures their inevitable survival. Krapp may have all the trappings of the music hall buffoon--myopic vision and strained hearing, a rusty black outfit with oversized boots, and, in early productions, a white nose--but he is less the descendant of the Beckettian clown figure than his unpolished ancestor, practicing farce in its first rough performances, slipping on banana skins, slamming drawers, and knocking things off the table. Krapp as a comic type evokes as many tears as belly laughs, for there is something deeply moving about this venerable comic archetype who never literally got his act together.

Krapp has always needed a caretaker, and recalling an earlier time, he describes a nurse in a sequence that connects instinct, punishment, his mother, and life and death (in the womb/tomb combination). Krapp found the bosomy "dark" nurse, dressed in white but wheeling a large black perambulator, maternal but sexually appealing. Although she threatened to call the police as he watched her and wished for his mother's death, he did, he makes clear, "know" her "well," which he qualifies, "by appearance," rather than sexually. Again, juxtaposing these associations but then compounding his identity to child and adult-caretaker, Krapp speaks of the black/white nurse and the black ball/white dog. An elaborate paralogical sequence follows: he first mentions his gratuitous kindness to the "*yelping*" dog when his mother died, when he gave it the ball. Then, identifying himself with the dog, he calls himself "rascal" or "scoundrel" (as he had affectionately addressed the Krapp-as writer-tape-at-39) and admits importuning fortune "with a yelp." Further connecting his writing activity and female muse/"bitch," he tells us that Miss

McGlome (note her name) has long since sung to him; and despite his more recent return to the bell and vespers, he sleeps through the music.

Such complex paralogic accompanies every word and phrase, even his last "spontaneous" remark, when he would "Be again, be again." Here Krapp describes walking his dog (which he calls a "bitch") at Christmas and listening to church bells, again near water. But the mention of water once again crystallized his ambivalence and now undercuts his potential rapture: each of Krapp's earlier moments of intense feeling occurred near water: lovemaking (in the punt), his mother's death (he sat at the weir), and the "memorable equinox" (during a storm).

Indeed, as *Krapp's Last Tape* re-plays for the audience long after the play has ended, every word and gesture accumulates increasingly fertile meanings. Krapp even transforms colloquialisms into emotionally graphic and often sexually suggestive images, like "riding the wave," which becomes "at the crest," or "fit as a fiddle," which becomes "sound as a bell." Especially provocative is his word "gently," in describing the moment his mother died and his sexual/spiritual ecstasy:

> under us all moved, and moved us, gently, up and down,
> and from side to side

and

> [the dog] took it [the ball] in his mouth,
> gently, gently.

One searches for resolutions when Krapp, for the last time, listens to the punt sequence. It is clearly one of his most poignant moments--in experience, recollection, and expression. Its return for a third time provokes the complexity of meaning and accrued feeling one brings to the repeated melody in a sonata:

> --gooseberries, she said. I said again I thought it was hopeless and no good going on, and she agreed, without opening her eyes. (*Pause.*) I asked her to look at me and after a few moments--(pause)--after a few moments she did, but the eyes just slits, because of the glare. I bent over her to get them in the shadow and they opened. (*Pause. Low.*) Let me in. (*Pause.*) I lay down across her with my face in her breasts and my hand on her. We lay there without moving. But under us all moved, and moved us, gently, up and down, and from side to side.
>
> *Pause. Krapp's lips move. No sound.*

> Past midnight. Never knew such silence. The earth might be uninhabited.

This time, however, Krapp allows the tape to continue, and he listens, for the first time, to his crucial rejection of life thirty years ago: "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." Despite the revelatory and ephiphanic possibilities of the moment, even more intense than the others, Beckett once again maintains the note of ambivalence and tentativeness he has accomplished throughout. Indeed, the younger man's "I wouldn't want it back" follows closely upon the aged Krapp's "Be again, be again," just as he had earlier said of his "last fancies" that he must "keep 'em under." The ambiguous mood evoked by the succession of Krapp's selves remains.

The play thus "ends" with the circularity that maintained its temporal complexity. Krapp confronts the same question that faced him when he was 28 and 39; how to live his life. The younger Krapp had known a transient wholeness in a loving and passionate moment. So too, the older Krapp reexperiences that moment--through art and recollection. One senses that, at least for a moment, and in silence, he has experienced what Wordsworth called "truth carried into the heart alive with passion."

Might he have chosen differently as a young man? Have we witnessed a "recognition scene," and is he wiser now? Or is there a "message" for the audience that extends beyond Krapp's understanding? For Beckett, the act of questioning (i.e., how to live and for what purpose) would seem to be all that one "can manage" in an age where religious, social, and cultural faiths no longer consolidate the soul. "Meaning," and even the value of existence, has been thrown into question.

Indeed, "to be or not to be" would appear to be the ultimate question upon which the play ends, for if Hamlet is driven to ask this when his ordered world fragments, such is the *a priori* existential condition into which Krapp has been born. It is a question which all of Beckett's heroic figures raise, although their answers are, at best, tentative. The loneliness of living in a world without answers is nearly unbearable. Yet the urge to understand persists.

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Notes

1. They are another example of what S.E. Gontarski refers to as Beckett's most persistent form, the circle, which Gontarski connects with the wheel of Karma, the Jungian mandala, and the symbolic circles from Vico and Schopenhauer to Nietzsche and Spengler--the form of drama

itself and the Platonic form basic to music. See *The Intent of 'Undoing' in Samuel Beckett's Dramatic Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985) 183.

2. Indeed, Beckett's active participation in directing, along with his elaborate production notebooks, refine every detail. See James Knowlson, "*Krapp's Last Tape*: The Evolution of a Play, 1958-1975," *Journal of Beckett Studies* I (Winter 1976), 50-65, which discusses the seven stages of the play's composition.

3. Knowlson and John Pilling, in *Frescoes of the Skull: The Later Prose and Drama of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove, 1979) 86-87, suggest that Krapp's rejection of earthy love is in the gnostic, Manichean tradition. See also Gontarski 56, which identifies *Krapp's* darkness as Schopenhauer's Will.

4. Despite this innovative design, one might still discuss Krapp's "development" traditionally. In the beginning and at age 69, he is close to senility; by the end, he experiences Verlaine's "saddest words"; the Krapp-at-39 tape is the "catalytic character."

5. Ruby Cohn, *Back to Beckett* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1973) 168.

6. See John Fletcher and John Spurling, *Beckett: The Playwright* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972) 90.

7. Knowlson, "*KLT*: The Evolution of a Play."

8. Ruby Cohn, *Just Play* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980) 66.

9. Alec Reid discusses Beckett's carefully modulated rhythms and sound in the narrative, lyrical, and sardonic modes, and the silence that modulates from section to section. See *All I Can Manage More than I Could* (Dublin: The Dolmen Press) 22-24.

10. Interesting discussions of the play also include Katharine Worth's "Past into Future: *Krapp's Last Tape* to *Breath*," in *Beckett's Later Fiction and Drama*, ed. J. Acheson, K. Arthur (New York: St. Martin, 1987) 168-92, which treats how the resolution of light imagery marks a change in Beckett's style. Among the numerous discussions comparing *Krapp* and Proust, see Rosette Lamont, "Krapp: Anti-Proust," in *Theatre Workbook* I, ed. James Knowlson (London: Brutus Books, 19) 158-73; Arthur K. Oberg's "*Krapp's Last Tape* and the Proustian Vision," *Modern Drama* 9 (December 1966) 333-38, and Sandra Gilbert's "All the Dead Voices: A Study of Krapp's Last Tape," *Drama Survey* 6 (Spring 1968) 244-57.

For other early, important essays, see Roy Walker, "Samuel Beckett's Double Bill: Love, Chess and Death," *Twentieth Century*, 164 (December 1958) 533-44; Robert Brustein, "Krapp and a Little Claptrap," *New Republic*, 143 (February 22, 1960) 21-22; Ruby Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1962) 248-50; Frederick J. Hoffman, *Samuel Beckett: The Language of Self* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1962) 155-59; Alec Reid, in *European Patterns*, ed. T.B. Harward (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1964) 38-43; Richard Coe, *Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove, 1964) 102-105; John Fletcher, "Action and Play in Beckett's Theater," *Modern Drama* 9 (December 1966) 242-50. See also Hugh Kenner, *A Reader's Guide to Samuel Beckett* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1973) 129-35; Ruby Cohn, *Back to Beckett* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1973) 165-72; Bernard F. Dukore, "*Krapp's Last Tape* as Tragicomedy," *Modern Drama* 15 (March 1974) 351-54; more recent essays include Sueellen Campbell, "*Krapp's Last Tape*–Critical Theory," *Comparative Drama* 12 (Fall 1978), 187-99; Andrew Kennedy, "Krapp's Dialogue of Selves," in *Beckett at 80/Beckett in Context*, ed. Enoch Brater (New York: Oxford UP, 1986) 102-109; Vivian Mercier, *Beckett/Beckett* (New York: Oxford UP, 1987), 196-202. For a discussion of Marcel Mihalovici's opera based on the play (and Beckett's collaboration), see Denise Bourdet, "Marcel Mihalovici," *Figaro Littéraire*, July 1, 1961, 14, 16.