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## Sophoclean Beckett in Performance

### Abstract

While Samuel Beckett's innovations for the stage place him in the vanguard of late twentieth-century theatre, his debt to ancient Greek drama is seldom discussed. This article argues that the richest engagement between Beckett's theatre and the tragedy and comedy of ancient Athens can be seen in the performance, that is, postpublication phase of his plays' composition. Beckett's directorial control created an ongoing compositional process; using the evidence of his production notes, I demonstrate how his performative aesthetics echo what is known of Greek practice and, in particular, how he makes mimetic use of an ekphrastic diegesis, blending telling and showing in a process of visualization. The argument is illustrated through a comparative analysis of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* and the performance history of *Krapp's Last Tape*. While both play texts involve a central dramatic analepsis which triggers the realization of an unwitting quasi-nostos, in performance Beckett's play increasingly emphasizes such Sophoclean elements as a circumscribed *mise en scène*, restrained bodily movement, ekphrastic spectacle, and a heightened use of both extrasцениc and distanced space. Underscoring these correspondences is a shared paratactic modality, in evidence at key moments on the level of the lexis (resulting in meaningful pauses and appositional juxtapositions in the dialogue) as well as in phenomenological aspects of each play's performance.

The best would be not to begin.

Beckett, *The Unnamable*

μη φῦναι τὸν ἅπαντα νικᾷ λόγον.<sup>1</sup>

*Oedipus at Colonus*

Il est peut-être temps que quelqu'un soit tout simplement rien.<sup>2</sup>

Beckett, *Eleuthéria*

While Samuel Beckett's innovations for the stage place him in the vanguard of late twentieth-century theatre, his debt to ancient Greek drama

<sup>1</sup> "Not to be born conquers all reasoning" (*OC* 1224).

<sup>2</sup> "It is perhaps time that somebody was quite simply nothing".

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is seldom discussed.<sup>3</sup> Conscious Sophoclean echoes – for example, “Can there be misery – [*he yawns*] – loftier than mine? No doubt. Formerly. But now?” (Beckett 2006a: 92-3) – arguably build on Beckett’s familiarity with Yeats’s versions of *King Oedipus* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, which he attended while a student at Trinity College, Dublin.<sup>4</sup> Systematic notes survive from the 1930s detailing (both in schematic and anecdotal fashion) the history of Greek drama (Beckett Archive MS 3000: 74r-76v). And, most decisively, the sensibility of his theatrical work resonates with the notion of Greek tragedy as the medium that unflinchingly presents the spectacle of human misery. Beckett’s plays do not depict suffering and misery on the grand scale envisioned by Aristotle,<sup>5</sup> yet they are concerned with miseries that, but for the scalar difference, resemble those typical of Sophoclean heroes like Oedipus: irredeemable mistakes, fateful ignorance, miscalculation, impotence, inexorable physical and mental affliction and degeneration.

The richest engagement between Beckett’s theatre and the tragedy of ancient Athens can be seen in the performance phase of his plays’ composition, wherein he cultivates a blending of strategies of showing and telling, an interpenetration of mimetic and diegetic effects. For instance, the quote above from Hamm in *Endgame* clearly echoes Oedipus’ lament at *OT* 813-5,<sup>6</sup> which W.B. Yeats rendered as “If this stranger were indeed Laius, is there a more miserable man in the world than the man before you?”. Beckett found, during the play’s production, the stage direction “yawns” too heavy handed as parody. He cut Hamm’s yawn (Knowlson 1992a: 49), thus tightening the theatrical line separating the tragic and comedic registers.<sup>7</sup> He contin-

<sup>3</sup> Two notable exceptions are Worth 2004 and Menke 2009. Greek tragedy as mediated by the French neoclassical tradition, particularly through Jean Racine, is another, more familiar, pathway of influence, as evidenced by Beckett’s lectures on Racine at Trinity College; see Juez and Schwartz 2008. I am going back, beyond Racine, to Sophocles (whom Racine admired more than Euripides, despite the obvious influence of the latter on his plays; see Phillippo 2003: 19-22).

<sup>4</sup> While the focus here is Sophocles, in Beckett’s writing there are also multiple references to the plays of Aeschylus – for instance, in *Waiting for Godot* an allusion to the watchman at the opening of *Agamemnon*, and in *Happy Days* an echo of *Prometheus Bound* – so the influence and intertextual presence of Athenian tragedy is extensive.

<sup>5</sup> For two of Aristotle’s defining notions of tragic scale – complex plot and a reputable and prosperous protagonist – see *Poet.* 1452b31-32 and 1453a10.

<sup>6</sup> εἰ δὲ τῷ ξένῳ / τούτῳ προσήκει Λαίῳ τι συγγενές, / τίς τοῦδ’ ἔτ’ ἀθλιώτερος.

<sup>7</sup> Beckett consistently avoids the fixed generic categories of comedy and tragedy. Similarly, recent scholarship argues against the notion of “pure” Greek tragedy; see for example, *contra* Steiner 1996, Wright 2005 and Gregory 1999-2000. The change in the stage direction in *Endgame* is part of a general production-phase trend to diminish the comic slapstick strategies (absorbed from the music-hall and silent movie traditions) in favor of a more ambiguous (comic/tragic) dramatic register. This shift is notable, for instance, in the production history of *Waiting for Godot*; see Knowlson and McMillan 1993.

ues to undercut the high tragic tone but sharpens the echo of tragic seriousness by freeing the pivotal word “loftier” from the comic pause and allowing it to more fully bear the weight of the double (ironic) aspect. In the process of staging his drama, Beckett refines it in the direction of classical tragedy but reimagines Sophoclean tragedy in more pedestrian terms. This shift is underscored by Hamm’s conclusion: “No doubt. Formerly. But now?” – as though it is the historical period itself which has fallen off the high register.

Beckett’s notoriously tight directorial control created an ongoing compositional process, producing a continuous or fluid text<sup>8</sup> and undermining any firm distinction between the play text and the performance text. The fact is that many of the play texts as published stand as unreliable documents for understanding how Beckett envisioned their theatrical staging. The evidence of his production notes demonstrates how his performative aesthetics echo Greek practice – the change to Hamm’s lines, for example, strengthens the passage’s irony, a signature strategy of Sophocles (Scodel 2005: 237). The general argument is illustrated through a comparative analysis of Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King* (henceforth, *OT*) and the performance history of *Krapp’s Last Tape* (henceforth, *KLT*). Once the significant changes to the play text Beckett made during performance are taken into consideration, the correspondences between his play and *OT* become striking. While both play texts involve a central dramatic analepsis which triggers the realization of an unwitting quasi-*nostos*, in performance Beckett’s play increasingly emphasizes a circumscribed *mise en scène*, restrained bodily movement yielding a language of gesture, the pivotal use of ekphrastic diegesis, a dyadic storyworld structure, and a heightened dependence on extrascenic and distanced space – all elements associated with Sophoclean tragedy and exemplified in *Oedipus the King*, Sophocles’ most famous play and the one that Beckett saw as an undergraduate when it was produced at the Abbey Theatre in Yeats’s translation. Underscoring these correspondences is a shared paratactic modality resulting in meaningful pauses and appositional juxtapositions in the dialogue.

Part one of this article highlights instances where the written record shows Beckett contemplating the Athenian tragic stage. The Sophoclean instantiation of Greek tragedy as the point of comparison, as opposed to the Aeschylean or Euripidean, is in part predicated on Beckett’s receptivity to aspects of Yeats’s versions of the *Oedipus* plays as staged at the Abbey Theatre in 1926–27. Beckett’s “Whoroscope” Notebook is briefly discussed for the light it sheds on his interest in Greek drama, and his early play *Eleuthéria* is

<sup>8</sup> For the concept of “fluid text” applied to literary works that exist in multiple versions, see Bryant 2002. With regard to the genetic approach to textual studies, see Ferrer 2011; Deppman, Ferrer, and Groden 2004; de Biasi 2000.

enlisted to show Beckett laying the groundwork for a thoroughgoing revitalization of Athenian, and specifically Sophoclean, tragedy. Part one concludes with a discussion of the seven theatrical strategies listed above as intrinsic features of Athenian tragedy, particularly in Sophocles' *OT*. This background sets the stage for the analysis of *KLT* in part two, in which I argue that Beckett's theatre inverts central elements of Sophoclean content while maintaining and even reinvigorating its performative methods and forms.

*KLT* may seem a paradoxical choice for comparison because it contains no explicitly classical intertextual references, unlike, say, *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, or *Happy Days*. This absence would seemingly set the bar of proof higher, and therefore if commonalities can be demonstrated here they may be understood to persist elsewhere – as indeed is largely the case. The principles foregrounded, especially the minimal *mise en scène*, the gestural body, ekphrastic diegesis, and strategic use of distanced space, are central to many of Beckett's plays, to say nothing of his use of other techniques echoing Athenian conventions, such as mask-like effects and choreography. Throughout his published dramatic *oeuvre* Beckett observes the Sophoclean rule of having no more than three speaking parts on the stage at any given time. The one apparent exception, when Lucky gives his "think" in *Waiting for Godot*, is only apparent since Lucky is not conversing but rather enacting thought as speech.

## Part 1

### Yeats at the Abbey Theatre, 1926-27

W.B. Yeats's importance to Beckett is attested in Beckett's writing and well recognized by scholars.<sup>9</sup> As mentioned above, Beckett attended the performances of Yeats's versions of *King Oedipus* and *Oedipus at Colonus* staged at the Abbey Theatre in 1926-27 (Knowlson 1996: 71). The principal translation of Sophocles' two plays contained in Beckett's surviving library in Paris is Yeats's (Van Hulle and Nixon 2013: 287). The only other Sophocles is a German translation of *OT* by Wolfgang Schadewaldt from 1955 (284), which Beckett referred to in a 1959 letter to Barbara Bray: "Started an *Oedipus Rex* in queer literal German translation but haven't got far" (Beckett 2014: 239). This letter shows that some thirty years after seeing *OT* at the Abbey Theatre, Beckett was still engaged with the play. The seemingly pejorative characterization of Schadewaldt's translation as "literal" hints at the qualities Beckett may have found satisfying in Yeats's version.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Van Hulle 2015: 215-16, which traces the connection between *KLT* and Yeats's poem "Aedh Wishes His Beloved Were Dead".

Yeats began his translation of *OT* (initially with the assistance of Nugent Monck) in 1911 by using the R.C. Jebb translation of 1885 (Macintosh 2008: 529). Yeats strove to pare down the Jebb version, following principles of condensation and contraction, making it more “verb-based” (534) and able to spring easily from the actor’s mouth. He breaks Jebb’s sentences into smaller units, and, importantly, moves from hypotaxis in the direction of parataxis. For instance, Jebb’s: “Such things were surmised; but Laius once slain, amid our troubles, no avenger rose” becomes “Such things were indeed guessed at, but Laius once dead no avenger rose. We were amid our troubles” (qtd in Macintosh 2008: 534-5). This generally paratactic shift towards speakable language in turn influences Hamm’s intertextual quote discussed above, which consists of four short sentences in paratactic arrangement. Yeats’s energetic speech is far closer to the type Beckett would fashion than is the translation of Jebb.

Yeats’s staging of the *OT* offered other innovative features that likely impressed the young Beckett. The relatively narrow confines of the Abbey Theatre resulted in a restrained *mise en scène*: in the 1926 production, for instance, the chorus of five was relegated to the orchestra pit and only the choral leader stood on the stage with the other leading Theban figures. One effect was to “isolate Oedipus from his Theban context altogether” (538), which furthered Yeats’s vision of the protagonist. The stylistic features of Yeats’s translation in combination with his innovations in staging thus shed some of the historical and cultural specificity of Oedipus, presenting him as a more generalized hero.

These various aspects of Yeats’s staging of Sophocles’ *King Oedipus* – a more conversationally energetic and fluent paratactic language, a more concentrated *mise en scène*, a more generalized protagonist – reflect strategies Beckett made use of in his own theatre and are observable in his thinking about the art form. This is not to gloss over the significant differences between their theatres. Nevertheless, Yeats’s version also foregrounded physical gesture, and it is clear that Beckett became especially interested in the way physical gestures can constitute a type of language. The Irish character actor Michael Dolan, who played the part of Tiresias in Yeats’s production, had particularly impressed Beckett by his gestural use of his hands. This same semiotic interest in gesture found expression in 1931 in the lectures Beckett gave on Molière at Trinity, in which he emphasized the importance of “muscular dialogue generated by gesture” (Knowlson 1996: 71).

### “Whoroscope” Notebook

The notebook Beckett kept through much of the 1930s, housed at the Beckett Archive in Reading (MS 3000), contains few entries relevant to Greek

theatre. However, six pages lay out in systematic fashion the major figures in the history of ancient Greek literature. Midway through these pages there appear section headings (Choral Poetry, Prose, Attic Period). The last heading is then subdivided into Tragedy, Comedy, History, and Eloquence, the last of which is left blank. In the Tragedy section, there are entries for Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, and under each of these we find basic information about the playwright, the number of tragedies he composed, and the number that are extant in a listing of titles (the titles of Euripides' extant works are only partial). The clearest interpretative remark concerns Euripides and takes the form of a single word written in capitals: MISOGYNIST (a remark which likely summarizes the traditional evaluation).<sup>10</sup> It is clear that Beckett has simply transcribed information from secondary sources, most likely Harold Fowler's *A History of Ancient Greek Literature* and Lemprière's *Classical Dictionary*, "supplemented here and there [with] other texts" (Van Hulle and Nixon 2013: 118). The entry for Sophocles contains the following anecdote: "Famous ingratitude of his children who accused him of insanity. In defence of which he read his Oedipus at Colonus lately finished. Acquitted" (MS 3000: 74r). While Beckett is obviously paraphrasing an anecdote (one in fact retailed in Cicero's *De senectute*), the paratactically abrupt form of his summary sentence "Acquitted" might suggest a certain subjective satisfaction, as if Beckett is endorsing the acquittal based on his appreciation of the play used as evidence.

The most certain conclusion to draw from the "Whoroscope" Notebook is twofold. First, that while Beckett was interested in a historical overview of the literature of the period, he did not endeavour to engage interpretatively in the schema he transcribed, unlike, say, his voluminous notes on the history of philosophy – similarly dependent on secondary sources – wherein he would occasionally make his own summary of philosophical concepts (Trinity College MS 10967). Second, the notebook underscores the fact that Beckett did not know Greek and so did not read the Greek tragedies in the original. While Beckett was linguistically gifted (the notebook contains entries in Latin, French, German, and Italian), he did not remedy his lack of Greek and so relied on translations and performances like Yeats's as pathways for accessing classical theatre.

### **Liberation from Classical Conventions: *Eleuthéria***

Beckett's play *Eleuthéria* anticipates *Krapp's Last Tape*, most obviously in the name of the protagonist: Victor Krap. More meaningful, perhaps, is

<sup>10</sup> For the origins of this view of Euripides see, for example, Aristoph. *Thesm.* 82-5.



*Eleuthéria's* use of pantomime – evident in such stage directions as: “(A silence. All of a sudden Dr. Piouk has slightly disjointed gestures, starts a dance step, makes odd movements with his arms, like signals, in other words, such as suit the actor’s fancy, then comes to a stop. Mild embarrassment)” (1995: 111) – which advances the notion that physical gesture can be as effective at dramatic characterization as verbal dialogue, if not more so.

*Eleuthéria*, written in 1947, foregrounds the influence of Sophocles. There are evidences of this influence in *Endgame*, when Hamm says to Clove, “One day you’ll be blind, like me. You’ll be sitting there, a speck in the void, in the dark, for ever, like me” (Beckett 2006a: 117)<sup>11</sup> or in *Waiting for Godot* where Estragon suffers from swollen feet, the boy character functions similarly to a tragic messenger, and Lucky the slave is the counterpart of the old Theban shepherd – all resonances with *OT*.<sup>12</sup> But it is *Eleuthéria*, the play that Beckett ended up suppressing, that serves as a “full statement of dramatic method – a statement which clearly influenced his later plays” (McMillan and Fehsenfeld 1988: 29-30). Here one can detect the paradigmatic importance of Sophocles’ theatre.

When Beckett offered *Godot* for production to Roger Blin in 1951 he offered it along with *Eleuthéria*, so at the time he viewed it as worthy of staging (30). *Eleuthéria* affords valuable insight into Beckett’s theatrical aesthetics. In a far-ranging parodic engagement it targets canonized playwrights and dramatic conventions; prominent among them is Sophocles, whose Oedipus serves as the Aristotelian epitome of the tragic hero – a fact that is clearly targeted here (31). The play’s title, the Greek word for ‘freedom’, heralds the liberation of both protagonist and dramatic action from the strictures of inherited classical practice.<sup>13</sup> The central character is Victor Krap, who is set up as a tragic figure in the vein of Oedipus, but who foregoes every form of heroism presented, first and foremost by trying to absent himself from the play’s action (as well as from his mother’s attention). As he says, “It is perhaps time that somebody was quite simply nothing”

<sup>11</sup> Compare this to *OT* 412-13, 418-21, and especially 454-6.

<sup>12</sup> See Worth 2004: 269, 271. These correspondences maintain Sophoclean forms but do so by overturning or deflating their content, or they appropriate the forms to the experience of modernity. For instance, Estragon’s swollen feet carry no meaningful implications for either his name or the play’s themes – for the importance of Oedipus’ name in this regard, see Menke 2009: 40. Lucky the slave character’s “think” (2006d: 35-7) can be seen as a parody of the consequential utterance of the Theban shepherd. And the messenger boy brings the opposite of a vivid account of momentous events.

<sup>13</sup> The play transgresses Aristotelian principles of characterization and plot structure (see FN 5).

(Beckett 1995: 82).<sup>14</sup> As a failure, Krap highlights the insufficiency of Sophoclean heroic drama and prompts instead the call for a theatre that can accommodate the pedestrian antithesis of Sophoclean heroism.<sup>15</sup> Krap therefore represents the accessibly unremarkable human, and the play's unfolding involves, on the meta-level, the search for a dramatic vehicle suitable for such a character (McMillan and Fehsenfeld 1988: 30). It is Sophoclean, and specifically Oedipal, heroism that Beckett's play works to deconstruct. In contrast, the structural forms and strategies of Sophoclean drama remain an effective means of enactment for Beckett.

### Aspects of Athenian/Sophoclean Tragedy

With regard to bodily disposition and action in the classical theatre, the absence of stage directions in the texts of Athenian tragedy force a reliance on other forms of material evidence, such as vase painting. Although inconclusive,<sup>16</sup> this evidence suggests the importance of physical gestures as a semiotic component of tragic theatre. This stands to reason, if only because all actors wore masks – eliminating facial expression – and tragic actors (all were male) wore inexpressive robes, “designed to fit seamlessly into their milieu” (Nelson 2016: 48). While the mask was “the only element of the actor's costume taken to represent the character's ‘self’” (46), the occlusion of the actor's expressive body yielded a theatre that was “in no sense naturalistic” (Davidson 2005: 205) and that relied on verbal enunciation and emphatic gesture. Physical gestures, in other words, were integral to illustrating or emphasizing projected speech.

Athenian tragedy's original home in the open-air theatre of Dionysus, abutting the sacred precinct of Dionysus Eleuthereus, on the southeast slope of the Acropolis, involved a theatrical space unconcerned with erecting palpable, much less fixed, borders between its actual world and the fictional worlds it staged. There were no substantial structural features of the theatre designed to cut off the surrounding landscape from the sightlines of the audience. As Rush Rehm points out, “the *theatron* in fifth-century Athens was less a building than . . . landscape architecture” (2002: 37). He distinguishes three distinct components that established it as a playable the-

<sup>14</sup> This line, in playing on the concept of nothing, is reminiscent of *OT* 1016–20, particularly Oedipus' line: “How could a nothing equal the one who gave me birth?” (καὶ πῶς ὁ φύσας ἔξ ἴσου τῶ μηδενί;).

<sup>15</sup> For the centrality of the ‘hero’ to Sophoclean tragedy, see, especially, Knox 1964. While this notion endures, Beckettian theatre anticipates recent challenges to Knox's ‘Sophoclean Hero’ model: see, for instance, Finglass 2011: 42–6, and Scodel 2005: 233–6.

<sup>16</sup> For a defence of the link between vase-painting and the plays, see Taplin 2007.

atre: the *cavea*, the hillside that provided seating for the audience, which was either the ground or wooden benches; the *orchestra*, which consisted of “a flat area of beaten earth supported by a retaining wall lying lower down the slope”; and the *skene*, “a wooden stage-building . . . at the back of the orchestra and in front of the terrace wall, allow[ing] for access (*eisodoi*) into the orchestra along its two edges. Its façade had a single door or opening offering entrances and exits” (38).

With its minimally staged *mise en scène* and barest spatial apparatus in service to enhance the illusion of fictionality, this was a dramatic space whose vitality was animated primarily by the power of its speech acts and accompanying gestures. The dimensions of the amphitheatre itself meant that the effectiveness of bodily gestures was limited by what could easily be seen across the considerable distances in the round. By all accounts the embellishment of setting through the use of physical props or scene painting was a negligible factor in performance.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, what would today be considered the primary graphic symptoms of tension-filled interpersonal relations, namely, the direct presentation of either sexual encounters or acts of physical violence, were consigned in the fifth century to off-stage and left for the ancillary figure of the Messenger to report. In this regard, the *skene* forms a vital part of the *mise en scène* as the sole structure visually signifying the space that is (to adopt Rush Rehm’s term) extrascenic,<sup>18</sup> and serving as well as a threshold of entrances and exits.

In the theatre of Dionysus, the exploitation of extrascenic space ultimately results in its reliance on ekphrastic diegesis, that is, speech that visualizes what has happened off stage; tragic climaxes, such as in *OT*, involve a messenger who arrives to relate the decisive events that unfolded extrascenically. Such speeches are properly understood as a form of *ekphrasis*. As Ruth Webb has pointed out, the understanding of this term as “the poetic description of a pictorial or sculptural work of art” has only developed during the second half of the twentieth century. Its long established meaning was “a speech that brings the subject matter vividly before the eyes” (2009: 1). The term is appropriate for tragic messenger speeches, because such speech functions *as spectacle* enacting the events that have been hidden from spectator view. Messenger speech thus stands in for first-hand visibility, and rests on verbal strategies of *enargeia* (vividness): the power of words to “create an impression *like* that of sensation and . . .

<sup>17</sup> On these and other material aspects of performance in the fifth-century theatre, as well as discussion of the historical evidence, see Rehm 2002: 1-75, and also Taplin 1977; 1978.

<sup>18</sup> Extrascenic space designates that space “lying immediately offstage, behind or contiguous to the façade” (Rehm 2002: 21).

be contemplated either as equivalent to what they represent, or as likenesses” (112). Messenger speeches therefore further the illusion of the fictional world while also enacting the spectacle of an event that occurs within the storyworld.

*OT* contains two messenger speeches, the second of which offers an ekphrastic account of the climactic events – the suicide of Jocasta and Oedipus’ self-blinding – that occur extrascenically, behind the façade of the *skene*. The first messenger speech, on the other hand, reports the death of King Polybus of Corinth and also precipitates the revelation that Oedipus was exposed as an infant on Mt Cithaeron. This messenger, therefore, makes pivotal use of distanced space,<sup>19</sup> since Mt Cithaeron, like the crossroads, constitutes a fateful distant location in Oedipus’ past.

Another intrinsic dimension of Athenian tragedy is the dyadic storyworld: each play is comprised of a mortal realm and an Olympian realm. The Priest of Zeus’ speech at the beginning of *OT* illustrates this double world structure when he describes Thebes to Oedipus, saying, “the firebearing god, a most hateful pestilence, swooping strikes the city” (ὁ πυρφόρος θεὸς σκίψας ἐλάυνει, λοιμὸς ἔχθιστος, πόλιν, 27-8). The paratactic arrangement of the phrases “the firebearing god swooping strikes” (ὁ πυρφόρος θεὸς σκίψας ἐλάυνει) and “a most hateful plague” (λοιμὸς ἔχθιστος) – ostensibly an identity relation – characterizes Thebes’ affliction as an appositional juxtaposition of Olympian and mortal sources. The unfolding of Sophoclean tragedy invariably involves the paratactically conjoined divine and human worlds.

## Part 2

### *Krapp’s Last Tape: the Play Text*

Written in the first two months of 1958, with the Irish actor Patrick Magee in mind, Beckett’s *KLT* is a one-man one-act play that dramatizes the evening of Krapp’s sixty-ninth birthday. The relatively static physical action and plot of the play involves an annual ritual, Krapp’s taking stock of the year now complete, through the use of a reel-to-reel tape-recorder. This postmortem entails a double process. On the one hand, it includes a more temporally extended historical self-review by way of listening to an “old year” from among his archive of annual recordings. This is, in a sense,

<sup>19</sup> Distanced space “bears no immediate relationship to the scenic givens that provide the setting. . . . [It lies] beyond the theatrical and scenic areas visible to the audience. Whereas extrascenic space affords exits and entrances through the central door, distanced space provides for arrivals and departures via the *eisodoi* leading into the orchestra” (Rehm 2002: 22).

the use of recording technology as both a catalyzing and stabilizing aid to memory. On the other hand, the primary function of this annual observance is to set down in a fresh recording Krapp's reflections on the significant events of the year just completed as well as note his general state and condition. "These old PMs are gruesome, but I often find them... a help before embarking on a new... (*hesitates*) retrospect".<sup>20</sup>

As the play opens, Krapp consumes two bananas in comically meditative fashion, and proceeds to consult a large ledger book in order to find the box and spool numbers ("box... three... spool... five": l. 39) that correspond to the recording of the year he has it in mind to recall. The correct box and spool found, the action of the play then sets off into its deeper emotional waters as he proceeds to listen intently to the tape. The tape in question is a recording he made thirty years prior, on "the awful occasion" (l. 70) of his thirty-ninth birthday. The audience witnesses Krapp's experience of listening to the voice of his much younger self as he recounts events of the year – principally, the death of his mother "in the late autumn, after her long viduity" (l. 133); an epiphany he had "that memorable night in March, at the end of the jetty, in the howling wind, never to be forgotten, when suddenly I saw the whole thing" (ll. 168-70); and a "farewell to love", referring to the mutual ending of a relationship with a girl which occurred during an outing in which they drift in a punt on the stream of an upper lake – "We lay there without moving. But under us all moved, and moved us, gently, up and down, and from side to side" (ll. 56-7, 196, 187-8). Erupting with revulsion on hearing the report of the epiphany on the jetty, the elder Krapp fast-forwards the tape into the account of this third event and is here arrested. Ultimately, the thirty-nine year old's narrative of the "farewell to love" takes hold and subverts the elder mind's intention from that of recording the narrative of the current year (he briefly begins that recording) to that of intractable nostalgia or pain for homecoming, the bitter solace of an involuntary return.

In addition to those landmarks distilling his thirty-eighth year, his younger voice gives a brief account of listening to "an old year, passages at random . . . it must [have been] at least ten or twelve years ago" (ll. 94-5). So, while the play is relatively short (the 2006 Grove Press edition totals ten pages), its narrative structure is quite complicated, involving a telescoping of timeframes: Krapp at age sixty-nine, at age thirty-nine, and, embedded within that timeframe, at age twenty-seven or twenty-nine.

<sup>20</sup> Knowlson 1992b: ll. 100-3. Citations from *Krapp's Last Tape* are by line number and refer to the "revised text" edited and published, with Beckett's consultation and approval, by James Knowlson in his third volume of *The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett*.

This telescoping of time periods creates an effect of simultaneity in which three versions of Krapp cohabit the stage and give voice to a self-scrutiny that shifts between mocking disgust and dismissal, affirming laughter of commiseration, and an acute nostalgia that leaves him speechless. The theatrical spectacle establishes a dynamic, multi-dimensional portrait of Krapp, involving a complicated choreography of verbal, physical, and psychological elements that bring into indirect view his embittered and atrophied development. The tape-recording pivotally involves the use of (fateful) distanced space: the death of his mother; the night in the wind on the end of the jetty; and drifting with the girl in the punt on the upper lake.

But the play also endeavours to ameliorate the darkness that attends and emanates from Krapp's alienation, deadendedness, and accelerating decrepitude, by leavening it with comedic elements. Krapp's attire is generically clown-like, with trousers that are "narrow" and "too short for him" (l. 8); a waistcoat that has "four capacious pockets" (*ibid.*); "dirty white boots . . . very narrow and pointed" (ll. 9-10); and a "purple nose" (l. 11). His habit of taking solace in liquor is foregrounded through three trips "backstage into darkness" (ll. 31-2) to audibly consume six drinks. As his level of inebriation increases he launches, with "quavering voice", into two partial renditions of the evening hymn "Now the day is over / Night is drawing nigh" (ll. 124, 247). These various motifs work to undercut the tones of seriousness and barrenness that otherwise predominate. They imbue with a comic aura the spectacle of Krapp alone in, or self-exiled to, the sanctuary of his den.

### The Continuous Text

This description is a general summary of the play as published, first in 1958 in the *Evergreen Review*, then by Faber and Faber in England in 1959, and thirdly in 1960 in the United States by Grove Press. And this summary still applies to the text in all its reprintings. But this version of the play represents only one of its incarnations. The complex postpublication history of Beckett's numerous excisions, alterations, and additions made over the subsequent nineteen years, in which he realized its construction *in performance*, reveals a play that no longer incorporates many of those ameliorating comedic elements detailed in the last paragraph of the summary above: the "four capacious pockets" of the waistcoat and the "purple nose" are cut, the banana gag is reduced, particularly in terms of the sexual innuendo (Knowlson 1992b: 12-13, 16-18). One result is a softening and diminishing of that distance from the audience that is associated with the genre of comedy: the spectacle of Krapp is more humanized, brought into more conventional proximity to the audience. This amelioration of comic aspects also allows those elements of the genre of tragedy – which are often resisted

by Beckett's theatre – to press against the play's surface. But these and the other changes made by Beckett never resulted in an officially revised text.

From the play's world première in October 1958 at the Royal Court Theatre,<sup>21</sup> London, Beckett had an active hand in shaping its production. Both the first American production,<sup>22</sup> at the Provincetown Playhouse, New York, in 1960, and, that same year, the first French production (as *La dernière bande*)<sup>23</sup> at the Théâtre Récamier in Paris, saw Beckett as consultant. But his first time directing the play (as *Das letzte Band*) in October 1969 at the Schiller-Theater Werkstatt in Berlin resulted in significant changes to the text, and these were recorded in detail in what is known as the Schiller Notebook.<sup>24</sup> This production notebook presents the most extensive revision of the play by Beckett postpublication, but it is not the sole record of compositional revision.

In the year following the Schiller-Theater Werkstatt production Beckett directed *La dernière bande*, with Jean Martin as Krapp, at the Théâtre Récamier. Martin's annotated French script preserves the deviations from the text as published, many of which continue the changes detailed in the Schiller Notebook. Then, in connection with the 1972 BBC2 Television production, directed by Donald McWhinnie and with Magee again as Krapp, there is a 1960 Grove Press edition of the play annotated by Beckett for McWhinnie. Furthermore, there exist two copies of the play, one of the 1960 Grove Press edition and one of the 1970 Faber and Faber edition, both with annotations by Beckett, used in the 1973 Royal Court Theatre production, directed by Anthony Page and featuring Albert Finney as Krapp.

This extensive history of revision in performance is further enriched by two more productions of the play directed by Beckett: one at the Théâtre d'Orsay in 1975, with Pierre Chabert as Krapp, and the second featuring Rick Cluchey of the San Quentin Drama Workshop in a 1977 production of *Krapp's Last Tape* at the Akademie der Künste in Berlin. Both Cluchey and Chabert published accounts of these productions and detailed the changes to the original, published text. Changes developed in the Schiller-Theater Werkstatt production are retained, while further significant excisions and alterations were put in place.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Directed by Donald McWhinnie, with Patrick Magee as Krapp.

<sup>22</sup> Directed by Alan Schneider, with Donald Davis as Krapp.

<sup>23</sup> Directed by Roger Blin, with R.J. Chauffard as Krapp.

<sup>24</sup> Manuscript notebook titled *Krapp Berlin Werkstatt 5.10.69*, in Beckett's hand, now in the Beckett Archive as MS 1396/4/16.

<sup>25</sup> The foregoing list of postproduction materials is available in Knowlson 1992b, and it is included in the more detailed genetic analysis by Dirk van Hulle (2015) *The Making of Samuel Beckett's Krapp's Last Tape / La dernière bande*. Many of these materials are also available in digital facsimile as part of the online collection of the Beckett Digital Manuscript Project.

Taken as a whole, this archival material offers a record of Beckett's creative process and vision as he worked through multiple productions to arrive at a closer approximation of the performative ideal of *KLT*, particularly in terms of mimetic presentation. The material is available for scholarly consultation: in 1970 Suhrkamp Verlag published Martin Held's script from the 1969 production as *Das letzte Band: Regiebuch der Berliner Inszenierung*, and in 1992 James Knowlson published a volume in the series *The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett* that includes both a facsimile and transcription of the Schiller Notebook as well as a "revised text" of the play, which compiles and synthesizes the changes made in the various sources listed above. Importantly, Knowlson confirmed the final state of the "revised text" with Beckett himself.<sup>26</sup> Knowlson's text makes a valuable contribution to a *genetic* approach to Beckett's play, which sees the work as a fluid process rather than as a fixed artefact.<sup>27</sup>

### Sophoclean Beckett

The *après-texte* supports a view of *KLT* as grounded in the performative methods and forms of Sophoclean tragedy. For the argument here, there are two important types of revision made in the epigenetic phase of composition, namely 'dream stares' and 'the listening position'. Their intensified presence within the play affects the gestural body, the dramatic parataxis, the dyadic world structure, the ekphrastic spectacle, and the use of distanced space.<sup>28</sup>

To introduce these two categories of revision, consider the play's most interior point temporally, the tape-recorded voice of Krapp at thirty-nine paraphrasing the recording of his voice at twenty-seven/twenty-nine. The scene stages Krapp listening to the recording of his thirty-nine year old self:<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> "I have presented a revised acting text in the precise form that Beckett finally wanted his text to be performed" (Knowlson 1992b: xxvii). While an argument can be made that Beckett did not consciously embrace the idea of the continuous text and strove instead for the ideal, fixed dramatic realization of the work – i.e. performances should trust the text, not the director – it is noteworthy that he made no attempt to publish an officially revised edition of works like *KLT*.

<sup>27</sup> Among the numerous studies of Beckett as a process writer, see in particular Gontarski 1985; Van Hulle 2014.

<sup>28</sup> *OT* provides the fitting Sophoclean comparison because of Beckett's attested engagement with the historical reception of Oedipus (described in Part 1 above) as well as because of the structural affinities connecting it with *KLT*, described in greater detail below.

<sup>29</sup> The following passage is from the (epigenetically) revised text published in Knowlson's *The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett*. The editorial conventions are the following: stage directions are in italics; additions to the original English text are in square brackets []; pointed brackets } contain revised text; passages excised from the original text are indicated with angle brackets <>.



Extraordinary silence this evening, I strain my ears and do not hear a sound. 86  
 Old Miss McGlome {sings always} at this hour. But not tonight. Songs of  
 her girlhood, she says. Hard to think of her as a girl. Wonderful woman  
 though. Connaught, I fancy. (Pause.) Shall I sing when I am her age, if I ever  
 am? ([Pause.]) No. (Pause.) Did I sing as a boy? ([Pause.]) No. (Pause.) Did I 90  
 ever sing? ([Slightly longer pause. Ear close to tape-recorder for final])  
 No.  
 (Pause [and back to normal listening position].)  
 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. At that time I think I 95  
 was still living on and off with Bianca in Kedar Street. ([Faint head  
 reaction].)  
 Well out of that, Jesus yes! Hopeless business. (Pause.) Not much about her,  
 apart from a tribute to her eyes. Very warm. (Pause. [Raises head and stares  
 front.]) I suddenly saw them again. Incomparable! (Pause.) Ah well...  
 (Pause.) These old PMs are gruesome, but I often find them – 100  
 (KRAPP switches off, broods, [makes to leave table, changes mind] switches on,  
 [back to normal listening position].)  
 – a help before embarking on a new... (hesitates) retrospect. Hard to believe  
 I was ever that young whelp. The voice! Jesus! And the aspirations! (Brief  
 laugh {tape alone}.) ([KRAPP looks at tape-recorder.]) 105  
 And the resolutions! (Brief laugh in which KRAPP joins, [without moving].)  
 To drink less, in particular. (Brief laugh of KRAPP alone. [He looks at tape-  
 recorder without moving.]) Statistics. ([Back to listening position].)  
 Seventeen hundred hours, out of the preceding eight thousand odd,  
 consumed on licensed premises alone. More than 20 per cent, say 40 per 110  
 cent of his waking life. (Pause.) Plans for a less... (hesitates) engrossing  
 sexual life. ([He grunts.]) 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. (Pause.)  
 Shadows of the opus... magnum. ([He grunts.]) Closing with a (brief laugh, 115  
 [tape alone]) – yelp to Providence.  
 (Prolonged laugh in which KRAPP joins, [throwing back his head].)  
 What remains of all that misery? ([Pause to get back to listening position].)  
 A girl in a shabby green coat, on a railway-station platform? ([Pause.]) No?  
 (Pause. [Head up. Dream.]) 120  
 (ll. 86-120)

The passage gives a clear indication of the parataxis that animates the play's monologues, which enacts, in staccato fashion, a synchronization of Krapp's thought process and speech. In these thirty-five lines, there is the addition of a *performative parataxis* – the gestural disposition of Krapp's body in coordinate relation to the voice of the tape-recorder – to the *grammatical parataxis* that is already in place. The interpenetration of mimetic and diegetic means strengthens the performative presentation.

## Dream Stares

The revisions in this passage reveal Beckett's effort at refining a language of physical gesture. The grunts, the throwing back of his head, the looking at the tape-recorder as though at someone else in the room, the expansion of the time spent in the state of pausing, and the full-blown "dream" – all these choreograph a multidimensional presentation of Krapp, heightening the mimetic presentation that works in conjunction with the tape-recorder's ekphrastic diegesis. The acute attention to physical enactment this passage displays underscores how important phenomenological spectacle was for Beckett.<sup>30</sup>

He has added five "pauses" for a total of seventeen; two dream-like stares added for a total of three; three added "looks at tape-recorder" for a total of three; and five additions that include head movements and verbal ejaculations. The pauses and dream-like stares speak of Krapp's interior paratactic experience as he negotiates the gaps of memory and sudden recollections, the distant spaces entailed in longing and reminiscent desire, and the sudden associative leaps that trigger laughter.

The action of the play increasingly depicts "a life consumed by dream (nothing)".<sup>31</sup> And Beckett clearly intended a progression in the duration of his spells lost in the dream state. The most explicit evidence for this intention is to be found on pages ninety-five and ninety-six of his Schiller Notebook, in which he makes a detailed list headed "How often seized by dream?". He describes sixteen places in the play where this happens, and to the right of each entry includes a description of the duration of each ("brief", "long", "very long") (Knowlson 1992b: 237). The epigenetic revisions portray Krapp as more and more engulfed in dreams, reflecting the intensified encroachment of distant space and the effect of this on the gestural body, as well as an atmospheric circumscribing of the *mise en scène*. In the play as a whole, the post-publication phase yielded an additional nineteen pauses to make a grand total of one hundred and two. And, perhaps most powerfully, it resulted in the revision of the play's conclusion, in which "({*Krapp listens dead still till the end.*} . . . *motionless staring before him. The tape runs on in silence.*)" (ll. 260-1, 278). He is finally overwhelmed by dream, and, instead of listening bent over the tape-recording of the girl in the punt, as in the original stage direction, he is frozen dead still staring before him. Beckett also revised the play's opening so that it opens and closes with Krapp in the same attitude "*(Krapp [sits with*

<sup>30</sup> In contrast to this, one is reminded of Aristotle's apparent slighting of the dimension of spectacle (ὄψις) in Greek tragedy. See the discussion in Halliwell 1986: 337-43.

<sup>31</sup> Beckett wrote in the Schiller Notebook: 97: in Träumen ertrunken ["drowned in dreams"], Traum – Nichts ["Dream – Nothing"], ein vom Traum (Nichts) gefressenes Leben ["A life consumed by dream (nothing)"], Traumgefressener Mensch ["Dream-consumed man"].

*both hands on the table. He [remains a [good] moment motionless, [staring before him].)*" (ll. 17-18). These changes deepen the presentation of the protagonist as a static shell containing jagged shards of memories, a characterization that connects him, on the one hand, to the "nothing" that Victor Krap gave voice to, and, on the other, (as an unheroic version) to the lone exilic Sophoclean figure who is out of options.

The stasis of the dream stare contrasts with Krapp's periods of speech and movement in the same way that Beckett creates a contrasting rhythm of silence alternating with speech or light in opposition with shadow.<sup>32</sup> This echoes Sophocles' concern with "realities the characters can and cannot see and know . . . they constantly play seen against hidden, speech against silence, true speech against falsehood, specific gods against unspecified divine forces" (Scodel 2005: 245). The increasing hold the dream stares have on Krapp bring a dawning self-knowledge of the lasting implications of acts committed in distant space. The reversal (*peripeteia*) for Krapp, while lacking Oedipal violence, actualizes his voluntary consignment to exilic emptiness, staring into nothing.

### Listening Position

Another important choreographic strategy was the introduction of the "listening position": "*He bends over the machine, switches it on and listens with his head slightly turned towards machine and his face to the audience*" (ll. 60-1). This changes what was before called the "listening posture": "*leaning forward, elbows on table, hand cupping ear towards machine, face front*". That original stage direction suggests that Krapp's physical placement in relation to the tape-recorder reflects primarily his hardness of hearing ("*elbows on table*" as though planting himself for sustained concentration; "*hand cupping ear towards machine*" so as to catch what he would otherwise miss; and "*face front*" in the effort to leave the gaze non-directed so that the sense of hearing is sensitized as primary). The revision, on the other hand, deemphasizes Krapp's sensory decrepitude. It choreographs his body in a coordinate and paratactic positioning to the tape-recorder: there is no physical contact with the machine or table, he "*bends over the machine*", as though hovering in a kind of intimacy, rather than planting himself as a subject before an object. Krapp's deafness is no longer made explicit, and has been replaced by gestures typical of one positioning himself in proximity to a loved one ("*bends over*", "*his head slightly turned towards*"). The term 'choreography' accurately captures how the

<sup>32</sup> For the well-rehearsed Manichean dimension of this, see Beckett's notes in the Schiller Notebook: 43-7.

addition of listening positions establishes a rhythmical movement of one body in relationship to another.

The revisions in the passage quoted above reveal the addition of four instances in which Krapp assumes the listening position. The epigenetic phase saw the scattering of this choreographic placement throughout the play, establishing a regular rhythm of return to the listening position. Through repetition they elevate it from a physical posture to a positioning in relation to one's surroundings and the others within it – a shift in line with the general move towards the paratactic.

This strategy is at work in another group of additions to the text: “looks at tape-recorder”. This gesture is introduced at three points in the passage and, because it involves a sort of mimed act of conversational exchange, can be understood as an extension of the listening position. Both communicate a sense of the relationship Krapp has with the machine.

This category of revision, particularly when taken in conjunction with that of the dream stares, best illustrates the idea of the paratactic body, which vitalizes the mimesis of *KLT*. The listening position is essentially a choreographed physical parataxis: Krapp's body is arranged side-by-side precisely into a coordinate position with the tape-recorder (bent over it, head turned “slightly” towards it). Both revisions involve using the physical language of gesture and mime to further paratactic expression, and to accomplish the performative work that verbal language can do only in part.

In its Sophoclean resonance, the addition of the listening position establishes the play's tragic irony. The central plot action of *KLT* presents Krapp returning (via archival recording) to his “farewell to love” with the girl in the punt thirty years previously. His life during the thirty-year interim has involved an intentional and salutary absence of love; in other words, his act of saying farewell to love was done to ensure his potential contentment and prosperous self-determination. Allowing for the aforementioned scalar difference with Sophoclean tragedy, one can nevertheless call Krapp's act a fateful decision. The listening position creates the spectre of intimacy through Krapp's paratactic positioning in relation to the tape-recorder, a machine that functions as a substitute for intimate partner. The audience is made visually aware of what Krapp is unconscious of: his manifest need for intimacy. The irony arises from the disjunction between what the protagonist knows and the greater knowledge to which the audience has access. The irony is tragic because it points to the desolation of a consciously determined loneliness, as reflected in the emptiness of the dream stare. Krapp qualifies as a tragic character insofar as his misery is compounded by his misguided attempt at self-improvement. “Tragedy's content points to the ‘tragic irony’ of practice and to an action that, although it is only ev-

er interested in its own success, necessarily brings about its own failure, and hence leads to misfortune for the doer” (Menke 2009: ix).<sup>33</sup> The tragic irony that is mimetically presented through the listening position depicts, therefore, Krapp’s decision from thirty years previous as an instance of hamartia.

Furthermore, the listening position casts Krapp in the general form of a Sophoclean hero, not on the pattern of Aristotelian prescription, but in the way renovated by Beckett, where “reputation” and “prosperity”<sup>34</sup> are jettisoned and emphasis is instead placed on the figure as isolated and struggling through a quasi-exilic condition. These same attributes, in fact, characterize the extant heroes of Sophocles: Oedipus, Ajax, Philoctetes, Antigone, Electra — all of them distinguished from their communities in isolating, even exilic terms. The listening position’s precise choreography of physical disposition forms a decisive part of the mimetic and diegetic spectacle of Krapp’s physical decrepitude — a spectacle that verges on a presentation of disability — forming an additional attribute of this notion of heroism, in which physical limitation or degeneration is inherent to the heroic struggle.<sup>35</sup>

### Tape-Recorder as Messenger

The tape-recorder should be understood as a species of messenger.<sup>36</sup> It has the authority of the first-hand witness and reports on events in distanced space (and time), events that have become defamiliarized for Krapp due to memory’s faulty nature, and so are heard on the tape as news. Of course the news the voice brings is of Krapp himself, so this messenger speech has a reflexive aspect — like the messenger speeches in *OT*, which bring Oedipus news of himself.<sup>37</sup>

*KLT* has a reflexive strategy similar to that of the play within a play, only here the theatre-like spectacle is accomplished through ekphrasis. Its success depends on achieving *enargeia*: the narrator or speaker “sets out to reproduce the vividness of oracular proof through language” (Webb 2009: 89).

<sup>33</sup> “A fate can be called ‘tragic’ on the model of *Oedipus Tyrannus* only when it is through the very act by which an agent aims to preserve his or her good fortune that the sudden transformation of happiness into misery enters his or her life” (11).

<sup>34</sup> Arist. *Po.* 1453a10: τῶν ἐν μεγάλῃ δόξῃ ὄντων καὶ εὐτυχία.

<sup>35</sup> A clear Sophoclean echo here is Oedipus’ supposed disability from having his ankles pinned as an exposed infant.

<sup>36</sup> Beckett makes extensive use of the Athenian tragic messenger figure; for instance, a boy messenger appears in both *Waiting for Godot* and *Ghost Trio*.

<sup>37</sup> For the issue of self-reflexivity, double meaning, and irony, see Menke 2009: 45-50.

We witness the sixty-nine year old Krapp as listener undergo an ekphrastic experience, and the proof that he does rests in the way the stage directions in this passage choreograph his attentive reactions to the tape and especially in the fact that his dream stares proliferate as a result of the listening: his mind's eye becomes lost in gazing at the matter the tape-recorded voice describes.

To be sure, there is really a double ekphrastic experience unfolding. The voice on the tape must have before his mind's eye the details of the twenty-nine/twenty-seven year old's tape in order for his speech to effectively cast images onto the sixty-nine year old's mind's eye. The telescoping of timeframes engenders a doubling of the ekphrastic dynamic wherein the tape-recording's *paratactic distillation of descriptive particulars* activates a vividly visualizing recollection. Consider the following passage:

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. (*Pause.*)  
Shadows of the opus... magnum. (*[He grunts.]*) Closing with a (*brief laugh,*  
*[tape alone]*) – yelp to Providence.  
(ll. 112-16)

Memory has been stripped of everything but vital particulars for Krapp. Even though the audience cannot see this directly, it presumably recognizes the *enargeia* that animates the tape's speech through the sixty-nine and thirty-nine year old Krapp's focused reactions and in the intensification of time spent in a dream state. This type of ekphrastic diegesis is reminiscent of the *enargeia* of Oedipus' rhesis (*OT* 771-833) and the Messenger speech (1237-85), in which an account recreates the distant events in a precisely distilled and visually evocative fashion: in all these instances the diegesis uses visualizing particulars to rhetorically simulate direct experience.

The tape-recordings are similar to messenger speeches in that they are performative, not just in the sense of being an integral part of the textual construction of the fictional storyworld, but in also actualizing the events of Krapp's past by rendering them as verbal spectacle, a type of mimetic diegesis. As Ruth Webb says, "[i]nseparable from [the] representational and informative function of *enargeia* is its ability to move the audience [in this case Krapp] and to make them feel the emotions appropriate to the events described" (2005: 89). The tape-recording clearly accomplishes this, and this emotionalizing function in turn 'verifies' the reality of Krapp's personal history, making it a feature of the fictional world that can be *described* and reacted to.

The fact that the tape-recorded voice actualizes, within the storyworld setting, Krapp's history is related to its nature as an archival machine: his

voice of thirty years ago has been captured in the flow of time and rendered an objective marker of time past. In the same way Oedipus recounts to Jocasta in anguished ekphrastic detail the memory of his fateful encounter with the “old man” at the crossroads (*OT* 771-833). Therefore, within the storyworld the taped voice, having an archival authority, has a different ontological status from that of Krapp’s living voice. In other words, like the *OT* (and other Athenian tragedies), the fictional world of Beckett’s play has a dyadic structure, although in this case the two realms are not mortal and divine, but rather mortal and archival.

### Tape-Recorder as Oracle

The speech act of the tape-recording has an authority akin to that of the divinely motivated oracular speech in *OT*, in that both speak prophetically: Krapp’s taped voice creates a kind of *mise en abyme* effect in which the three differently-aged Krapps mirror and repeat each other. There is a conspicuous repetition of constitutional factors uniting the speech acts of all three ages (for instance, consumption of bananas; constipation; dependence on alcohol; sexual preoccupation; rejection of love), and while this pattern makes a pronouncement about what Krapp has been and continues to be, it also foretells what in all likelihood he will be in the future. Similar to the ancient oracle, the tape-recording prompts an act of interpretation that seeks to avoid patterns and mistakes of the past. In the *mise en abyme* structure of *KLT*, the utterances of the tape-recorder function like the ancient oracle that speaks of things present, future, and past.<sup>38</sup>

It is this combined function of the tape-recording – its aspect as messenger bringing news of distant events and its aspect as oracle giving a pronouncement of the past which looks to the future – that yields the recognition (*anagnorisis*) for Krapp: he sees the outcome of his farewell to love as it relates to the darkness of his present and future. The tape-recording initiates an analeptic return – one that is structurally central and that echoes the vital analepsis of Oedipus’ rhesis (*OT* 771-833). It is through Beckett’s choreographic staging of this process (which pivotally involves both the dream stare and the listening position) that the play’s tragic form and content are structured: tragic irony is first established, then Krapp’s (implied) recognition unfolds, and, in tight conjunction with this, the reversal (*peripeteia*) occurs, which takes the form of Krapp becoming increasingly lost to the nothingness of the dream stare. Beckett achieves this economi-

<sup>38</sup> Hom. *Il.* 1.70: ὃς ἤδη τά τ’ ἐόντα τά τ’ ἐσσόμενα πρό τ’ ἐόντα ([Calchas] “who knew the things that were, the things that would be, and the things past”).

cal structure by refining Krapp's verbal pauses, stares, and physical disposition away from both the sentimental and the overtly comical in the direction of the tragic. He brings this precise focus while also maintaining the atmospheric presence of the comedic. This balanced combination of characteristics allows the renovation of the tragic within a modern sensibility, in which the onlooker can still observe that, "the tragic, on which the aversion, indeed the horror, of the spectator focuses, consists in the experience of the impossibility of learning from experience" (Menke 2009: 87).

In *KLT* the tragic irony, the recognition, and the reversal are enabled and brought into close formation through the multiple-functionality of the tape-recording. This resembles the structural role played by the oracles and messenger speeches in *OT*. The analeptic telescoping of timeframes and the resulting incorporation of events from distant space create, in both plays, a direct conjunction of the recognition and reversal, fulfilling Aristotle's tragic ideal.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, the comparison of the two plays is warranted because the reversal in the case of both Krapp and Oedipus is due to self-knowledge, not action: "the reversal in Oedipus' destiny is brought about . . . not through his deeds, but rather through his full knowledge of his deeds" (Menke 2009: 8). Oedipus and Krapp are tragic figures because their self-knowledge precipitates their downfall, despite a history of trying to make it otherwise.

In the case of *KLT*, however, the tragic dimension of the play is brought into being specifically through Beckett's vitalizing revisions during production. The play's tragic irony, for instance, depends on the paratactic inflection of the listening position, discussed above, which is brought to life in the actual theatrical staging. This is in keeping with the fact that the modern instantiation of tragedy, as discussed by Menke, rests on the tension between the tragic practice and theatrical play (86).<sup>40</sup> The notion of the transcendent dimension implicit in the classical model's aesthetic contemplation of the tragic presentation is, like heroic action, evacuated from the Beckettian stage. However, the forms and play of the tragic are retained and exercised.

To be sure, the archival nature of the tape-recordings in *KLT* underscores a fundamental divergence from the Sophoclean tragic world: the absence of the divine. In replacing the mortal/Olympian dyadic structure with the mortal/archival dyad, the idea of textual fixity or storage is made

<sup>39</sup> Arist. *Po.* 1452a32-3: καλλίστη δὲ ἀναγνώρισις, ὅταν ἄμα περιπετεῖα γένηται, οἷον ἔχει ἢ ἐν τῷ Οἰδίποδι ("the finest recognition happens together with a reversal, as with the instance in the *Oedipus*").

<sup>40</sup> "Where the classical model perceives the aesthetic other of the tragic as the tragic's interruption through the contemplation of its beautiful presentation, the modern model perceives it as its liquefaction through the play of theatrical performance" (86).



to fill the gap left by the divine. And this new, decidedly modern dyad allows for the collapse of the world into the solitary. An additional function, therefore, of the tape-recorder is that it allows for an interactive staging of Krapp in his world without other agents – in other words, it allows for a mirroring of the solitary self-exile on the level of the play's form. Krapp is shown alone, fallen from the tragic Sophoclean height formulated by Aristotle, in a darker and more pedestrian essay against meaninglessness, which through the process of Beckett's tragic play becomes, in effect, a reconditioned heroism – the solitary figure struggling against and falling to the limits of self-knowledge.<sup>41</sup>

## Conclusion

The genetic approach to literature is not a search for intentionality. Rather, it seeks to highlight the work as extended compositional process. Beckett's directorial involvement in his plays' realization in many instances gave rise to an epigenetic phase of composition and theatrical refinement. In the case of *KLK*, this phase reveals a tragic complexion often obscured by the published play's foregrounding of comedic and sentimental elements. The epigenetic refinements to the play's complex vision reveal Beckett gravitating towards Sophoclean forms and strategies, at the same time that he moved beyond its notion of content and normative heroic characterization. This movement is strongly suggestive of the ways in which Sophoclean drama remains durable, adaptable, and relevant to the experience of late modernity.

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<sup>41</sup> Beckett: “We'd end up needing God, we have lost all sense of decency admittedly, but there are still certain depths we prefer not to sink to” (1979: 344-5). For an analysis of Beckett's work in the context of modernity and contemporary philosophy, see Critchley 1997: 141-80.

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