

Title	The Inevitable Destruction of the Mediated Self : The Future Dead Tape-recording and Tape-recorded in Beckett's Krapp's Last Tape
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Citation	Osaka Literary Review. 2004, 43, p. 153-163
Version Type	VoR
URL	https://doi.org/10.18910/25222
rights	
Note	

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The Inevitable Destruction of the Mediated Self: The Future Dead
Tape-recording and Tape-recorded in Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*

Yuka Kakiguchi

Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), which sets a tape-recorder as a driving force of the play in the centre of the stage, begins with a stage direction '[a] *late evening in the future*' (55). The stage time of this play is set 'in the future,' though it is the here and now, presence, which the theatre represents to its audience. But there seem to have been not philosophical, semantic reasons but some pragmatic ones for the playwright. Since a home tape-recorder had not prevailed enough when he wrote the play in 1958, and since Krapp has recorded his voice on tape at least for 40 years, Beckett applied a future time in order to prevent chronological disorder of using this machine for his contemporary audience and readers.¹

However, as Hugh Kenner says, 'It feels... like any Beckettian present' (129), it can hardly be said that this time-setting is a mere expedient. Krapp makes it a habit to record his annual 'retrospect' on his birthday every year, and sixty-nine-year-old Krapp on stage listens to thirty-nine-year-old Krapp's voice on tape, where the latter listens to and makes remarks about himself 'at least ten or twelve years ago' (58). That is to say, *Krapp's Last Tape* is Chinese boxes, 'actually almost infinite Chinese boxes,' and 'here what is nested is "time"' (Yasunari Takahashi 95). Recording one's memory on tape and listening to it means cutting a time sequence and manipulating it with complete control, and by replaying a tape storing his past the present is juxtaposed with the past, being deprived of the

privilege. It is, then, suggestive that what can be referred to as performance in *Krapp's Last Tape* is not sixty-nine-year-old Krapp's '*listening posture, i.e. leaning forward, elbows on table, hand cupping ear towards machine*' (57), but what earlier Krapp's voice on tape delivers, though of course the audience as well as older Krapp can only imagine it in mind. That is why I think that the time-setting of 'future' has more than pragmatic necessity.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the dissolution of 'time' which is caused by using a tape-recorder and its impact on the protagonist's subject.

I The Separation of One from Others

I have already pointed out that *Krapp's Last Tape* is Chinese boxes where 'time' is nested by using a tape-recorder, but what is nested is not only 'time': the space and the properties also assume the same characteristic; the playhouse contains Krapp's den, which is referred to as 'my old rags' by earlier Krapp (57); older Krapp living in the den puts on slapstick clothes like rags, which have '*four capacious pockets*' (55), which make narrow spaces; in these pockets Krapp contains an envelope and a bunch of keys, by one of which he unlocks a drawer, another space; from a drawer Krapp takes out a banana covered with a skin; on the table are '*a number of cardboard boxes containing reels of recorded tapes*' (55). Thus, a space becomes a box and 'nests' narrower spaces in it. As for 'time,' it can be thought that it also takes the form of 'space': by recording on tape Krapp turns his past time or memory into a material and stores it spatially.

Krapp himself on stage, being imprisoned in and surrounded with a number of boxes, is irresistibly degraded to one of the boxes undistinguishable from the others. Then, for Krapp, in

particular for Krapp at thirty-nine, the ambitious and confident man in the prime of life, arises the necessity of resisting from falling into scenery. Krapp's voice, '[s]trong voice, rather pompous' (57), on tape describes his thirty-ninth birthday:

Thirty-nine today, sound as a bell, apart from my old weakness, and intellectually I have now every reason to suspect at the ... [*hesitates*] ... crest of the wave – or thereabouts. Celebrated the awful occasion, as recent years, quietly at the Wine-house. Not a soul. Sat before the fire with closed eyes, *separating the grain from the husks*. Jotted down a few notes, on the back of an envelope.

(57, italics mine)

It is probable that earlier Krapp who designed to be a writer was lost in meditation on his birthday, 'separating the grain from the husks' having no other jobs to do. This behavior, however, seems to be not a mere kill-time but a significant act for him: it is the substitution for an escape from Chinese boxes.

The voice keeps delivering: 'The grain, now what I wonder do I mean by that, I mean ... [*hesitates*] ... I suppose I mean those things worth having when all the dust has – what all *my* dust has settles' (57, italics in the original). Earlier Krapp supposes the grain whose husks are peeled off is his most important self that will remain after his death. That is, he is eager to take essential substance out of 'actually almost infinite Chinese boxes' by separating one from the others. Krapp on stage seems to be still possessed by this high-minded aspiration, though it has already turned into a mere habit without any noble intention: he is addicted to bananas in spite of the fact that they are '[f]atal things for a man with my [his] condition,' namely terrible constipation (57).

The lighting of *Krapp's Last Tape* is directed by Beckett as follows: 'Table and immediately adjacent are in strong white light. Rest of stage in darkness' (55). And thirty-nine-year-old Krapp's voice gives an account of the light as an example of separating:

The new light above my table is a great improvement. With all this darkness round me I feel less alone. [Pause.] In a way. [Pause.] I love to get up and move about in it, then back here to ... [hesitates] ... me. [Pause.] Krapp.

(57)

James Knowlson, who regards the play as a dualistic conflict, writes about the dualism of the light and the dark as follows:²

The new light above Krapp's table is seen, for instance, as a great improvement by Krapp because it forms a clearer division between the light and the dark. As a result, Krapp believes he can move out into the darkness, before returning to the zone of light with which he would wish to identify his essential self. ... (*Frescoes* 87)

As has been pointed out here, Krapp draws a distinctive line between the light and the dark and separates the two because 'a clear division' creates an ideal condition for him to confirm his own subject on the side of the light or as light.

Light is associated with intellect, as he reached '[t]he vision' which would be organized into a 'opus magnum' with 'the fire that set it alight' in him (60), though '[s]eventeen copies sold, of which eleven at trade price to free circulating libraries beyond the seas' and he got only '[o]ne pound six and something, eight' (62). On the other hand, darkness is associated with desire, as thirty-nine-year-old Krapp describes the dark as what he has 'always struggled to keep under' (60), and he practices

asceticism: abstinence from alcohol, bananas and sex.³

As I have said above, recording one's past on tape contributes to configuring the play to Chinese boxes spatially as well as temporally. However, at the same time, it is also an act of separating: separating one's present from his past. As the tape-recorder is set on the table, in the centre of the light Krapp identifies with himself, recording his past on tape and storing it in cardboard boxes means that Krapp tries to extract the present self from the past one and fortify the former. As a result, he ends in having no choice but to expel the latter as the other into the dark.

Krapp always listens to his tape recorded in his past years as a warm-up before recording his annual 'retrospect.' Thirty-nine-year-old Krapp represents this habit as follows: 'These old P.M.s are gruesome, but I often find them ... a help before embarking on a new ... [*hesitates*] ... retrospect' (58). 'P. M.' which denotes his recorded tape is an abbreviation of 'postmortem,' which means 'a searching analysis or discussion of a past event.' But here, what I would like to note is that it also has a meaning of 'autopsy,' 'postmortem examination.' For Krapp, the past self is the dead, and listening to and cursing at his past voice shows that he objectifies his past dead self and inspects it from the vantage *viewpoint* of an observer.

Both Krapps sometimes use a personal pronoun 'he' or 'his,' not 'I' or 'my,' to indicate each past self, though they seem to be able to recognize the senders of the voices as themselves. Krapp on tape says:

Plans for a less ... [*hesitates*] ... engrossing sexual life. Last illness of *his* father. Flagging pursuit of happiness. Unattainable laxation. Sneers at what *he* calls *his* youth and thanks to God that it's over. [*Pause.*] False ring there.
(58, Italics mine)

Krapp on stage, likewise, records his judgment over earlier himself: 'Take *his* mind off *his* homework! Jesus! [*Pause. Weary.*] Ah well, maybe *he* was right. [*Pause.*] Maybe *he* was right' (62, italics mine). Thus, thirty-nine-year-old Krapp proudly and arrogantly and sixty-nine-year-old Krapp remorsefully and lamently perform a postmortem examination of their past selves.

Krapp's eyes, though they are, to speak properly, his ears, with which he once separates himself into the past self and the present one and looks down the former as the other, are quite different from the eyes of the women whom he had once got involved in. He always remembers the women in association with their eyes: as for Bianca, 'Not much about her, apart from a tribute to her eyes. Very warm. I suddenly saw them again. [*Pause.*] Incomparable!' (58); as for a nursemaid, 'The eyes! Like ... [*hesitates*] ... chrysolite!' (60). And besides, the most sentimental episode with a woman on a punt is conveyed as follows:

I thought it was hopeless and no good going on and she agreed, without opening her eyes. [*Pause.*] I asked her to look at me and after a few moments – [*Pause.*] – after a few moments she did, but the eyes just slits, because of the glare. I bent over her to get them in the shadow and they opened. [*Pause. Low.*] Let me in. (61, 63)

Her eyes do not exclude and objectify, but contain the other, Krapp.

However, when he was thirty-nine years old, Krapp could not penetrate the virtue of her comprehensive eyes and separated from her and hers. For him, a fusion of the self and the other means the loss of his vantage *viewpoint* and himself. He probably thought that he could see everything with his own

eyes better than hers: 'I saw the whole thing. The vision at last' (60). With this vision, he ought to have achieved his essence. Aged decrepit Krapp on stage, whose vision in both senses of thought and eyesight has decayed and for whom the tape-recorder only remains, remembers regretfully the eyes he discarded: 'The eyes she had! [*Broods. ...*] Everything there, everything on this old muckball, all the light and dark and famine and feasting of ... [*hesitates*] ... the ages!' (62). Although he separated the women's eyes to keep his definite self and his vantage *viewpoint*, he seems to have lost both of them.

II The Future Dead

Replaying and listening to a tape in which the past self is imprisoned seems to keep a listener's vantage point; Krapp, of course, does so in order to grasp the grain of his being, his essential substance. However, it ironically results in eviscerating the subject.

Charles Grivel writes about a phonograph in 'The Phonograph's Horned Mouth':

The phonograph emphasizes the self in the lack of subject. This machine bears a paradox: it identifies a voice, fixes the deceased (or mortal) person, registers the dead and thus perpetuates his living testimony, but also achieves his automatic reproduction *in absentia*: my self would live *without me* – horror of horrors. ... And in inventing this mechanical form, I graft upon myself the irremediable impression of my death. (35, italics in the original)

Recording one's own voice is fixing himself as the dead, and every time the tape is replayed, the dead resurrects like a phoenix. By so doing, he inscribes his own death, the dead of the past self, in himself at the same time; Ulrika Maude writes,

'Through the voice on tape ... Krapp grows a phantom body' (117). Krapp is far from separating the past self, but doubles and multiplexes himself.

Thirty-nine-year-old Krapp, who ought to be examined by sixty-nine-year-old Krapp, is reproduced and erodes his inspector; the present self dissolves into the dead, 'the future dead.' When he reads the definition of the word 'viduity' from the dictionary, he stops and broods from the top: 'State — or condition — of being — or remaining — a widow — or widower. [*Looks up. Puzzled.*] Being — or remaining?' (59). He is surely amnesic and has a poor memory, but it seems ineluctable that he cannot understand the meaning of 'being' and 'remaining.' Since he is not a 'being' in a proper sense because his 'being' is violated by the dead, and since it is not clear whether his subjectivity still remains or not, these words are beyond Krapp. A noun 'remain' bears the meaning of 'a dead body' as well as 'a remaining part or trace,' so he may stop and ponder whether he himself is alive or dead. Thus, Krapp's present being is unstable and fragile; it is impossible for him to be as a full being.

If he is dead, what is Krapp's existence on stage which the audience watches? I have already said that the present Krapp dissolves into 'the future dead,' being possessed by the dead of his past, but I have to give a detailed explanation for that. Krapp is already the dead, the object of a postmortem examination, at the point of recording his voice on tape. In the near end of the 'retrospect' of his sixty-ninth year, it is getting more difficult for him to use a first personal pronoun:

Went to Vespers once, like when I was in short trousers.

[*Pause. Sing.*]

Now the day is over,

Night is drawing nigh-igh,

Shadows — [*coughing, then almost inaudible*] —

of the evening

Steal across the sky.

[*Gasping.*] Went to sleep and fell off the pew. [*Pause.*]

Sometimes wondered in the night 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.*] Leave it at that. (62-3, italics mine)

The way of speaking in which he deliberately or accidentally avoid using a first personal pronoun is common to Krapp at thirty-nine and at sixty-nine, but it is shown clearly here that older Krapp cannot use it for himself and that he is the subject 'I' and the object 'you' of the postmortem examination at the same time. As the song of *Vespers* shows, 'shadows,' that is ghosts, are creeping up on him and they turns him into the shadow half alive and half dead; the death, which he will encounter in the near future, has already been inscribed in his body. So I call Krapp 'the future dead.' Since 'the future dead' has the past and the future in its body, it cannot live in the present. As a result, Krapp, who at first appears to be able to control 'time' at will by using the tape-recorder, is dragged down from the height of God and uncovers his real self, which is tossed by 'time.' Krapp can be only 'in the future.'

For Krapp, the present time does not have any privilege over against the past and the future. In fact, Krapp on stage does not see even his past self from the vantage *viewpoint*, for it is not the present self but the past one that takes hold of this play. Krapp's main act is to operate the tape-recorder, to switch it on and off, and to wind the tape forward and back. In contrast to it, the dead body reproduced by the voice on tape does perform. Maude insists that 'if Beckett's audience is brought to the theatre as much to hear as to see, the missing visual imagery, notwithstanding, is provided by the act of

listening' (116).

Repetition in *Krapp's Last Tape* also reinforces the significance of the past self. The structure of Chinese boxes can be considered as a kind of repetition: older Krapp repeats earlier Krapp in recording his voice and listening to the recorded tape, and relives the experiences thirty years ago. With regard to the use of words, the former repeats the latter's locution. For example, thirty-nine-year-old Krapp says, 'Just been listening to an old year, passages at random. I did not check in the book, but it must be at least ten or twelve years ago. . . . Hard to believe I was ever that young whelp. The voice!' (58); on the other hand sixty-nine-year-old Krapp says, 'Just been listening to that stupid bastard I took myself for thirty years ago, hard to believe I was ever as bad as that' (62).⁴ Ruby Cohn calls Beckett's repetitions 'ghosting' ('Ghosting' 7). An ironical paradox is created here: although Krapp operates the machine, in fact the dead of the past self and the repetitive ghosts in the machine manipulate him. What was thought of as a husk is indeed the grain; the dead of the past self which was once a husk is devouring the grain of the present self and is about to supplant the place of the subject.

Krapp is mediated by the past self through the tape-recorder and cannot escape losing the subjectivity. However, the dead, who contrives to engulf him as well, cannot become the subject, because they are always what are mediated by the machine and are only embedded in it. They dissolve when it fails. It is the tape-recorder that is in the centre of both of them. *Krapp's Last Tape* is a play dramatizing the inevitable destruction of the mediated self.

Notes

1. See Hugh Kenner (129). Although Kenner says, 'he [Beckett] had never seen a recorder,' James Knowlson corrects this widespread fallacy in Beckett's biography *Damned to fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*: 'he had seen a tape-recorder in operation when he went along in January 1958 to the BBC studio on the Avenue Hoche in Paris' (444).
2. I owe a part of my paper to Knowlson's argument, but there is a difference of viewpoint: I make a point of the multilayered structure of the play, while he does of the dualistic one.
3. For further arguments on this point, see Knowlson (1979; 86-92).
4. For details about repetition, see Ruby Cohn (1973; 169-70).

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- 高橋康也『橋がかり — 演劇的なものを求めて』笹山隆編(岩波書店、2003年)