

“Be Again”:

Exploring the Trauma of Separation through the Physical in

Krapp's Last Tape

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The opening moments of Samuel Beckett's short play, *Krapp's Last Tape*, feature a character who is almost entirely silent, save for mutterings to himself and joyous exclamations on the delight of saying the word "spool." Yet soon the stage becomes filled with sound-- the sound of his younger self, talking to himself in a fully different way. Krapp staggers and stumbles around the stage as he moves through his regular birthday ceremonies of banana-eating, drinking, and listening to tapes he has made on previous birthdays, recounting the events of the year, and reflecting on another tape, listened to in the past, telescoping the layers of the past in on themselves. Yet while the past is brought to life, so to speak, through the voice on the tapes, it is also very distant from both Krapp and the audience witnessing the play-- the audience is subject to the present Krapp's pauses and fast-forwards of the tape, while Krapp is sure to continually distance and detach himself from the man, the other Krapp, speaking on the tape. This fraught relationship of closeness to a past that is also constantly pushed away plays out as Krapp records another tape, commemorating his 69th birthday. Yet as he records, he turns back to the past tape, allowing his words in the present to become subsumed by those of the past. While the play may be set "in the future,"¹ what seems to be at stake is the relationship to what has come before.

This temporal struggle and complication is drawn out through a play that is physical in a number of ways. As Krapp is very physically present and active on the stage, he is the classic Beckettian grotesque elderly man, susceptible to falls, not possessing good eyesight, and with a "laborious" (1) walk. This is contrasted, or perhaps highlighted, by the presence of the tapes from previous years, which experience no lack of physical functionality, but are also subject to the whims of Krapp as he physically manipulates them to hear what he wants to hear and avoid

¹ Samuel Beckett, "Krapp's Last Tape," in *Krapp's Last Tape and Other Dramatic Pieces* (New York: Grove Press Inc, 1960), 1. Further citations for this text will be parenthetical.

that from the past which would somehow prove to be painful. This deliberate manipulation is rendered in such a way that it demonstrates a traumatic relationship between Krapp and the tapes, and by extension, between Krapp and his past. Cathy Caruth, in her exploration of Freud's work, defines trauma as based in an experience that is so psychologically disruptive that it cannot be understood in the moment, and thus continues to reassert itself, unconsciously, in the life of the victim through flashbacks and nightmares.² This tendency is emphasized as the subconscious compulsion to repeat the traumatic events in a way that is seemingly outside the individual's control.³ Krapp's birthday ceremonies are viciously repetitive in a way that extends beyond the simple repetition of events, and imply a trauma at the core of Krapp's being: the trauma of separation. Krapp's relationship to the tapes and the voices on them represents the ways that he consistently repeats the separation from others, and from the self, and he enacts this not just mentally, but physically, drawing the body into the psychological state as well. Through reading the play with the understandings of this framework, it becomes clear that Krapp's trauma of separation is also more simply the trauma of the knowledge of death, which grows stronger as he ages, approaching his "last tape."

In order to better understand the role that death plays at the center of his trauma, it is necessary to have a certain understanding of trauma theory before delving into the play. As Caruth notes, it is not the event in itself that is necessarily traumatic, but rather the unknowability of it, and the ways that it escapes comprehension: "[w]hat returns to haunt the victim...is not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known."⁴ This lack of understanding of the traumatic event exists

² Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 1-2.

³ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 2.

⁴ Caruth, 6.

not only through simple cognitive dissonance or confusion, but also through the ways that memories of trauma become altered so that they present the event differently to the subject in a way that allows it to be somehow better known or grasped. This modification occurs primarily through subconscious memory alteration, repression, or dissociation.⁵

This “unknown” in trauma often emerges in what is referred to as a “latency” between the traumatic event and the full realization of what it means.⁶ Because the event is so violent, it is hard for the individual to believe it has occurred, and as they struggle to make sense of it, the event presents itself and re-presents itself continually in their thoughts and experiences. In a discussion of Freud’s example of a person who survives a train accident with no bodily harm, Caruth notes that what is so significant is that the person was “never fully conscious of the accident itself.”⁷ Due to the suddenness of the unusual experience of the trauma, the closeness of death is not registered by the conscious mind in time to fully perceive it in the moment: “It is not simply, that is, the literal threatening of bodily life, but the fact that the threat is recognized as such by the mind *one moment too late*. The shock of the mind’s relation to the threat of death is thus....the fact that, not being experienced *in time*, it has not yet been fully known.”⁸ This is the latency that leads to subconscious attempts to understand and integrate experience through both the memory alteration processes described above, as well as through the repetition of the psychological reassertion of the event.

Significantly, Caruth also asserts that while the proximity of death is extremely disorienting for the individual, it is not death itself that is ultimately so difficult to grasp. Death is

⁵ Laurence J. Kirmayer, “Landscapes of Memory: Trauma, Narrative, and Dissociation,” in *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*, (New York: Routledge, 1996), 179, 181.

⁶ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 17.

⁷ Caruth, 17.

⁸ Caruth, 62.

natural, but survival of a near-death event is incomprehensible, at least initially. Caruth notes that, “Repetition...is not simply the attempt to grasp that one has almost died, but more fundamentally and enigmatically, the very attempt *to claim one’s own survival.*”⁹ Here, again, we bump into the idea of how and why memory is unconsciously adjusted when striving to deal with a traumatic event. Attempting to “claim” the survival of the event is essentially attempting to unite this moment of violence into the life story, and to be able to narrate the event as a part of the individual’s larger experience, making continuity out of what comes before and after.

According to Ruth Leys, this difficulty of narrativity was explored by the psychologist Janet, who is known for drawing the distinction between “traumatic memory” and “narrative memory.” The former occurs when the individual unknowingly enacts and re-enacts trauma, subconsciously remembering through compulsive actions or psychological disruptions such as nightmares or flashbacks. “Narrative memory,” on the other hand, is the memory that allows people to tell stories of their lives, making individual events fit a continuity and an explanatory timeline.¹⁰ For Janet, “the goal of therapy is to convert ‘traumatic memory’ into ‘narrative memory’ by getting the patient to recount her history.”¹¹ The unknowability marked by Caruth lies in how it is initially impossible for the event to be figured as a memory that fits within the life story and experience of the individual. For Krapp, this idea of narrativity becomes markedly important, particularly as we hear two different versions of his life story narrated throughout the play by his character at two different ages. As he struggles to deal with the different kinds of traumatic separation that inflict themselves upon his life, he narrates and re-narrates his life in order to create order out of these two different vantage points.

⁹ Caruth, 64. Emphasis in original.

¹⁰ Ruth Leys, “Traumatic Cures: Shell Shock, Janet, and the Question of Memory,” in *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*, (New York: Routledge, 1996), 120.

¹¹ Leys, “Traumatic Cures,” 120-121.

Krapp's trauma, however, does not seem to lie in the kinds of events that Caruth and Leys have been working with-- distinct blocks of time that are experienced in a different way due to the extremity of some kind of violence. However, Freudian conceptions of trauma exceed this event-based definition of how trauma operates, which is ultimately where Krapp's trauma lies. Dominick LaCapra draws a useful distinction here between trauma based on a specific event where one experiences a specific and nameable "loss" ("historical trauma"), and trauma based on an "absence," a perceived something that is missing from one's life that is not necessarily nameable or quantifiable ("structural trauma").¹² Structural trauma is "an anxiety-producing condition of possibility related to the potential for historical traumatization,"¹³ or, in other words, structural trauma is based on the feeling that one missed the jolt of the train accident, and now is trying to take account for the violence that was done, and figure out what, exactly, was lost, experiencing a false sense of latency from an event that never truly occurred. Structural trauma thus poses a difficulty: while historical trauma can ultimately be fully realized, recognized, and re-integrated into the narration of an individual's life (what LaCapra calls "working-through"¹⁴), the same is not true of structural trauma, which presents itself more as a pre-existing and omnipresent condition. However, LaCapra notes, if the absence of a structural trauma is refigured in the mind as loss as a way to cope with the anxiety it causes, then the structural trauma becomes similarly refigured as a historical trauma from which other events seem to arise. This creates a wholly alternate and false narrative of trauma based around a loss that was never actually experienced. As LaCapra puts it, "When structural trauma is reeducated to, or figured as,

¹² Dominick LaCapra, "Trauma, Absence, Loss," *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 4 (1999), 698, 719. (Examples of structural trauma include the trauma of separation from the maternal figure, or the anxiety surrounding the loss of innocence.)

¹³ LaCapra, "Trauma, Absence, Loss," 725.

¹⁴ LaCapra, 713.

an event, one has the genesis of myth wherein trauma is enacted in a story or narrative from which later traumas seem to derive....”¹⁵. Thus, unlike historical trauma, it is not helpful to narrativize structural trauma, and is in fact directly unhelpful as it is a site of the generation of questions and complexes of traumas that truly stem from pre-existing social or human conditions, and which lead to the trauma becoming repetitive through “acting-out.”¹⁶ Krapp, as we will note, is the victim of an extreme narrativization of structural trauma, as he centers his tapes around specific events that haunt him, though in reality, he is merely struggling with the idea that he is isolated. His misconception of the structural for historical, as will be discussed in greater depth, is ultimately what prevents him from creating a coherent and satisfying narrative of his life.

LaCapra’s concepts of the reformulation of trauma can be traced to Freud’s *Mourning and Melancholia*. Freud notes that both mourning and melancholia are conditions of low spirits and sorrow that follow the removal of some object that was dear to the individual.¹⁷ However, while both conditions involve sadness that sharpens into a sudden focus on the lost object and disinterest in all else, melancholia involves a self-flagellation and hatred that is not seen in mourning.¹⁸ Freud reasons that this occurs due to the focus of the libido and how this differs between the two conditions. In mourning, the libido focuses all of its energy onto the lost object until it has worked through the attachment and is able to come to terms with its loss. In melancholia, however, the libido does not focus on the object, but instead is erroneously shifted onto the ego, and thus, those suffering melancholia are actually attempting a mourning of

¹⁵ LaCapra, 725.

¹⁶ LaCapra, 713.

¹⁷ Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, Vol. XIV, (London: Hogarth, n.d.), 244-5.

¹⁸ Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” 249.

themselves. Because of this relationship between the ego and the libido, the mourning energy becomes directed at the self, and the individual espouses extreme anger and sadness towards the self. Freud notes that this may be a result of ambivalence towards the truly lost object that was already present, as the complaints melancholic persons have about themselves often reflect complaints they had about the lost object or person before the loss.¹⁹ Melancholia, then, is much harder to work through than mourning, as the attachment to something outside the self is much easier to reckon with and ultimately let go of than a mourning relationship of the ego, which turns inwards and spirals into a destructive, impossible, cycle. Melancholia is useful not only for understanding better the idea of displacement introduced by LaCapra, but also for bringing a perspective to Krapp's self-hatred that reasserts itself throughout the play. LaCapra continues to build on Freud's terminology here in his definition of melancholy, which is slightly different than melancholia as Freud writes about it. For LaCapra, melancholy occurs when an absence becomes "approximated to loss"²⁰ and an individual attempts to mourn a structural trauma, leading to a mourning that, like the attachment to the ego, can never be truly completed. Framing this in terms of narrativity, when an individual tries to resolve structural trauma through making it a part of the life's narrative, this process of narrativization instead becomes an endless process that constantly draws the individual back to reckon with the ego and to try to move past the loss of something that was never really there to begin with.

Beckett is recognized by many critics as an author steeped in the ideas of trauma theory. LaCapra himself notes this, saying that when it comes to the difference between absence and loss, "...Beckett may be read as a novelist and dramatist of absence and not simply loss, indeed,

¹⁹ Freud, 251.

²⁰ LaCapra, "Trauma, Absence, Loss," 715.

as a writer whose works deploy ways of both acting out and working through absence.”²¹

Similarly, Seamus Deane points to the detachment experienced by the characters in Beckett’s work, noting that the speakers oscillate between “incompetence and mastery in language”²² in their attempts to narrate their own histories. This is all unimportant, he notes, as the feature that Beckett’s characters primarily share is their isolation: “There is no social world that corresponds to either aphasia or eloquence, only the loneliness of the speaker.”²³ For Krapp, this “loneliness” comes not only from an inability to truly connect with others, but also a lack of a meaningful relationship with himself that prevents him from selecting and working with a narrative of his life that he can grasp onto.²⁴

Declan Kiberd also cites this crisis of narration in Beckett, turning toward the relationship of his characters with their pasts, which becomes important for analyzing Krapp and his life story. He points to the ways that the pasts of Beckett’s characters re-emerge to disrupt their presents in ways that strongly echo the traumatic recurrences described by Caruth. Speaking specifically of the central characters in *Waiting for Godot*, Kiberd notes: “...they are doomed to repeat the past precisely because they have never allowed themselves, or been allowed, to know it fully....the past erupts, again and again, to usurp the present, but never to connect

²¹ LaCapra, 714.

²² Seamus Deane, “Silence and Eloquence,” *The Guardian*, December 12, 1991, 1.

²³ Deane, “Silence and Eloquence,” 1.

²⁴ This idea of absence being central to Beckett’s work is also explored through the idea of the sense of an absent narrative, which is primarily related through his childhood in Ireland. Both Deane and Declan Kiberd discuss how the fractured history of Ireland in itself creates a trauma through something that feels as though it is missing: a cohesive narrative of cultural and national history. Deane argues that “the repeated failure of political systems in Ireland has enforced on its literature the requirement of trying to reconcile on the symbolic level what could not be reconciled in the political zone,” (Deane 1) meaning that the political lack of unity and lack of consistent narrative about what Ireland *is* has led to a literary crisis of trying to resolve these disjunctures through writing and through story-telling. Ireland, according to Deane, lacks a unified narrativity, and it is this narrativity that Beckett is constantly trying to figure in his works, and coming to terms with the fact that this is perhaps not a loss but an absence, and that narrativity may not exist at all. This political rendering of Beckett’s work is interesting, but will not be the focus of the argument pursued here.

meaningfully with it.”²⁵ Kiberd thus implies that having a past is in itself traumatic (in a structural way), as one is never able to fully make sense of it in relation to the present. Beckett’s characters feel a deep desire to do so by turning their pasts into narrative, but this is ultimately a futile task.²⁶ Krapp’s inability to settle on a narrative becomes embodied in his actions and interactions with the tapes and recorder onstage, as well as being coded into his body itself. Ultimately, Krapp quite literally enacts his trauma before the audience before he builds to a moment of catharsis through re-engaging with the past. As he comes to terms with his fear of dying, he embraces it through an enactment of death itself which, though desolate, ultimately allows him a reconciliation between the fact that his trauma is about surviving and the fact that in the end, he will not, in fact, survive.

Because of the nature of the play as genre, we are not granted access to Krapp’s internal thoughts or dreams except as he self-narrates them for the tapes that we listen to. What we do witness, however, is the way that the play presents his actions as repetitious to the point of being compulsive. Jon Erickson terms Krapp’s constant return to the past as an “addiction” which functions through disguising itself as “ritual,”²⁷ speaking to the fact that there is something uncontrollable about Krapp’s continual revisiting of the tapes. Erickson argues that Krapp uses this ritual as a way to connect with the past, in an attempt to “control” it,²⁸ or as Kiberd puts it, to “possess” it.²⁹ There is something sinister about this connection, which seems to be the way that it insists on making the past sensorily prior to the present, in the same way that the patients of

²⁵ Declan Kiberd, “Beckett’s Texts of Laughter and Forgetting,” in *Inventing Ireland*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995) 538-9.

²⁶ Kiberd, “Beckett’s Texts of Laughter and Forgetting,” 538-9.

²⁷ Jon Erickson, “Self-Objectification and Preservation in Beckett’s Krapp’s Last Tape,” In *The World of Samuel Beckett*, ed. Joseph H. Smith, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 187.

²⁸ Erickson, “Self-Objectification and Preservation,” 187.

²⁹ Kiberd, “Beckett’s Texts of Laughter and Forgetting,” 538-539.

Janet and Freud insisted on repeating certain actions. In fact, the entire point of listening to the tapes appears to be to re-experience the past as it was originally felt (though later, Krapp also makes judgment calls about this experience). The 39-year-old Krapp heard on the tape describes how when he was listening to a tape from his late twenties that contained a passage devoted to the eyes of his then-partner Bianca, “I suddenly saw them again. (*Pause.*) Incomparable!” (16). The tapes draw Krapp back into the past in a sensory and visceral way, something which the 39-year-old Krapp is even aware of, as he discusses his encounter with the white dog and the ball, saying that, “In the end, I held it out to him and he took it in his mouth, gently, gently. (*Pause.*) I shall feel it, in my hand, until my dying day” (20). Whether or not the Krapp present with us on the stage has felt that ball in the years since, this evocation makes it felt in that moment. Thus, the tapes are not just about recollection of memory, but the re-experiencing and re-living of the past, making it primary in the present. This drawing-into the past allows it to reassert itself in Krapp’s life in ways that make it momentarily central and more important than the present.

Understanding, then, that the way that the past asserts itself is as compulsive and dominating as trauma is, we can turn to the ways that separation manifests itself in the tapes. The moments that Krapp describes with such intense physical presence are the moments of connection that occur, and it is these that reassert themselves in the present so intensely. The younger Krapp is struck into silence over the memory of gazing into Bianca’s eyes, while the older Krapp frenetically returns to listen, multiple times, to the narration of the last moment he shares with his lover in the boat, a moment of intense connection between the two of them, though it is immediately preceded by their decision to stop seeing each other. Younger Krapp describes it with extreme specificity:

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 (22-23).

In this moment, it is vital to Krapp that he be able to look into his lover's eyes as a form of intimate connection with her, unifying the two of them. He urges her, in this act, to "let him in," and thus make them one, something which is then experienced through the dichotomy between their shared stillness and the movement surrounding them.

These moments of physical intimacy are not in themselves traumatic. Instead, the vividness of these moments is heightened by the ways that they frame moments of extreme separation. Perhaps the most intense instance of separation occurring in the time narrated by 39-year-old Krapp is the death of his mother. This event is bookended by two striking moments shared with another being: the "dark nurse" and the white dog. As with Bianca, it is the eyes of the nurse (and not her "incomparable bosom," 19) that seem to somehow penetrate him-- he describes them as "Like...chrysolite!" (19) which is a description so apparently stirring that present Krapp turns the tape off for a moment to consider it. And as described above, the moment of returning the ball to the dog is one that he recognizes as marked on his memory sensorily. This tactile moment of connection with the dog is also experienced as a simultaneous moment of separation, as this is when Krapp learns that his mother has died through the lowering of the blind in her window. Krapp thinks, "All over and done with, at last. I sat for a few moments with the ball in my hand and the dog yelping and pawing at me. (*Pause.*) Moments. Her moments, my moments. (*Pause.*) The dog's moments" (16-17). From there, Krapp moves on to describe the sensation of handing the ball back to the dog, but it is clear that in this instant of unforgettable transmission from him to the dog ("gently, gently"), the idea that they are sharing something acts in extreme contrast to the way that Krapp's mother is now permanently separated

from him. He will never be able to share any moment with her again. Here is precisely what is experienced as traumatic-- the way that moments of connection are in themselves completely ephemeral, and it is separation that is ultimately permanent, always underlined by the absolute permanence of death.

Haunted by this knowledge, Krapp is not just separated from others by the natural course of things, but also through his own actions and the ways that he creates separation between himself and others at all times, such as ending things with his lover. However, it is nowhere more evident than in his relationship with his past self. Though Krapp is apparently obsessed with his past, and particularly with re-living it, he also continually distances himself from it, and from who he was back then. He repeatedly insults and belittles the younger version of himself: the Krapp on the tape disparages the Krapp in his late twenties who he has just been listening to, saying, “Hard to believe I was ever that young whelp. The voice! Jesus! And the aspirations! (*Brief laugh in which [current] Krapp joins.*) And the resolutions! (*Brief laugh in which Krapp joins.*)...Sneers at what he calls his youth and thanks to God that it’s over” (16-17). The oldest Krapp, present on stage, then repeats this gesture of distancing and denunciation on the new tape he is recording: “Just been listening to that stupid old bastard I took myself to be thirty years ago, hard to believe I was ever as bad as that. Thank God that’s all done with anyway” (24). Even as Krapp listens to his past selves and partakes sensorily of his past experiences, he also distances himself through the disavowal of a previous stage of life that is now “over” and a previous self who was a fool. This is a process that he is happy to work with iteratively, that is, he agrees with and laughs with the taped Krapp’s assertion that the even younger Krapp is a naive “young whelp” but he also does not think that the taped Krapp is much wiser either. The Krapp on stage is present and distinct from the Krapp on the tape, who is different from the Krapp in his

twenties. By presenting himself as better now, older, wiser, and more understanding of the way things work, Krapp is able to reassert the control that Erickson argues that he seeks through his obsession with the past. This control comes in the form of narrative power, as he is always attempting to re-narrate his life to fit his current position, dismissing earlier feelings or ambitions. Paul Ricoeur argues that our narration of our past lives allows us to create a sense of fate in our present, a sense that we were always leading up to the moment we are in, and it is evident that this is what Krapp is doing.³⁰ If he can re-narrate every year from a new vantage, then his failures were not failures: they were misguided attempts to do something that wasn't meant to be. His goal in re-shaping and re-telling his life story then is not to distance himself from the past, but rather to resolve the trauma of separation by unifying it, by controlling it, by creating a comprehensible, cohesive narrative of it. But in doing so, he also pushes away from unification in distancing himself from past narrators who got the story wrong. In seeking one kind of unity, he creates a further distancing, unconsciously re-enacting the separation that he is so afraid of.

None of this is to say that Krapp's is incapable of learning through this repetition. In fact, the play points out the opposite through one of its most comedic moments. Before he has even spoken a word, Krapp consumes two bananas and deals with the peels in radically different ways. The first peel is tossed onto the stage where it causes him to trip. Krapp goes out of his way to avoid this mistake with the second peel, which is decisively thrown off of the stage, indicating that Krapp is changing his behavior even as he repeats it (10-11). However, these are most definitely not the first bananas Krapp has consumed (in fact, the 39-year-old Krapp discusses eating them, page 14), and it is likely that he has gone through this exact process

³⁰ Paul Ricoeur, "Narrative Time," in *On Narrative*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 178-179.

before, making and learning from the same mistake—and the fact that he still consumes bananas in spite of the constipation it allegedly causes him (as implied on 17) indicates that he hasn't learned to avoid this at all. This parodic moment encapsulates what becomes the process Krapp carries out within himself. In repeating his distancing and narrating of the past over and over, Krapp seems to learn from his mistakes in the way that he re-frames his life up to the new birthday. Yet this, like with the bananas, indicates that Krapp is actually mistaking certain ways that he is “learning” that are actually him missing the broader point. Just as he avoids slipping on a peel, but is almost definitely still dealing with the health effects caused by eating too many of bananas, Krapp shifts his worldview multiple times, moving from wanting an intimate relationship to wanting artistic integrity, but in doing so, he does not become self-aware of the ways that his narrations are actually reinforcing the lack of the unity he so keenly feels.

This splitting of Krapp's life into different stages, and thus different moments of identification and purpose, is also a splintering of Krapp's subjectivity. One of the most fascinating things about the play is the way Krapp literally converses with his previous selves. Only one character is onstage, only one character ever speaks, but a multitude of voices emerge from this, creating a polyvocal narration of past events. The Krapp who speaks on the tape is technically the same Krapp who moves about the stage, but they are also different in their thoughts, values, and claims to what is important or good. Bennett Simon discusses this in his work on “The Fragmented Self,” making the argument that as the number of selves “multiplies,” the connection to a narrative or shared history grows more and more tenuous.³¹ Simon contrasts this multiplication of the self with the reproduction of the self through procreation, arguing that

³¹ Bennett Simon, “The Fragmented Self, the Reproduction of the Self, and Reproduction in Beckett and in the Theater of the Absurd,” in *The World of Samuel Beckett*, ed. Joseph H. Smith, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 162.

many characters in Beckett have a deep fear of birth that leads them to push away the possibility of such generation and towards an inward focus as they lose sight of a unifying genealogical history.³² This unease is apparent for Krapp as he rejects his lovers (Bianca, Effie, the woman in the boat) and, instead of encountering unification with another, creates his own multitude of subjectivities with whom he can argue and debate without ever having to encounter another person. His base fear of separation causes him to attempt to resolve that alienation starting with the self, which necessarily fails, and as a result, he is unable to find unity anywhere.

In thinking through Krapp's relationship with his past in Freudian terms, it becomes clear that Krapp is experiencing a deep melancholia. Krapp perceives the structural absence of unity in his life (as constantly overshadowed by death) as an historical loss in order to cope with his anxiety. This moves the "loss" (that does not truly exist) into the ego, which creates a deep panic about the lack of unity of the ego itself, or the lack of a coherent narrative in Krapp's framing of the self. Thus, Krapp carries out the contradictory process that has just been explored, furthering his lack of unity through the fracturing of the self, the ego. Freud's description of how melancholics turn their grief and anger inward, becoming frustrated with themselves, is particularly apt considering that Krapp carries out his complicated feelings about his isolation through continual and constant devaluation of his past selves and the narratives they tell. This frantic desire for a unification of the ego is telling when we consider a Krapp who is confronting death, which is the ultimate loss of the ego. There is a known end to the story, where everything will be unified in one way or the other, and this knowledge leads Krapp into a frenetic process of trying to attain this unity on his own before this permanent and final end.

³² Simon, "The Fragmented Self," 162.

Yet while we analyze the internal workings of Krapp's mind, it is essential to remember that this melancholia is not just something playing out within Krapp's thoughts, but is rather being physically embodied on the stage. It is perhaps quite significant that the trauma that inherently affects Krapp is in its very nature spatial-- separation implies a gap between, and unity implies a lack of this. Further, the two separations that are so striking from the aged-39 tape are both instances of the loss of a physical presence of a person, as well as being separated from them through other means as well. When Krapp's mother dies, he is not only not with her, but literally out of the building and in the park. After her death, when the shade is drawn down, there is another physical barrier between them that acts in a metaphorical way, indicating the physical separation he experiences from his mother in her death. She is no longer physically present in his life in any way, and she and Krapp are physically separated forever. The primary person with whom Krapp experienced absolute physical unity before his birth (when he was a part of his mother when growing in her womb) is thus gone, proving that physical unity is itself only temporary and always something that will result in an ultimate and permanent separation. The loss of his lover, though not quite as permanent, is also a loss of a physical presence with whom Krapp had experienced physical unity. Though the moment in the boat is not overtly sexual, the idea of lovers as physically united in their love is a common trope in literature, and it is implied that Krapp and this woman did have a sexual relationship. This relationship is one that he is willing to forgo because "it was hopeless and no good going on" (27), but this denial results in a physical loss of a connection between him and his lover. This loss connects to the loss of his mother and the two cause Krapp to become fearful of experiencing such unity again, as it comes with a necessary separation.

Krapp feels this separation from others taken to its absolute extreme, as he repeats again and again that he feels completely alone on earth in a variety of ways, pointing to an absolute isolation that is experienced not just emotionally but physically. On the past tape, he ends saying, “Past midnight. Never knew such silence. The earth might be uninhabited” (28). This feeling points in opposition to the moments he shared earlier with the dog that felt so communal. Here, the primary sensory mode is “silence,” and the feeling that he is the only living being on earth, physically isolated in the most extreme of ways. In the tape he records for the 69th birthday, Krapp describes a moment on one of the rare occasions where he has left his home, saying, “Sat shivering in the park, drowned in dreams and burning to be gone. Not a soul” (25). Again, he feels completely alone, not just emotionally, but in a very physical way. This “silence” carries over into Krapp’s own speech, demonstrating that this separation seeps into his own language and thinking. Krapp’s tape recordings are absolutely riddled with pauses, moments where the tape continues to record, but Krapp does not speak, creating a temporal gap that is experienced both for the audience watching and listening, and also for some “future Krapp” who would be listening to the tape. These gaps do not just create moments of anticipation or suspension, but also create moments of temporal distancing from one moment to the next. This gapping is a metonymic representation of the process that Krapp carries out within his life, re-narrating his stories by putting temporal separations between different moments of perspective that allow him to understand things differently while missing the larger picture that is ultimately causing him such deep distress.

This sense of emotional isolation becoming physicalized is further reinforced through the concept of his books, physical objects in themselves. Though they are physically separate from himself, the act of reading represents a kind of connection at a distance, and understanding of his

mind, his life, and his purpose. Krapp sarcastically notes that in the most recent year, he has had “Seventeen copies sold, of which eleven at trade price to free circulating libraries beyond the seas. Getting known” (25). His writing, which he has considered to be his great work and inspiration, is not being experienced by others, which would allow him a displaced connection with them through the emotional work he has put into it. Instead, his books are rarely purchased, and when they are, it is by those far away. His inability to be “known” or unified with others is thus presented as a physical unreadability of the narrative he chooses to present to the world. Without an ability to find any kind of physical unity, he attempts to locate this connection in the physical realm through his self-narration, which fails again and again.

This constant re-narration is in itself also physicalized, and materializes an enacted multiplication of subjectivities. While the present Krapp is the only body on stage, the taped Krapp is another presence, distinct and separate from the first due to the physical separation of the tape and tape recorder from the man. Krapp could get up and walk away from the voice onstage and leave it still speaking; hence the polyvocality of the narrative is not just one that exists internally, but one that is physically represented to the audience. The multitude of Krapps is not just created mentally but through the boxes of tapes that physically represent each past self, furthering the idea of multiple subjectivities that Simon has outlined. Now it is not just that there are multiple narratives happening onstage, but that there are distinct, physically different voices speaking and disagreeing with each other, as well as the voice of a third subject referenced (the tape that 39-year-old Krapp has been listening to). Derval Turbidity discusses these multiple subjectivities in Beckett, contrasting the ways in which normal “deictics,” such as the word “I,” function to bring together the physical “spatio-temporal field” and the spoken

word,³³ but Beckett's literature resists this through an exploration of "the impossibility yet necessity of transforming the voice into body and the body into voice."³⁴ Tubridy explores this resistance through another of Beckett's short plays, *Not I*, where "[t]he body in which the voice becomes flesh resists its role as speaker."³⁵ For Krapp, something of the reverse of this happens: the voice speaking on the tape identifies itself with the body we see before us, but this body simultaneously resists this identification both through the creation of a new tape and a new story that disavows the previous narrative, and through the interactions with the past tape in its physical presence. Toward the end of the tape, the younger Krapp begins speaking about what he considers to be "what I have chiefly to record this evening, against the day when my work will be done, and perhaps no place left in my memory, warm or cold, for the miracle that...(*hesitates*)...for the fire that it set alight" (20-21). In spite of the younger Krapp's insistence that this moment is the most significant part of the tape, the older Krapp continually winds the tape forward until he is certain that this part of the tape is over (9-10). In doing so, he also implies that he has unfortunately not forgotten this memory as predicted, as well as denying it any kind of mystical significance that deems it worth recalling or recounting or even remembering at all. The physical "I" onstage pushes away the identification the tape creates with his body, and in doing so, rejects the unity that he clearly desires, a unity that cannot even be achieved physically.

This separation is not just presented through a physically enacted difference between the narratives of Krapp at different ages, but also through his body itself. Though each "I" that speaks on any given tape lays claim to the body onstage, he has aged in such a way that his body

³³ Derval Tubridy, "WORDS PRONOUNCING ME ALIVE: Beckett and Incarnation," *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui* 9 (2000), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25781303>, 97.

³⁴ Tubridy, "WORDS PRONOUNCING ME ALIVE," 94.

³⁵ Tubridy, 101.

now would not resemble that of the Krapp speaking on the tape he plays. In the very opening notes of the play, Krapp is described as “*Very near-sighted (but unsuspected). Hard of hearing....Laborious walk*” (9-10). Before (either) Krapp begins to speak, he is already presented as physically limited in the present, which is not the case in his previous memories: he describes no troubles with his sight and hearing, and the narrative of looking at the blind in his mother’s room indicates that he was once able to see well. While the tape makes claim to the body which is onstage, it is unclear if the two would resemble each other in any more than passing features. The psychosomatic subjectivity including both voice and body thus becomes further splintered between what the Krapp on the tape could enact versus what he is unable to do now. Not only is the narrative different, but the body also becomes a site of discontinuity and difference.

Beckett further emphasizes this by having the older Krapp perform functions that the younger Krapp was either incapable of or unwilling to perform. The younger Krapp ponders the singing of his elderly neighbor, and wonders, “Shall I sing when I am her age, if I ever am? No. (*Pause.*) Did I sing as a boy? No. (*Pause.*) Did I ever sing? No” (15). Later, however, when Krapp switches off the tape to disappear offstage and pour himself a drink, he returns to the stage in song (17). The aging body is expected to move closer to falling apart, to grow less capable as it grows older. While Krapp experiences this form of deterioration, the disjointedness between himself and his younger self is even more pointed by showing the gaps that are not due to age, but rather to other forms of growth, or change. A body that was never capable of singing, or that refused to sing, now breaks into song.

Similarly, Krapp now has a much different relationship to sex than he did when he was 39. The final encounter with the woman in the boat is one primarily focused on emotional connection, while the aspect of sexuality is secondary to this. Krapp continues to engage in

sexual activity, of course, but this loses any semblance of being an activity of passionate connection and instead serves the primary purpose of pleasure for himself. The passage cited above, where Krapp and his lover are unified in their stillness, contrasts starkly with the description of sex that he records on his new tape: "Fanny came in a couple of times. Bony old ghost of a whore. Couldn't do much, but I suppose better than a kick in the crutch. The last time wasn't so bad" (25). Rather than a moment of connection, it is now more of a moment of spasmodic violence and personal satisfaction, rather than anything that is to be shared. The action itself is almost unrecognizable as he carries it out as an older man. Thus, while Krapp's tapes indicate that there is no continuity of the self internally, his actions indicate that the body is not a sustainable indication of who the self is either. Krapp's body thus not only reflects the fundamental lack of unity that has become so deeply distressing to him, but also participates in this denial of any sense of unity. In this way, the structural trauma repeats itself once more. Afraid of not even experiencing a unity within himself, Krapp ironically distances himself again and again in an attempt to make some kind of narrative. He is unable to escape the inevitability of separation, even bodily, both through the natural processes of aging, and through actions he carries out himself.

The inescapability of separation reflects the omnipresence of death, which, as already discussed, has an interesting relationship to trauma. Death is, in some ways, the ultimate physical trauma, especially in terms of separation, as it is the moment when the subjective self is separated from the body: the body continues to exist, the self does not. However, as Caruth has noted, what asserts itself as trauma is not the closeness of death, but rather the survival of it. In this way, though death is the ultimate separation, it is also the end of trauma of any kind, as there is nothing to reckon with or reconcile with any longer. It is perhaps in this relationship that we

see a reflection of Krapp's contradictory association with his own past, pulling it close and also pushing it away, just as death allows for the ultimate unity in the way in which the ego no longer struggles with the bodily self, but this is only achieved through the sundering of the body and the conception of the subjective, inner self.

In this sense, LaCapra's terminology becomes very useful again. Krapp is constantly attempting to "work through" his past by making it coherent and narratable, but in doing so, he is really only "acting it out." The gap between Krapp and any sense of connection with his previous selves becomes more and more tenuous as he re-tells his stories to fit a new worldview. This sense of "acting" becomes more significant when we consider that Krapp is not just a figure created of words on paper, but the physical body on stage, acting. It is not just in Krapp's mind that the memories play out and his actions are repeated, but in physical form and real space. The play thus indicates there is something inherently physical about the process of remembering, of creating narrative, and that our bodies are tied into our self-narratives in more than just the attachment that necessarily exists. This dramatic aspect of the play points to something further about trauma, something that has already been hinted at by Erickson's positioning of the tape recording and collection as a "ritual" as well as an "addiction" -- something which is necessarily bodily and physical, as well as something that is by its very nature practiced and rehearsed. Krapp not only performs the actions of the listening and recording for the audience present in the room to watch the play, but also for himself. Thus the attempts, physically, to rectify what he perceives as the gap between present-Krapp and past-Krapp are not just done as a way to re-create his narrative, but as a way to convince himself he is capable of doing so. In order to believe that he is capable of experiencing completeness and unity even within himself, he needs to physically perform actions to persuade himself as such. In attempting to bury the traumatic

loss of a continuous self, he brings it to the surface again and again, and enacts it again and again. As LaCapra formulates it, this acting out will not allow him to ever overcome the trauma or to learn how to live with it, to make it a part of his life that is acceptable. Instead, he is caught in a cycle of repetition that not only never fully resolves his experience of trauma, but that also reinforces the feeling of separation and alienation that so dogs him to begin with.

In spite of this seemingly inescapable cycle, something shifts for Krapp at the end of the play, something that makes this his “last tape.” While recording his new tape for the current year, Krapp abruptly stops the recording in favor of listening to the description of his time in the boat again, and does so with a practically frantic nature, as he moves “suddenly” to “wrench” the current tape off, and “throws it away” (27), in a shift from his normally deliberate behavior. This is also a shift from the normal cycle of devoting himself to the past before subsuming it to the present year and the present narrative. The play ends not with the voice of the present Krapp, but rather with the voice of the past tape, recounting again the last moments with the woman, while the present Krapp sits by in silence. This switch from rewriting his narrative once more is indicative of some kind of shift from his normal method of “acting out” and reinforcing distance, but it does not appear to be a “working through” that will help Krapp move beyond the trauma that is central to his life. Instead, it seems that this final action is almost another kind of acting out, as indicated by Krapp’s wishes expressed in the tape he is in the midst of recording when this abrupt change comes over him. Though starting with a self-derogatory assertion that assumes a position similar to ones taken in previous tapes, the ending of the tape Krapp creates on stage demonstrates a need not to re-narrate, but rather to re-live and re-experience:

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 the Croghan on a Sunday morning, in the haze, with the bitch, stop and listen to the bells. (*Pause.*) Be again, be again. (*Pause.*) All that old misery. (*Pause.*) Once wasn't enough for you. (*Pause.*) Lie down

across her. (26-27)

Krapp moves from wanting to create a new version of his life from a bitter, distant perspective to intensely needing the opposite of distance. He acknowledges the part of him that craves a kind of connection with his previous selves and previous experiences so intently that he wishes to experience them again. It is no longer enough to just remember things through the tapes, but now he acknowledges a wish for the impossible: to “be again.” He desires not to just remember what it is like to lie across his lover, and not even to feel himself lying across her once more. Instead, he wishes to complete the *action* of lying across her. He wishes to fully embody this moment again, despite the “misery” it has brought him. This leads him to do the closest thing available, and toss aside the current tape in favor of listening to the description once more. On some level, then, it appears that he has moved from acting-out one aspect of his trauma (the distancing of separation) to another type of acting-out, where the distance itself becomes unfathomable and must be mourned, as the past and unity can never fully be claimed. However, calling this an acting-out conflicts with the fact that there is almost no action at all, and in fact, there is a dearth of action. Though Krapp begins listening to the tape in a sudden rush of action, he ends the play completely “motionless” (28). This re-listening to the tape proves fruitless in returning Krapp to the past, and unlike his previous rituals, it does not even give him a false narrative with which to address the future, much less one that allows him to work through or even around the lack of unity that he experiences as so traumatic. In this respect, it is not an acting-out, nor is it a working-through, so perhaps it is something else altogether.

Eric P. Levy reads this ending as a moment of closure, as he asserts in “Beckettian Mimesis.” To him, these final moments of the play constitute Krapp “repudiat[ing] his very

location in the present,”³⁶ which Levy believes is a positive direction for Krapp, as it moves him from his location in the rest of the play where he has been trapped between the past and the present to at least accepting one of these two locations. Levy says, “...through [Krapp’s] regret, epitomized by obsessive remembrance of lovemaking in the canoe, Krapp gives all his yearning to ghosts....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.”³⁷ Thus, according to Levy, Krapp has previously not been able to fully reckon with the present in an anticipation of someday needing to re-define it. Trying to avoid “regret,” he instead creates a situation where he is constantly creating it through the tape-making process.³⁸ This ending, then, is Krapp finding a way to “overcome” the struggle which he has created for himself throughout his life by giving himself over to the past, and “render[ing] the future irrelevant.”³⁹ Levy believes that the “last”-ness of the tape is not, as many critics have argued, signaling Krapp’s death, but rather that Krapp no longer needs to create tapes, having resolved the balancing act between the past and the present by allowing himself to become fully absorbed into one of these.⁴⁰

While Levy’s suggestion that the ending represents some kind of change for Krapp is interesting, this “giving himself over” is not, in fact, a positive change, or even a hopeful one. Reading the trauma physically and bodily, the final moments do not present a better alternative to what has come before. The play ends in silence, and before that, the voice of the younger Krapp is narrating for quite some time, taking over the narrative control (previously asserted by the older Krapp) by being allowed to run unconstrainedly, without Krapp pausing or rewinding,

³⁶ Eric P. Levy, “Krapp’s Last Tape and the Beckettian Mimesis of Regret,” *Sydney Studies in English*, (28:), 2002, (Electronic publication), 58.

³⁷ Levy, “Beckettian Mimesis,” 61,

³⁸ Levy, 53, 55.

³⁹ Levy, 57.

⁴⁰ Levy, 57.

or even turning the tape off once the recording has finished. The present Krapp has lost all of his ability to narrate. At one point, "*Krapp's lips move. No sound*" (28). He has become literally speechless, unable to refute his past, or make a claim to his present that allows him to envision hopes for the future. He ends the play remaining in silence, with no way of moving forward.

While this does demonstrate a more accurate understanding of the effect the past has had on him, it is by no means a useful way to grow into the future. The absolute silence at the end of the play echoes the silence that the past Krapp has just described: "The earth might be uninhabited" (28). However, the silence at the end of the play is not even interrupted by the sound of Krapp's own voice breaking through, asserting some kind of subjectivity in the isolation. He has instead become a part of the silence, a part of the uninhabitation. Without the ability to control his own narrative, without the ability to even argue with his past selves, Krapp cannot see himself as a person inhabiting the earth, and cannot make a coherent narrative out of what his life has become, other than "misery." His physical actions are contained to the past, and without the capacity to reject and re-narrate them, he becomes physically immobile and silent.

If this is a moment not of traditional acting-out or working-through, then perhaps it is a moment of acknowledgment, though not quite an integration or a way to move forward. Everything that Krapp longs for are times, feelings, relationships, and experiences that no longer exist except on a tape. In this sense, there is almost no more need for a body anymore, and so Krapp remains silent and still, facing the loss he has enacted upon himself in attempting to avoid the absence of separation. To put it in the terms by which Caruth originally defined trauma, it has now become "knowable." But in its knowability it is paralyzing. Recognizing that his past is no more coherent than anything else, he cannot move forward, and he cannot move. What he enacts

in this moment is the thing that is so terrifying for being both an unchangeable separation and also a relief from the separation. In stillness and silence, Krapp acts-out his death.

Though Krapp has not experienced a brush with death in any physical sense, we have seen how the specter of it has lingered in traces of the other kinds of separation he fears and enacts throughout the play. In some ways, he has tried to recreate death before this point, “killing” the former selves: the one who claimed that love for Bianca was everything, and the one who claimed that the moment on the pier would be the defining moment of his life. This constant narrative of death-and-rebirth allowed him to both experience the unifying qualities of death as clearing his slate, as well as allowing him to feel protected from the imminent and incredibly disturbing permanence of separation that accompanies an actual physical death. In this moment of fully returning to and even embracing his past, the full significance of the end of a life begins to dawn on him. He is unable to escape the fact that he once was the man in the boat, that he once was the man who collected holly on Christmas Eve, but that he is no longer either of these, and he never can be again. His connection with the past only points to the ephemerality of it, and thus to a fact that he has perhaps been avoiding all along: that he is going to die. He cannot rewind time, and in spite of his efforts to efface the past, he will not always be able to reject the past in favor of a future because at a certain point there is no more future. The disjunctions that have occurred throughout the play between the past and present, and between body and memory are also indicative of this ultimate and tragic truth of death. As he attempts to control his past, Krapp creates physical representations of himself, in his books and on his tapes. However, the physicality of the self cannot be replicated so easily. As Krapp’s body ages, the tapes and books do not provide a consolation from the impending destruction of his body, and thus his mind. This separation, at least, is final.

Though this moment is tragic, it is also in some ways, peaceful, and that is because though death is ultimately a separation of Krapp from the world, and from his body, it also presents a kind of unity. In the darkness and stillness of death, the story has already been told, and cannot be re-narrated. The past simply is what it is, and the events are not up for debate or reinterpretation again and again. The body and mind both cease to function, and Krapp, despite his best efforts, completely ceases to exist. In this lack of being, he does not need to worry about what he has been or what he will become. In facing down how far he is from the past and how he has come to be in this place, Krapp faces death, yes, but he also, for the first time since he has entered the stage, rests.

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