

Krapp's Last Tape and the Beckettian mimesis of regret

ERIC P. LEVY

Perhaps no drama more deserves to be called a 'memory play' (to invoke Ruby Cohn's designation) than *Krapp's Last Tape*—a play which, through pairing the aged Krapp with what Martin Esslin terms an 'autobiographical library of annual recorded statements', unfolds a series of rememorations.¹ In this regard, *Krapp's Last Tape*, like *The Glass Menagerie* as described by its author, Tennessee Williams, appears as a work in which nostalgia is 'the first condition'.² This impression is reinforced by the abundant connections, expertly charted by James Knowlson, between the lives of Krapp and Samuel Beckett, his author.³ The relentless emphasis, in *Krapp's Last Tape*, on memory as the agent of negative retrospection on life has prompted many critics to construe the play in generically mimetic terms, and hence to interpret Krapp as the Beckettian version of Everyman. For example, according to Joseph Smith, the play treats 'the question whether *any* life can be said to have been lived for other than naught'.⁴ According to Anthony Kubiak, the play consummates the mimetic tradition of 'Western drama', with respect to the inevitability of 'pain, failure, and hopelessness' in life.⁵ Daniel Katz transposes this universalizing tendency to a more theoretical plane, by interpreting Krapp in poststructuralist terms as a representation of 'the interminable denial of subjective appropriation which makes up "Not I"'.⁶

But to construe the play, in generically mimetic terms, as the representation of some aspect or quality universally applicable to human life is to construe Krapp's plight, at age sixty-nine, as irreversibly inevitable, and not as one which could, by any means, be averted. In such interpretation, Krapp cannot be

judged responsible for his predicament; for its cause concerns the intrinsic nature of life, not the intrinsic nature of Krapp. Yet, the upshot of such interpretation is to suppress or obscure the *moral* dimension of the play—a dimension memorably formulated, in another context, by Matthew Arnold, as entailing the question of ‘[h]ow to live’, how to apply ‘ideas to life’, so that life is not ‘abandoned to passion or allowed to drift at hazard’.⁷ But in thus demanding the avoidance of *irresponsibility*, the moral question of how to live presupposes the recognition of *responsibility*—the obligation, that is, to direct life toward its proper goal, however defined.

The moral dimension is not only fundamental to *Krapp’s Last Tape*, but also fundamentally *ambiguous*. From one perspective, Krapp displays *irresponsibility*, in becoming the victim of his own psychological mechanism or habitual attitude to life, which reduces his existence to the state of regret, regarding the one event which he obsessively remembers: ‘Be again, be again. (*Pause.*) All that old misery. (*Pause.*) Once wasn’t enough for you. (*Pause.*) Lie down across her’ (pp. 26-7). Yet from another perspective, through precisely this lapse into regret, Krapp displays *responsibility*, by conducting his life to the Beckettian goal of abandonment—a state of vacancy beyond the reach of regret: ‘Regretting, that’s what helps you on . . . regretting what is, regretting what was . . . that’s what transports you, towards the end of regretting’ (*The Unnamable*, p. 371). Ironically, *neither* alternative confirms the conventional view that the play represents the futility of life. If Krapp is construed in terms of irresponsibility, then his plight, by definition, cannot be attributed to universally impinging forces over which he has no control. But if Krapp is construed in terms of responsibility and successful achievement of the Beckettian goal, then his plight cannot be deemed an example of ‘failure, and hopelessness’ (to retrieve Kubiak’s characterization, cited earlier).

The ambiguity of Krapp’s predicament, with respect to the alternatives of irresponsibility and responsibility, is epitomized by the *time* indicated in the stage directions. Though the

accumulated tapes suggest Krapp's concern with the *past*, and though his observance of this particular birthday (his sixty-ninth) emphasizes his situation in the *present*, the first stage direction of the play indicates 'A late evening in the *future*' (p. 9, my emphasis). Since Krapp is in a present that commemorates various pasts, the designation of an evening in the future becomes problematic. But the problem can be solved when we realize that the temporal designation is not chronological but symbolic. That is, it indicates, not a date not yet reached on a calendar, but an inevitability toward which Krapp is always tending. But is this inevitability due to factors which Krapp cannot control or to factors for which he is responsible? On the one hand, as we shall explore, Krapp's predicament seems to stem from the mentality or perspective on life which he embodies at any age, but which in principle he could modify. On the other hand, Krapp appears caught in a cycle whose momentum cannot be altered. The *locus classicus* of the Beckettian notion of unalterable inevitability occurs in *Molloy*: 'And what I saw was more like a crumbling, a frenzied collapsing of all that had always protected me from all I was always condemned to be.'⁸ A similar formulation appears in *Waiting for Godot*: 'The essential doesn't change.'⁹ An analogue occurs in *Company*: 'And you as you always were. Alone.'¹⁰

The first alternative—irresponsibility or failure properly to address the problem of how to live—can be introduced by contrasting the view of age in *Krapp's Last Tape* with that in Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas*. Our intention here is simply to foreground an important aspect of Beckett's play, not to adduce any theories of literary influence on Beckett's work—though, as Knowlson indicates, Beckett conceived, in late 1936, the never executed plan of writing a play concerning Dr. Johnson and Mrs Thrale.¹¹ *Rasselas* begins with the admonition that disappointment in life is inevitable; for age cannot 'perform the promises of youth':

Ye who listen with credulity to the whispers of fancy, and pursue with eagerness the phantoms of hope; who expect that age will perform the promises of youth, and that the

deficiencies of the present day will be supplied by the morrow;
attend to the history of Rasselas prince of Abissinia.¹²

To Johnson, the problem of unhappiness in old age is generic. The individual bears no responsibility for it. But from the point of view which we shall now adopt, this is not the situation in *Krapp's Last Tape*, where Krapp's plight results from his own choices. Here, to invoke the Heracleitean dictum, character is man's fate.¹³

The notion of deficient self-control and failure to assume responsibility for one's actions is localized in Krapp's relation to bananas (though critics who discuss the bananas treat them as phallic symbols, ultimately indicative of Krapp's masturbatory narcissism).¹⁴ Despite repeated resolutions over the years to 'Cut 'em out!' (p. 14), Krapp continues gorging: 'Have just eaten I regret to say three bananas and only with difficulty refrained from a fourth' (p. 14). Ironically, the compulsiveness of Krapp's banana bulimia is conspicuously analogous to the compulsiveness of his rememoration. Moreover, his much emphasized discarding of banana peels is obviously analogous to his tendency to reject or forget memories.¹⁵ He 'nearly falls' after treading on the first skin, and then 'finally pushes it, still stooping, with his foot over the edge of stage into pit' (p. 11). After peeling the second banana, he 'tosses skin into pit' (p. 11). He treats memories in the same way as he treats banana skins. No longer interested in rememorating the year just concluded, Krapp first discards the envelope on which he has scrawled his notes ('Crumples it and *throws it away*' [p. 24, my emphasis]), and then discards the tape on which he is recording, so that he might gorge once more on the more distant memory of the girl in the punt: 'He suddenly bends over machine, switches off, wrenches off tape, *throws it away*, puts on the other, winds it forward to the passage he wants, switches on, listens staring front' (p. 27, my emphasis).

The problem of disposal common to bananas and memories suggests that, like bananas, memories are "[f]atal things for a

man with [Krapp's] condition' (p. 14); for compulsive consumption of them constipates his life: 'What's a year now? The sour cud and the iron stool' (p. 25). Here movement toward the future is formulated in terms of preoccupation with the past: 'These old P.M.s are gruesome, but I often find them—(Krapp switches off, broods, switches on)—a help before embarking on a new . . . (hesitates) . . . retrospect' (p. 16). Krapp's relation to memory entails a further paradox. On the one hand, Krapp's life is a repudiating of his own previous or earlier selves and their respective experiences: 'Well out of that, Jesus yes!' (p. 17); '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' (p. 24). This disposal of the past seems to serve the project of advancing toward fulfillment in the future: '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' (p. 28). But on the other hand, the consequence of discarding the past is eventually to reduce life to regret ('drowned in dreams' [p. 25]), with the result, to interpolate Beckett's words from *Proust*, that Krapp is 'present at his own absence'.¹⁶

From this perspective, Krapp does indeed appear irresponsible, in his failure to control a pattern of thought which dooms him to nostalgia. Originally, as we have seen, Krapp's retrospective project was not to return to the past, but to define his identity through the annual progression of perspectives on the past. But eventually this retrospective project backfires such that Krapp has no identity but through regretting the past and abdicating responsibility to identify through striving toward the future:

Sometimes wondered if a last effort mightn't—(Pause.) Ah finish your booze now and get to your bed. Go on with this drivel in the morning. Or leave it at that. (Pause.) Lie propped up in the dark—and wander. Be again in the dingle on a Christmas Eve, gathering holly, the red-berried. All that old misery. (p. 26)

Yet from another perspective, Krapp's relation to memory enables him to evade the great hazard enunciated in the theory of life which Beckett formulates in his study of Proust, already cited.

In this theory, often summarized by critics, the life of an individual is governed by habits or routine patterns of existence which sustain their own continuity, and enable the individual to adapt to his or her environment, until disrupted by a period of transition, during which 'for a moment the boredom of living is replaced by the suffering of being'.¹⁷ Here, Beckett construes life in terms of a process of *decantation* whereby the habits and forms of life established by the individual in the past must inevitably yield to changing circumstances and conditions in the future:

The individual is the seat of a constant process of decantation, decantation from the vessel containing the fluid of future time, sluggish, pale and monochrome, to the vessel containing the fluid of past time, agitated and multicoloured by the phenomena of its hours.¹⁸

As a result of the continual impingement of change and the need to adapt to it, life is here construed as 'a succession of habits, since *the individual is a succession of individuals . . .*' (my emphasis).¹⁹

It is obvious, as Esslin has noted, that the annual tapes recorded by Krapp foreground this notion of the individual as a succession of individuals.²⁰ But it has never before been noticed that *Krapp's Last Tape* actually *stages* the process of temporal decantation wherein, according to the passage from *Proust* already cited, this succession finds its originating cause. On three occasions, Krapp disappears 'backstage into darkness (pp. 12, 17, 24), where he is heard uncorking bottles and decanting their contents: 'Sound of bottle against glass, then brief siphon' (p. 24). Significantly, on each of these occasions, the passage of time is emphasized: 'Ten seconds. Loud pop of cork. Fifteen seconds' (p. 12). The link between the passage of time and decantation is reinforced by Krapp's habit of

consulting his prominently displayed '[h]eavy silver watch' (p. 9) just before each trip backstage to decant (pp. 10, 17, 23).

Ironically, Krapp himself constitutes a dramatic refutation or, more precisely, counter example of the theory of life which Beckett expressed in *Proust*. For in the play, character finally supersedes the 'constant process of decantation' which individual identity necessarily undergoes. Here we reach the deeper significance of the play's title. The notion of life as *succession* is displaced by the notion of life as *regression*. There will be no more tapes, not because Krapp will not live another year (as Vivian Mercier suggests), but because Krapp has found a way to overcome the process of decantation whereby, through the passage of time, the individual becomes a succession of individuals.²¹ By fixating exclusively on past moments, Krapp reduces the present to the site of remembrance, and thus fortifies his life against change. Through regretting the past that can never return, Krapp renders the future irrelevant. This is his last tape, because there will never be anything new to record: 'Leave it at that' (p. 26). Originally, the purpose of 'retrospect' (p. 16) was to mark annual progress away from the past: 'Well out of that, Jesus yes!' (p. 17); 'Thank God that's all done with anyway' (p. 24). But now the only retrospect concerns the importunity of regret: 'Be again, be again' (p. 26). In discarding the new tape ('wrenches off the tape, throws it away' [p. 27]), Krapp discards the very process by which he confirms his identity as a succession of individuals. Henceforth, he will be himself only through interrogating his loss: 'Could have been happy with her, up there on the Baltic, and the pines, and the dunes. (Pause.) Could I?' (p. 25).

By this means, Krapp triumphs over the decantation of time, as defined in Beckett's *Proust*. This triumph can be clarified through examination of the scene which Krapp most obsessively remembers—the one concerning the girl in the punt:

We drifted in among the flags and stuck. The way they went down, sighing, before the stem! (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. (p. 27)

The passage narrates a remarkable opposition between flux and immobility. Krapp and the girl are unmoving, but beneath them 'all moved'. A related opposition closes the play, as Krapp sits 'motionless,' while '[t]he tape runs on in silence' (p. 28). Here Krapp makes love to motionlessness in his life, by giving all his passion to regret.

Further analysis of this opposition between motion and motionlessness will clarify the implications of regret in the play. As a character, Krapp is positioned between two principles of movement: one concrete (the tapes revolving in the tape recorder), the other abstract (the passage of time, suggested, as we have seen, by both the setting 'in the future' and the repeated action of decantation). Recourse to the tape recorder is the primary means by which Krapp negates the movement of time. He does this not merely by focusing on the past in order to ignore the movement of time toward the future. More profoundly, the tapes enable him to replace *continuity* with *atomicity*—to replace, that is, the experience of time as an unbroken flow of becoming with the experience of time as a series of discrete, disposable parts, which can be discarded or rememorated at will: 'Happiest moment of the past half million' (p. 25). In his earlier phases, Krapp construed life as a series of escapes from involvement, with either a loved one ('Well out of that, Jesus yes!' [p. 17]) or his own emotional turmoil: 'Thank God that's all done with anyway' (p. 24). The hidden motive of the tape recording ritual is to detach Krapp from implication in the continuity of his own life, by reducing it to a series of disposable and fixed memories whose relation to the present Krapp, as he moves through time, can always be repudiated. Conversely, by fixating on one of those memories, Krapp repudiates his very location in the present.

This paradoxical project to repudiate the past by discarding memories, and to repudiate the present by obsessive remembering, entails a remarkable deconstruction of the theory

of life as a succession of individuals, which Beckett formulated in *Proust*. As typified by his response to his mother's death, Krapp's reaction, after completing every stage of his life, is relief that it is 'All over and done with, at last' (p. 20). By this means, he reduces life to the mere succession of moments ('Moments. Her moments, my moments. The dog's moments' [p. 20]), but *without* the excruciating intervals of transition when, according to the schema in *Proust*, 'the boredom of living is replaced by the suffering of being'. Yet at the end of the play, as Krapp sits 'motionless' while '[t]he tape runs on in silence' (p. 28), it becomes apparent that his ultimate project is not merely to reduce life to a succession of moments without the inconveniently intervening intervals postulated in *Proust*, but to empty time of the succession of moments by which its movement, according to that essay, is punctuated. Thus, through regret, Krapp simulates a state where time is no longer threatening, because its movement is divested of succession, and simply perpetuates the same unchanging preoccupation. He discards women ('living on and off with Bianca in Kedar street' [p. 16]) just as he discards his past selves. But this refusal of continuity, with either himself or others, is precisely the factor that inevitably makes his life prey to the futility of regret.²²

Yet in the Beckettian universe, a paradoxical transvaluation of values occurs, such that futility becomes the only valid goal. Indeed, in an utterance that could serve as Krapp's epitaph, the Unnamable explicitly posits futility as a *raison d'être*: 'No, one can spend one's life thus, unable to live, unable to bring to life, and die in vain, having done nothing, been nothing' (*Un*, p. 358). The Beckettian protagonist is always 'a monster of the solitudes' (*How It Is*, p. 13), and Beckett's minimalist art always concerns 'the little that's left of the little whereby man continues' (*How It Is*, p. 26): 'as if to grow less could help, ever less and less and never quite be gone' (*Texts for Nothing*).²³ In this context, to assess Krapp on the conventional 'moral plane' (*How It Is*, p. 57) is a labour in irrelevance. For in Beckettian terms, through enduring the decantation of time by which he is

‘aged out of recognition’ (*How It Is*, p. 107), Krapp is simply a Beckettian ‘paradigm of human kind’ (*Texts for Nothing*, p. 108), suffering ‘in obedience to the unintelligible terms of an incomprehensible damnation’ (*Un*, p. 308). Ineluctably, in the Beckettian universe, existence is ‘senseless, speechless, issueless misery’ (*Molloy*, p. 13).

The relation of *Krapp’s Last Tape* to the conditions prevailing in the Beckettian universe can reveal the undiscovered implications of the stage directions concluding the play: ‘Krapp motionless staring before him. The tape runs on in silence’ (p. 28). As the couple in *Ohio Impromptu*, Krapp is now ‘Buried in who knows what profounds of mind.’²⁴ Indeed, Paul Lawley has noted that the relation between ‘the taped voice of Krapp-at-thirty-nine’ and ‘Krapp-at-sixty-nine’ corresponds to that between Reader and Listener in *Ohio Impromptu*.²⁵ In this circumstance, lapsed in silence indefinitely prolonged, Krapp approaches the Beckettian ideal as formulated in *The Unnamable*:

I don’t mind failing, it’s a pleasure, but I want to go silent. Not as just now, the better to listen, but peacefully, victorious, without ulterior object. Then it would be a life worth having, a life at last (*Un*, p. 310).

As ‘[t]he tape runs on in silence’, it is almost as if Krapp were listening to a recording of silence: listening, that is, to a transcription of ultimate reality in the Beckettian universe: ‘And the ticking of an invisible alarm-clock was as the voice of that silence which, like the dark, would one day triumph too. And then all would be still and dark and all things at rest for ever at last’ (*Malone*, p. 203).

Hence, Krapp remains a radically ambiguous character. In terms of the eudaemonistic assumption that the supreme task in life is to achieve ‘happiness’ (pp. 16, 28), Krapp is a dismal failure. But viewed in terms of the Beckettian ideal regarding silence ‘without ulterior object’ (*Un*, p. 310), wherein ‘all things [are] at rest for ever at last’ (*Malone*, p. 203), Krapp achieves resounding success. For in that silence, lost in reverie about the punt experience which the recorded voice intoned, it

almost seems as if Krapp has fulfilled the Beckettian narrator's project to become him whom the words recall: 'Will they succeed in slipping me into him, the memory and dream of me, into him still living . . . ' (*Texts for Nothing*, p. 134). In that impossible circumstance, silence is the supreme—and indeed only—felicity: 'it will be the silence . . . the lasting one' (*Un*, p. 414). To apply Malone's words, Krapp here approaches 'the blessedness of absence' (*Malone*, p. 222). For in the nostalgia induced by 'old words back from the dead' (to invoke Bom's apt formula in *How It Is*, p. 95), Krapp is not here and now; he is only there and then.

Yet, at bottom, what Krapp wants is not the return of the past, but the passionate abandon of the present to the impertunity of 'retrospect': 'Once wasn't enough for you. (Pause.) Lie down across her' (pp. 16, 27). In this context, the irony of Krapp's relation with Fanny, the '[b]ony old ghost of a whore' emerges: 'I told her I'd been saving up for her all my life' (pp. 25, 26). Through reducing his life to a series of retrospects on discarded selves and relationships, Krapp tends inevitably toward the stage where all that remains is regret. But through that regret, epitomized by obsessive remembrance of lovemaking in the canoe, Krapp gives all his yearning to ghosts—to the perseveration, that is, of moments long departed, whose remembrance Krapp pursues with more consistency of attachment than he ever gave to anything or anyone in the past. In this sense, he has indeed been saving up for ghosts all his life, allocating to dead moments a fidelity which he never accorded to living ones: 'Thank God that's all done with anyway' (p. 24). As Dr. Johnson wrote in an *Idler* essay, 'he to whom the present offers nothing will often be looking backward on the past.'²⁶ But in Krapp's case, the present offers nothing precisely because his deepest wish is to be 'a memory come alive' (to borrow a phrase from Kafka's *Diaries: 1914-1923*).²⁷ Krapp's need is to have no life but remembering the one(s) that he rejected—a project epitomized by the narrator of 'Enough': 'It is then I shall have lived then or never'.²⁸ The only way for Krapp to be free of attachment is to be attached, through regret, to loss.

Krapp's failure to find fulfilment through the forward movement of life can be clarified through reference to *Waiting for Godot*. Whereas in *Krapp's Last Tape* the refusal of forward movement is expressed through regretting a past that will never return, in *Waiting for Godot* it is expressed through waiting for a future that will never happen or arrive. The future will never happen, because it already has happened, as evident in Estragon's amplification of his observation regarding 'Another day done with': 'For me it's over and done with, no matter what happens' (p. 38). Whereas Krapp focuses on events already concluded, Estragon focuses inevitable conclusion. By opposite means, each rejects the notion of novelty in life—an attitude articulated in the opening sentence of *Murphy*: 'The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new.'²⁹ In consequence, all that remains is repetition, as epitomized in Krapp's imperative, 'Be again' (p. 26).

In this context, Krapp's immunity to moral evaluation is confirmed. For his recourse to regret here appears not as a character fault, but as '[a]n automatic adjustment of the human organism to the conditions of its existence . . . ' (to retrieve a formula from *Proust*).³⁰ In the Beckettian universe, reality is reduced to recurring cycle which prevents creative advance: 'the endless April showers and the crocuses and then the whole bloody business starting all over again' (*Watt*).³¹ Viewed from this angle, Krapp's regret results not so much from choice as from mechanical and involuntary adaptation to the unavoidable circumstances of life. Indeed, the mechanical aspect of Krapp is suggested by his close relation with his 'machine' (p. 13), the tape-recorder. In fact, as Paul Lawley points out, Beckett instructed the actor, Pierre Chabert, to '[b]ecome as much as possible one with the machine'.³²

But, regardless of such emphasis, Krapp is a man, not a machine—one who has abdicated responsibility to control his own compulsion toward mechanical repetition, with respect to both bananas and the recourse to remembrance which, as we have seen, they symbolize. Indeed, as noted earlier with respect to his banana bulimia, Krapp himself acknowledges his failure

to control compulsive consumption: 'Cut 'em out!' (p. 14). But his resolution soon lapses. Indeed, Krapp's frequent intervals of vacuity are prominently associated with the very bananas which he undertakes to forswear. For example, twice on the same page the same description of his action is repeated: 'puts end of banana in his mouth and remains motionless, staring vacuously before him' (p. 11). Virtually the same description pertains to Krapp's immersion in nostalgia at the end of the play: 'Krapp motionless staring before him', as the 'tape runs on in silence' (p. 28). We reach here the deeper implication of Krapp's identification with the tape recorder which, as we have just seen, Beckett, when directing the play, emphasized. Krapp wants to become one with the machine—to merge, that is, with reiterated memory—so that the effort of living is replaced by surrender to regret.

Krapp's contribution to his own predicament can be gauged by considering the remarkable moment when the present Krapp (aged 69) and a past Krapp (aged 39) share laughs regarding a Krapp from an earlier year:

Hard to believe I was ever that young whelp. The voice! Jesus! And the aspirations! (Brief laugh in which Krapp joins.) And the resolutions! (Brief laugh in which Krapp joins.) To drink less, in particular. (Brief laugh of Krapp alone.) (p. 16)

Snears 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.) (p. 17)

The key to understanding this shared laughter is to consider first the sole instance when only Krapp laughs: 'Brief laugh of Krapp alone.' The topic on that occasion concerns the resolution '[t]o drink less'. It is obvious that the younger Krapp still takes that resolution seriously, though he is unable to fulfill it. But in the years since then, Krapp has abandoned all his resolutions, and can laugh as readily at that one as at all the others. As Ruby Cohn observes, 'The laughter is inspired by the futility of aspiration and resolution'.³³ Similarly, Steven Connor argues that Krapp's laugh alone 'adds a layer of disillusion'.³⁴

But as the end of the play suggests, this defeatist and weak-willed attitude has the last laugh on Krapp.

Perhaps a deeper implication of this laughter is indicated by the celebrated typology of laughter in *Watt*: ‘the bitter laugh’ which ‘laughs at that which is not good’; the ‘hollow laugh’ which ‘laughs at that which is not true’; and ‘the mirthless laugh’ which ‘laughs . . . at that which is unhappy’.³⁵ Ultimately, the laughter in *Krapp’s Last Tape* pertains to this third category: the laugh that ‘sneers’ (to use the younger Krapp’s term) at unhappiness—that is, at disappointment, surrender, lapse of will, and defeat. For the perfect defence against these calamities is to mock the suffering of them. Yet the deeper irony of Krapp’s laughter is that he shirks the effort to achieve happiness. It is much easier to cry about happiness lost, forfeited, or never achieved:

Scalded the eyes out of me reading *Effie* again, a page a day, with tears again. Effie . . . (Pause.) Could have been happy with her, up there on the Baltic, and the pines, and the dunes. (Pause.) Could I? (p. 25)

Krapp refuses to face his predicament in the present and take responsibility for his feelings about it. Through self-pitying regret, Krapp repudiates his present life, just as he repudiates and repudiated his past selves. His present suffering is never his fault. It can be blamed on the past, and the decisions made or avoided then. That is the ‘belief [he has] been going on all [his] life’ (p. 21).

The irony of Krapp’s predicament can be further clarified. In an earlier phase, on the occasion of his ‘vision’ (p. 20), he believed in the ‘unshatterable association until my dissolution of storm and night with the light of the understanding and the fire’ (p. 21). On one level, Krapp has obviously failed to fulfill the promise of his vision; for his creative life never fructified. But on a more profound level, he did indeed fulfil the implications of his vision regarding the fusion of light and darkness. For through reducing his life to the agony of regret, he has inundated ‘the light of the understanding’ with anguished nostalgia, so that ‘the fire’ in him is now explicitly

linked with yearning for death: 'drowned in dreams and *burning* to be gone' (p. 25, my emphasis). At the moment of his spectacular vision, Krapp did not expect that this would be its result. But he never achieves recognition or *anagnorisis* regarding his plight. Just as he recognizes the problem of his 'bowel condition' (p. 13), yet refuses to control the banana bulimia which aggravates it, so he recognizes the sense of 'misery' (p. 26) which has always dogged his life, but refuses to take responsibility for its cause: obsessive-compulsive regret—the need to define himself through 'retrospect' (p. 16).

- ¹ Ruby Cohn, 'The Laughter of Sad Sam Beckett', in *Samuel Beckett Now*, ed. Melvin J. Friedman, 2nd edn (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), pp. 185-97 (p. 194), and Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, rev. edn (New York: Doubleday, 1969), p. 56.
- ² Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie* (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 26.
- ³ James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996). A short list of these links as documented by Knowlson will illustrate. Here and elsewhere, references to Samuel Beckett, *Krapp's Last Tape*, in *Krapp's Last Tape and Other Dramatic Pieces* (New York: Grove, 1957) are included in the text in parentheses. (a) The girl in the punt connected with Ethna MacCarthy with whom Beckett fell in love soon after enrolling at Trinity College in October 1923 (Knowlson, pp. 442-3); (b) Krapp's 'girl in a shabby green coat' (p. 17) associated with Peggy Sinclair, a cousin with whom Beckett fell in love in the summer of 1928 (Knowlson, p. 81); (c) Miss Beamish (whom Beckett first met when he came to Rousillon in 1942) as the model for 'Old Miss McGlome' (p. 15; Knowlson, pp. 330-1); (d) Krapp's outdoor 'vision, at last' (p. 20) derived from Beckett's own indoor vision in his mother's room during the summer of 1945 (Knowlson p. 352); (e) the 'house on the canal where mother lay a-dying, in the late autumn, after her long viduity' (p. 18) connected with Merrion Nursing Home where Beckett's mother, May, died of Parkinson's disease on August 25, 1950 (Knowlson, p. 384). Anthony Uhlmann relates Krapp's account of his 'vision' to Schopenhauer's account of artistic

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- genius: *Beckett and Poststructuralism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 19.
- ⁴ Joseph H. Smith, 'Notes on Krapp, Endgame, and "Applied" Psychoanalysis', in Joseph H. Smith, ed., *The World of Samuel Beckett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), pp. 195-203 (p. 197).
- ⁵ Anthony Kubiak, 'Post Apocalypse with Out Figures: The Trauma of Theater in Samuel Beckett', in Smith, *World of Samuel Beckett*, pp. 107-24 (p. 121).
- ⁶ Daniel Katz, *Saying I No More: Subjectivity and Consciousness in the Prose of Samuel Beckett* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999) p. 9.
- ⁷ For the first quotation, see Matthew Arnold, 'Wordsworth', in *Victorian Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Walter E. Houghton and G. Robert Stange (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959), p. 539. For the second quotation, see Matthew Arnold, 'Marcus Aurelius', in *Essays in Criticism, First Series*, in *English Prose of the Victorian Era*, ed. Charles Frederick Harrold and William D. Templeman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1938), p. 1085.
- ⁸ Samuel Beckett, *Molloy*, in *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*, trans. Samuel Beckett, with Patrick Bowles assisting with the translation of *Molloy* (New York: Grove Press, 1958), p. 148. Further references to *Molloy*, to *Malone Dies* (abbreviated *Malone*), and to *The Unnamable* (abbreviated *Un*) are included in the text in parentheses.
- ⁹ Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, trans. Samuel Beckett (New York: Grove Press, 1954), p. 14. Further references to this work are included in the text in parentheses.
- ¹⁰ Samuel Beckett, *Company* (London: Calder, 1979, 1980), p. 89.
- ¹¹ Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, p. 269.
- ¹² Samuel Johnson, *Rasselas*, in *Rasselas, Poems, and Selected Prose*, ed. Bertrand H. Bronson (1759; New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1952), p. 505.
- ¹³ See Heraclitus of Ephesus, Fragment #119, in *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers*, trans. Kathleen Freeman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), p. 32.
- ¹⁴ See, for example, Alan Astro, *Understanding Samuel Beckett* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1990), p. 155; Sylvie Debevec Henning, *Beckett's Critical Complicity: Carnival*,

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- Contestation, and Tradition* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1988), p. 153; Jon Erickson, 'Self-Objectification and Preservation in Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*', in *The World of Samuel Beckett*, ed. Joseph H. Smith (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), pp. 181-94 (p. 187).
- ¹⁵ For critics who note Krapp's tendency to forget or disremember, see Vivian Mercier, *Beckett/Beckett* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), and Henning, *Beckett's Critical Complicity*, p. 147.
- ¹⁶ Samuel Beckett, *Proust*, in *Proust and Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit* (London: John Calder, 1965), p. 27.
- ¹⁷ Beckett, *Proust*, p. 19. For treatments of the relevance of *Proust* to *Krapp's Last Tape*, see Enoch Brater, *Beyond Minimalism: Beckett's Late Style in the Theater* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 19; Henning, *Beckett's Critical Complicity*, pp. 144-58; Erickson, 'Self-Objectification and Preservation', pp. 181-94.
- ¹⁸ Beckett, *Proust*, p. 15.
- ¹⁹ Beckett, *Proust*, p. 19.
- ²⁰ Esslin, *Theatre of the Absurd*, p. 56.
- ²¹ Mercier, *Beckett/Beckett*, p. 184.
- ²² However, some critics link the predicament of the aged Krapp with too much concern for the future (in the mode of artistic ambition), not too little. See Mercier, *Beckett/Beckett*, p. 201; John Pilling, *Samuel Beckett* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976), p. 85; H. Porter Abbott, *Beckett Writing Beckett: The Author in the Autograph* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 65.
- ²³ Samuel Beckett, *Texts for Nothing*, in *Stories and Texts for Nothing*, trans. Samuel Beckett (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p. 112. Samuel Beckett, *How It Is*, trans. Samuel Beckett (New York: Grove Press, 1964). Further references to these works are included in the text in parentheses.
- ²⁴ Samuel Beckett, *Ohio Impromptu*, in *Three Plays: Ohio Impromptu, Catastrophe, and What Where* (New York: Grove Press, 1984), p. 18.
- ²⁵ Paul Lawley, 'Stages of Identity: from *Krapp's last tape* to *Play*', in *The Cambridge Companion to Beckett*, ed. John Pilling

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- (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 88-105 (p. 91).
- ²⁶ Johnson, *Idler* No. 72 (September 1, 1759), in *Rasselas, Poems, and Selected Prose*, p. 191.
- ²⁷ Franz Kafka, entry for October 15, 1921, *Diaries 1914-1923*, trans. Martin Greenberg and Hannah Arendt, in *I am a Memory Come Alive: Autobiographical Writings by Franz Kafka*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken, 1974), p. 203.
- ²⁸ Samuel Beckett, 'Enough', trans. Samuel Beckett, in *First Love and Other Shorts* (New York: Grove Press, 1974), p. 57.
- ²⁹ Samuel Beckett, *Murphy* (1938; New York: Grove Press, 1957), p. 1.
- ³⁰ Beckett, *Proust*, p. 20.
- ³¹ Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (New York: Grove Press, 1959), p. 47.
- ³² Lawley, 'Stages of Identity', p. 93.
- ³³ Ruby Cohn, *Back to Beckett* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 94.
- ³⁴ Steven Connor, "'What? Where?'" Presence and Repetition in Beckett's Theater', in *Rethinking Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Lance St John and Robin J. Davis (New York: St. Martin's, 1990), pp. 1-19 (p. 6).
- ³⁵ Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (New York: Grove Press, 1959), p. 48. Ruby Cohn draws attention to Watt's anatomy of laughter, but does not apply it specifically to *Krapp's Last Tape*: 'Laughter', p. 185.

ERIC P. LEVY is Associate Professor of English at the University of British Columbia. His publications include a book and articles on Samuel Beckett, as well as articles on *Hamlet*, Emily Bronte, Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, D. H. Lawrence, T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Tennessee Williams, Christology, and self-pity neurosis.