

“*What remains of all that misery?*”
*Time, Habit and Memory in Samuel
Beckett’s Krapp’s Last Tape*

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Abstract: *This article discusses how the flow of time in Krapp’s Last Tape constitutes an element of suspense to keep the audience’s attention and interest throughout. It also analyses the way Beckett’s play explores the paradoxical connection between time and meaning which, along with the corrosively comic potential it holds, offers the audience the opportunity to philosophize in concrete and existential terms.*

Keywords: *Samuel Beckett; Krapp’s Last Tape; existentialism.*

Life is habit. Or rather life is a succession of habits, since the individual is a succession of individuals. (Beckett on Proust)

Krapp’s Last Tape was written in English in early 1958, the same year when it was first published in *Evergreen Review* and performed at the Royal Court Theatre in London. As history has it, the voice of Northern Irish actor Patrick Magee provided Beckett with the inspiration to write this play: Beckett had listened to Magee reading excerpts from *Molloy* (1951) and *From an Abandoned Work* (1957) on the BBC at the end of the previous year. That said, this article looks into how the flow of time in *Krapp’s Last Tape* constitutes the leading motif that generates and maintains suspense throughout Beckett’s one-act play. In addition, this study considers time as a central philosophical category to reflect upon the nature of the uncertainty and of the despair that afflict the ageing protagonist. Indeed, time imbricates memory and remembrance, and sets the frame for experience and existence to take place and acquire meaning. Paradoxically, it is also the passage of time that fades people’s memories into oblivion and ultimately renders personal experiences meaningless. Bearing that in mind, this article examines how Beckett’s play explores this paradox, and the corrosively comic potential it holds, to offer the audience the opportunity to philosophise in concrete and existential terms.

The play starts with Krapp, a weary sixty-nine-year-old man, sitting at a table and facing front across from its drawers. He remains motionless for a moment, heaves a sigh, consults his pocket-watch, and after fumbling his pockets for a bunch of keys, gets up and moves to the front of the table. He locks and unlocks the table's drawers several times, paces to and fro at the edge of the stage, peels and eats some bananas –and nearly falls on their skin, which he drops at his feet –, goes backstage in the dark for a drink – the loud pop of a cork suggests so – and returns to the stage carrying a ledger which he finally lays onto the table. In strong white light, the table has on it a tape-recorder with microphone and a number of cardboard boxes with reels that contain recorded audio diary entries. Very near-sighted – but unspectacled – and hard of hearing, Krapp takes a spool out of a box – “box three, spool five” (Beckett 216) – in order to listen to it. He plays the recording back and forth, repeatedly switching the machine on and off. In this process, he stumbles upon a pompous and resentful thirty-nine-year-old Krapp, who broods on the memories of things that could have been and comments bitterly on the life of a much younger Krapp, possibly in his late twenties – “Just been listening to an old year, passages at random. I did not check the book, but *it must have been ten or twelve years ago*” (Beckett 218, *emphasis added*) –, who is at a certain point described as a young whelp. After listening to random fragments of his memories, most of which had already been partially or totally forgotten, Krapp switches off the machine, loads a virgin reel to it, clears his throat and starts recording a new audio diary entry. The sixty-nine-year old Krapp is contemptuous towards his thirty-nine-year-old self and makes bitter comments on his multiple failures as a lover and human being. Enraged, and after a long pause, Krapp wrenches off the tape and throws it away. He then puts the previous tape back on the machine, winds it forward to the passage in which he is with a girl in a punt and listens to it motionlessly staring before him, as the tape runs on in silence till the curtain falls.

The Krapp who is afflicted by impending death in his den is a victim of time and a prisoner of his own memories. Even though the ageing protagonist is “... disgusted with his earlier self's priorities” (Webb 70), he cannot refrain from harking back on the “... life of the selves he has made. Though his old selves may be forgotten, his successive patterns of habit grow out of one another, holding him the prisoner of men he can no longer even recognize” (Webb 68). His continuing efforts to evade the flaws and weaknesses of his previous selves emphasise the bitter irony embedded in the Manichean structure of the play. This exposes how suggestively interlinked his selves are, as well as how minimal changes, if any, have taken place throughout his life. The sixty-nine-year-old Krapp is never sympathetic towards his former selves, who are united “... by certain continuities, principally a continuous egoism, which ironically isolates them from one another by the mutual lack of sympathy it engenders. Each despises the others” (Webb 68). Indeed, Krapp still suffers from the same foibles and shortcomings he derides in his young selves. He is selfish and possessive, which is demonstrated by his strenuous obsession with keeping the table's drawers locked. At the beginning of

the play, he "... *unlocks* first drawer ... takes out a reel of tape ... *locks* drawer, *unlocks* second drawer ... takes out a large banana ... *locks* drawer ..." (Beckett 215, *emphasis added*). Apart from that, Krapp has also failed to keep the resolution to "... drink less, in particular" (Beckett 218). This becomes evident not only in his brief and solitary laughter after listening to his past aspirations and resolutions – "The voice! Jesus! And the aspirations! [*Brief laugh in which KRAPP joins.*] And the resolutions! [*Brief laugh in which KRAPP joins.*]" (Beckett 218) –, but also in the "pop of a cork" (Beckett 215) and in the "... sound of bottle against glass, then brief siphon" (Beckett 221) that are heard when he goes backstage, at different moments. Moreover, as the present Krapp sits, raptly listening to his thirty-nine-year-old self praise the new light above the table as "... a great improvement [to make him] feel less alone. [*Pause.*] In a way. [*Pause.*]" (Beckett 217), he reaffirms the rejection of the emotional side of life represented by his self-imposed exile and asceticism. In fact, the sixty-nine-year-old Krapp "... is not less alone with the dark around him; he only feels that way momentarily [and the] association of the ideas symbolized by light and darkness with the various women in his life is gradually revealed" (Webb 71-72). The image of loneliness that emerges from these associations is corroborated by the references to his former lover Bianca, whom he despises as a "hopeless business" (Beckett 218), and to the dark nurse who used to look after his mother. Indeed, Krapp's present activities and isolation make it "... even clearer how little fundamental change there has been, despite his feeling of loss of continuity among his successive selves" (Webb 70). In that sense, Beckett's dramatic irony is particularly corrosive in the following passage: "Just been listening to that stupid bastard I took myself for thirty years ago, hard to believe I was ever as bad as that. Thank God that's all done with anyway" (Beckett 222). This is so because Krapp's words are clearly contradicted by his attitudes and his current state of perplexity and precariousness. Added to that, his incurable obsession with the flow of time lures him into trying to capture and store the evanescence of the moments he lived, which he fails to do miserably. As a matter of fact, "deforming [time] and being deformed in turn, Krapp has made of his days and years the links of the chains that bind him" (Webb 66). To put it differently, Krapp's life has become a "... sequence of fragmentary selves held together by habit and by a thread of memory" (Webb 68) whose meaning time has altered, distorted and, in some cases, completely obliterated.

That time is a leading motif in *Krapp's Last Tape* is therefore beyond dispute. According to Weiss, the play "... takes place during a specific clock time of which we are not told, and on a specific calendar date: Krapp's sixty-ninth birthday" (31). Indeed, the 'last tape' in the title already suggests so, and it becomes an important element to reinforce the duality and the ambiguity that characterise Krapp's existence. Is the 'last tape' a reference to Krapp's most recent recording? Or is it an allusion to his final registration of the experience of self-denial his staunch asceticism has engendered? In fact, 'last tape' favours both interpretations, thus juxtaposing recentness and finitude, never actually privileging one over the other. Besides, 'last tape' also intimates the existence of previous

tapes, and in turn, of previous selves, an implication which helps to allocate the passage of time at the heart of the play. Beckett pithily establishes the connection between past and present in his manipulation of language for aesthetic effect, and he never resolves the ambiguities that arise. Indeed, the interest and suspense generated by his choices fulfil "... the basic task of anyone concerned with presenting any kind of drama to any audience [, which] consists in capturing their attention and holding it as long as required" (Esslin 43). That said, Beckett's masterful use of time for dramatic effect increases the expectations of the audience as it constantly reminds them of the driving force behind the actions on stage. In *Krapp's Last Tape*, the "... ageing protagonist is consumed by two machines – his pocket-watch and his tape recorder – both of which make up his obsession with clock and calendar time" (Weiss 31). In addition to that, Beckett's use of time as structural principle and motif also causes the audience to experience its flow in a most intense and insidious form. In other words, Beckett invites the audience to feel the passage of time, and to a certain extent to sympathise with Krapp's irreparable losses. Furthermore, Beckett's skilful use of pauses and hesitations dictates the pace of the action, which is counterpointed with the alternation of prolonged and brief laughs, as in the following passage:

More than 20 per cent, say 40 per cent of his waking life. [*Pause.*] Plans for a less... [*hesitates*]...engrossing sexual life. Last illness of his father. Flagging pursuit of happiness. Unattainable laxation. Sneers at what he calls his youth and thanks God that it's over. [*Pause.*] False ring there. [*Pause.*] Shadows of the opus...magnum. Closing with a – [*brief laugh*] – yelp to Providence. [*Prolonged laugh in which KRAPP joins.*] (...). (Beckett 218).

This experience of time also generates and maintains suspense, which is reinforced by both Krapp's switching on and off of the tape recorder as well as by his winding it forward at moments of potential resolution of this tension.

In addition, Krapp's laconic and elliptical language contributes to keeping the audience's attention by denying full access to the protagonist's existence. The audience can only gain access to fragments of Krapp's memory and experience while he impatiently attempts to edit out passages of his life he considers embarrassing or even not relevant any longer. In terms of dramatic effect, it is safe to say that *Krapp's Last Tape* pushes to the limit the notion that "expectations must be aroused, but never, until the last curtain, wholly fulfilled [and that] the action must seem to be getting nearer to the objective yet never reach it entirely before the end" (Esslin 43). The following passage illustrates this idea more didactically:

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*] – great granite rocks the foam flying up in the light of the lighthouse and the wind-gauge spinning like a propeller, clear to me at last that the dark

I have always struggled to keep under is in reality my most – [KRAPP curses, switches off, winds tape forward, switches on again] – unshatterable association until my dissolution of storm and night with the light of the understanding and the fire – [KRAPP curses louder, switches off, winds tape forward, switches again] – 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. (Beckett 219-220)

What Krapp does is to interrupt his narrative several times at what seem to be moments of great revelation. This makes room for conjectures about the content of the parts he impatiently winds forward. The suppression of these passages, and the absence of meaning they represent, creates dramatic suspense that is never actually resolved. It is not that the action never gets nearer to its objective before the end of the play: it never reaches it.

Yet time is not only the structural principle of *Krapp's Last Tape*; it is also its central philosophical category in that it imbricates memory and remembrance. “*Krapp's Last Tape* deals with the flow of time and the instability of the self ...” (Esslin 51). In that sense, time and memory are the elements that put Krapp's different selves into close contact. Moreover, it is memory the category which challenges chronology and brings into contact different Krapps, from different moments of his life. In this scenario, the self is not only “... ever elusive, split into perceiver and perceived, the teller of the tale and the listener to the tale [but] also ever changing through time, from moment to moment ...” (Esslin 90). That the reading of the dictionary entry for ‘viduity’ – “... state – or condition – of being – or remaining – a widow – or widower. [*Looks up. Puzzled.*] Being – or remaining? ...” (Beckett 219) – puzzles Krapp so greatly is therefore not surprising. As a matter of fact, the meaning of ‘viduity’ appears to have become of little importance or interest for Krapp at the very moment he reads the definition from the dictionary. Instead, it is the shape of the idea of being or remaining that seems of greater interest to Krapp. His perplexity makes the audience wonder whether being and remaining could actually be an alternative for one another, or whether these actions would not necessarily overlap in the end. In other words, to what extent does being become remaining when one thinks in terms of one's own misery, as Krapp manifestly does? Are not the ruins of our selves, corroded by the action of time, which remain in the end? Or else, is not it remaining a necessary condition of being? Moreover, Krapp has to come to terms with the fact that being or remaining can only be possible within time, which is ironically what consumes him physically and morally. The final implication of this idea is that the “... only authentic experience that can be communicated is the experience of the single moment in the fullness of its emotional intensity, its existential totality” (Esslin 90). And that existential totality which is only manifest in the singularity of the moment cannot be saved or remain. To put it differently, it is the memory of the moment that remains, not the moment itself: the moment ceases to be so that it can be stored in and rescued by memory. Memories in that sense are mere ruins. They are only remains of lived

experience. As such they can be excavated for meaning, but are not guaranteed to have preserved any inherent signification. What this means is that they can hide as much as they can reveal. The scene in which Krapp meditates on his mother's death illustrates Esslin's point with great clarity

I was there when – [KRAPP *switches off, broods, switches on again.*] – the blind went down, one of those dirty brown roller affairs, throwing a ball for a little white dog as chance would have it. I happened to look up and there it was. All over and done with, at last. (Beckett 220)

Death comes as a welcome relief, a profound liberation from the burden of being or remaining, which in that passage is reinforced by 'at last.' "I sat on for a few moments with the ball in my hand and the dog yelping and pawing at me. [*Pause.*] Moments. Her moment, my moments. [*Pause.*] The dog's moments. [*Pause.*]" (Beckett 219-220), says Krapp, and his words graphically express his difficulty in rationally finding meaning in a reality subjected to constant change. It is because the moment is evanescent that the emotional intensity and existential totality of the experiences he has lived are eventually consigned to oblivion. In *Krapp's Last Tape*, "... the self is a mystery, ever elusive [given] the impermanence of the human personality in time [in that] at each point in time our self is a distinct and different entity ..." (Esslin 90). Even though the sixty-nine-year old Krapp is still affected by the predicaments of his former selves, his present self is "... confronted with its earlier incarnation only to find it utterly strange" (Esslin 79).

This utter strangeness builds an acute awareness that time marches on, which therefore introduces despair as a distinctive thematic element in *Krapp's Last Tape*. The critical element in Krapp's character is "... moral isolation. [His] various choices [have] made his life into a prison [and he] is driven in old age to the realization that he is about to die without having ever really lived" (Webb 66). His losses are many and permanent, and his persistent refusal to engage in prolonged relationships with women, for fear of what their outcome could be, confirms that. "[*Pause.*] Could have been happy with her, up there on the Baltic..., and the pines, and the dunes. [*Pause.*] Pah! [*Pause.*] Could I? [*Pause.*] And she? [*Pause.*] Pah!" (Beckett 222). The irresolute tone of his words here attests that his staunch asceticism is in fact a result of his inability to make the first move. In fact, his attempts to do so are reported to have been an abject failure. For instance, the scene at the hospital, which the thirty-nine-year-old Krapp recounts, reveals that one of the nurses – "... one dark young beauty I recollect particularly, all white and starch, incomparable bosom ..." (Beckett 219) –, held a strong erotic attraction for him. Krapp insinuates that she was attracted to him as well – "... whenever I looked in her direction she had her eyes on me" (Beckett 219) –, which might have only been a figment of his imagination after all. Be that as it may, the scene ends with his pathetically faltering attempt to approach the nurse: "And yet when I was bold enough to speak to her – not having been introduced – she threatened to call a policeman. As if I had designs on

her virtue! [*Laugh. Pause*]” (Beckett 219-220). The effect the whole passage produces, with Krapp’s disdainful comment on the nurse he was obviously attracted to, is darkly comic: it shows the reader and the audience that “... behind the comedy lies a clear-eyed vision of the waste of most human endeavor, social planning and attempts to do good” (Calder 31).

Despite offering a startling and poignant insight into man’s inherent tendency to failure, and into the despair it provokes, *Krapp’s Last Tape* denies any forms of simple-minded nihilism and fatalistic solutions to its conflicts. Of particular interest is the fact that Krapp’s approaching death, which could free him from the imprisonment of living under the veil of his fragmented memories, never actually comes. The tape running on in silence at the end of the play does not provide enough evidence about whether or not Krapp has finally ceased to be. If anything, it suggests that Krapp’s life goes on. As John Calder argues, for Beckett’s characters death is not a way to escape from life. Instead, “Krapp escapes through the Proustian past, reliving his memories with the aid of a tape recorder on which he has recorded his thoughts every birthday up to the present one, his sixty-ninth ... But escape is never divorced from pain” (Calder 27). Beckett’s artistic works are honest enough never to eschew the preposterous notions and attitudes that govern people’s lives. Indeed, “... to find a way beyond the absurd, one can only pass through it [and this is what] Beckett’s plays attempt to do ...” (Webb 24). Yet, going through the absurdity of existence and its chaotic nature is not easy. Krapp has spent his life trying to escape it and now he lives solely on new retrospects, as his remarks in “... – a help before embarking on a new ... [*hesitates*] ... retrospect” (Beckett 218) evince. He has failed to find his way beyond the absurd, and as a result seeks comfort and consolation in the cultivation of habits that ultimately get him back to himself. As he admits, “[*Pause.*] I love to get up and move about in [my den], then back here to... [*hesitates*] ... me. [*Pause.*] Krapp” (Beckett 219). Consequently, the resulting atmosphere of failure and despair of the play, along with the elusive nature of Krapp’s memories and selves, corroborates the idea that

The drama of Samuel Beckett ... has no faith whatsoever in redemption, but presents a world which still looks as though it is in dire need of it. It refuses to turn its gaze from the intolerableness of things, even if there is no transcendent consolation at hand. After a while, however, you can ease the strain of this by portraying a world in which there is indeed no salvation, but on the other hand nothing to be saved. (Eagleton 57-58)

What is left for Krapp to save after all? As he admits, “perhaps [his] best years are gone. When there was a chance of happiness” (Beckett 223). Krapp’s misery is made all the more prominent by his “emotional dependency on the tape recorder” (Weiss 36), which represents the way “Krapp has become increasingly mechanised, and as such has become increasingly isolated” (Weiss 36). In this context, the tape recorder has a dual function and an ambiguous nature. This results from the fact that at the same time it “allows Krapp to remember, and keep remembering, his lost past, it also displaces Krapp’s

emotional and physical needs. The act of reviewing the past draws Krapp further into the past, into himself and into the machine” (Weiss 35). What this shows in the end is that the protagonist has arrived at an impasse. He cannot save his experiences from total oblivion through recollection simply because he has never been able to attach meaning to his existence. Krapp’s dead end reveals that there is no essential or inherent meaning to experience, and also that it falls to people to render their experiences meaningful. Such experiences can only be meaningful when their potentialities are fully embraced, which Krapp has refused to do throughout his life. Instead, he has systematically confined them to a mechanised archive represented by the tape recorder. “Because the memory remains on tape only to be recalled with the help of a sterile machine, Krapp is unable to flush away his emotional longing” (Weiss 38). Nevertheless, his emotions seem to be as sterile as the accounts of the past Krapps registered on the tapes. A failed author, “Krapp cannot produce written texts because he hoards his memories of love and loss onto a machine which ultimately leads to an unproductive artistic life” (Weiss 38).

Krapp’s Last Tape ultimately embodies “... in form a presentation of the formlessness of human experience in the twentieth century” (Webb 24). What Beckett’s play does is to aesthetically represent the state of mind which produces the central paradox that twentieth-century man had to face: “we are impelled by our nature to seek understanding, but reason, the only instrument we have with which to seek it, has proven a clumsy and fragile tool” (Webb 23). The way that Beckett rewrites experience in the aesthetic realm of this particular one-act play reveals that he never looks away from the most excruciatingly unbearable aspects of human existence. On the contrary, his work as a playwright shows he is very much aware that “drama at its best, in the concreteness, the reality, of its nature, has the infinite complexity of the real world itself” (Esslin 114). Due to that, Beckett never overlooks the reality of human existence and its inherent contradictions. His plays address themes and topics that go way beyond exploring the dilemmas of twentieth-century man or of what came to be known as the theatre of the absurd. As a matter of fact, they delve into and, to a certain extent, re-examine the philosophical tradition that has transformed (post)modern man into a “... stranger in an unintelligible universe ...” (Webb 23).

There seems to be little doubt, then, that time is of the essence for memory and recollection. It not only creates habit, but it also provides the frame within which human existence and experience may acquire meaning. In that sense, Krapp is the quintessential embodiment of the Beckettian principle according to which the individual is a succession of individuals and life is a mere succession of habits. In spite of that, time can also serve another completely different purpose. Indeed, it drains language out of meaning and in “... *Krapp’s Last Tape*, the well-turned idealistic professions of faith Krapp made in his best years have become empty sounds to Krapp grown old” (Esslin 87). The present Krapp’s inability to remember the word ‘viduity’ used by his thirty-nine-year old self at a certain point shows that. “[*KRAPP switches off, raises his head, stares blankly before him. His lips move in the syllables of ‘viduity’. No sound.*]” (Beckett 219). He then goes

backstage, picks up a dictionary, lays it on the table and looks up the meaning of a word which, like most of his memorable moments, had faded into total oblivion.

The blackly comic effect this scene creates is matched by the paradox of "... Hm... Memorable... what? [*He peers closer.*] Equinox, memorable equinox. [*He raises his head, stares blankly front. Puzzled.*] Memorable equinox?... [*Pause. He shrugs his shoulders, peers again at ledger, reads.*]" (Beckett 217). Krapp's blank stare added to his shrug of shoulders bespeaks his perplexity at the fact that language escapes him much as the relevance of his memories does. In fact, the medium through which the totality of the moment could be redeemed proves itself to be fallible. Indeed, language in *Krapp's Last Tape* "... becomes a living force of its own that can dictate the content that floats on it, and have the capacity to hide as much as it reveals" (Calder 17). Beckett's use of language also elicits Krapp's obsession with habit, and passages like "... Past midnight. *Never* knew such silence" (Beckett 221) and "be *again*, be *again*" (Beckett 223, *emphasis added*) illustrate that, with their emphasis on frequency and repetition. Moreover, the scene in which Old Miss McGlome does not sing her habitual songs of her girlhood shows very clearly that, in this play, habit is imbricated in both language and gesture. Besides, it is habit that helps to create the consciousness of past and present, as well as of their constant juxtaposition for dramatic effect. "*Extraordinary* silence this evening, I strain my ears and do not hear a sound. Old Miss McGlome *always* sings at this hour. But not tonight" (Beckett 217, *emphasis added*), says Krapp after noticing her unusual silence. Beckett's choice of words here creates a powerful metaphor that shows how great a deadener habit is. The absence of language, in the form of Miss McGlome's unsung song, disrupts the usual order of things, which is also alluded to and reinforced by the etymological nuances of 'extraordinary'. To put it differently, Beckett's word choice can hide and unveil meanings at the same time, which suggests that he viewed language in a somewhat ambiguous and paradoxical way. For him, "... language is both adequate and inadequate, life and art become expressible and inexpressible" (McCrae; Carter 15), to the point that he never takes for granted the gaps in meaning, as well as the tiny yet indispensable nuances of discourse that common sense will blithely take for granted. To a certain extent, this nature of words appears to justify his tendency towards minimalism. Ultimately, in *Krapp's Last Tape*, language "... serves to express the breakdown, the disintegration of language. Where there is no certainty, there can be no definite meanings ..." (Esslin 86), which undermines the possibility for absolute truths to ever exist, let alone to be expressed. In Krapp's dramatic universe, where no transcendence is presented as alternative or consolation, and where reason has proved faulty to apprehend existence in its full complexity, it is natural that uncertainty meets despair.

Whether it is uncertainty that leads to despair, or is the other way around is a difficult thing to be sure of, though. "What went wrong? What choices led him to this dead end? Krapp himself seems to understand very little of this, only that the end he has come to is indeed a dead one" (Webb 71). An heir of enlightened reason, Krapp cannot figure out what went wrong because he is "... too close to [the clues]. The audience,

however, is in a position to see more clearly” (Webb 71). The dramatic irony that results exposes Krapp’s weaknesses while it also offers the audience the chance to look inwards and meditate on their own tentative existence. The ambiguity and perplexity that arise from this situation are also signaled in Krapp’s faltering discourse. Excerpts like “... – back on the year that is gone, with what I hope is *perhaps* a glint of the old eye to come ...” (Beckett 219, *emphasis added*), and “... I have chiefly to record this evening, against the day when my work will be done and *perhaps* no place left in my memory ...” (Beckett 220, *emphasis added*) confirm this idea. His hesitancy and vacillation between different selves, as well as the states of mind they represent, are also evident in “... Ah well, *maybe* he was right” (Beckett 222, *emphasis added*), and also in “... *Perhaps* my best years are gone. When there was a chance of happiness” (Beckett 223, *emphasis added*). What this suggests is that the key word and the defining notion in Krapp’s life is ‘perhaps’. Indeed, Krapp’s fickleness entails his incapacity to sort out the puzzle that his existence has become. Besides, his reticent discourse reinforces this idea as it attests language’s failure to communicate existential truths directly and positively. Beckett “... may have devalued language as an instrument for the communication of ultimate truths, but he has shown himself a great master of language as an artistic medium” (Esslin 88). Moreover, Beckett’s virtuoso command of language as an artistic medium makes his writing, for either stage or page, at the same time self-consciously poetic in its form and philosophically disturbing in its content and effects. In his plays, “action on the level of reality [can at] the same time be a poetic metaphor” (Esslin 114-115). In *Krapp’s Last Tape* this metaphor becomes all the more powerful as it encapsulates the complex nature of time and causes the reader or the theatregoer to experience its flow at work in the aesthetic realm of the play.

According to Martin Esslin, “most serious drama from Greek tragedies to Samuel Beckett is [a form of] philosophising not in abstract but in [concrete and existential] terms” (22). In and of itself, drama can exert a direct and profound impact on people’s minds by appealing to emotions as well as to reason. What is more, drama constitutes a “... form of thought, a cognitive process, a method by which we can translate abstract concepts into concrete human terms or by which we can set up a situation and work out its consequences” (Esslin 23). If this is true, one can say that Beckett took this idea almost literally when he tried to translate the abstract notions of memory and time onto the stage by using a tape recorder as the quintessential metaphor for time and habit in *Krapp’s Last Tape*. Moreover, within the framework that the stage provides, the recording machine *is* the protagonist’s involuntary memory, the fragments of which are exposed to Krapp as he operates the machine. At the same time, the encounter with the tape recorder causes the reader and audience to reflect upon their own experiences and perhaps rethink their existence altogether. In conclusion, and bearing these considerations in mind, it seems appropriate to think of Samuel Beckett’s theatre of the absurd as part of a broader philosophical tradition that meditates upon the emptiness of human existence, its origins and its consequences. As a result, the careful study of *Krapp’s Last Tape* indicates that

Beckett possessed a keen awareness and vast knowledge of the philosophical tradition that has thrown (post)modern man into this impenetrable and indecipherable universe in which he is just a stranger, and where going on seems to be the only way out of his moral isolation and despair.

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