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Asserting and Accompanying the Excluded Self: The Function of the Recorded Voice in Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* and *Rockaby*

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In Samuel Beckett's plays Krapp's Last Tape (1958) and Rockaby (1980), there is one character on stage, alone, accompanied only by the presence of his/her own recorded voice, played back to himself/herself. The recorded voice of each of the characters becomes a way of proving to themselves that they have existed before the present moment, and, at the same time, it becomes a companion, disrupting silence and aloneness. Finally, it is the recorded voice that allows the characters to fully exist while excluded from the company and comfort of others, as they fulfill their own needs through their own voice.

In Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* and *Rockaby*, the character on stage is alone, accompanied only by the presence of his/her own recorded voice, played back to himself/herself. Irrespective of the plays' individual differences, in both cases this recorded voice becomes an idiosyncratic speaking role all by itself, although it is the characters' own. In other words, it is distinct from the characters, and it is an essential and integral part of the plays since they are formed by and performed through these recorded voices. Their own recorded voice becomes a way for the characters to prove to themselves that they have existed before the present (and presented) moment, and, at the same time, it becomes a companion, the only thing to protect them against silence and darkness. Finally, it is the recorded voice that allows the characters to fully exist in an isolated state, excluded from the company and comfort of others, as they fulfill their own needs by listening to and interacting with their own voice.

***Krapp's Last Tape* and *Rockaby* in a few words**

Beckett wrote *Krapp's Last Tape* in 1958 for the actor Patrick Magee, after listening to him read extracts from *Molloy* and *From an Abandoned Work* on the radio. It is a one-act play with a cast of one man, focused on the presence (and premise) of his voice, taped or live on stage combined with his physical presence, which, however, is less noticeable than his voice in both of its manifestations. Beckett told Magee, who indeed played the original Krapp, that

his “voice was the one which he heard inside his mind.” (Bair 521). Beckett writes a play that unfolds a “late evening in the future”, and he presents his audience with Krapp, “a wearish old man”, in his “den”, listening to recorded tapes of his younger self describing his life (215). Gradually, it becomes apparent that Krapp records himself every year on his birthday, and every year he reports on and summarizes the year that has passed. He attempts to record that year as well, yet he has “(n)othing to say, not a squeak. What's a year now?” and he goes back to listening to the tape of his thirty-nine-year-old self, until “(t)he tape runs on in silence” (Beckett 222, 223).

Rockaby, on the other hand, belongs to Beckett's later works, since he wrote it in 1980 for a festival celebrating his seventy-fifth birthday. It is a short play for a cast of one woman and he wrote it specifically for the actress Billie Whitelaw. Beckett chose not to name the character on stage, simply calling her “W: Woman in chair” (435). Outside of W, Beckett only gives his audience “V: Her recorded voice”, the rocking chair W is sitting on and the movement of its rocking; with only these ingredients, he builds a play (435). The fact that *Rockaby* belongs to Beckett's later works also makes it more experimental, since after 1960 he truly began experimenting with what can constitute a play, as he gradually progressed towards a powerful minimalism. W is moved back and forth by her rocking chair, while her recorded voice narrates someone's life in the third person narrative, possibly her own or her mother's, although the “she” of this poetic narrative remains unclear. W pleases or commands her own recorded voice to continue every time the voice stops, to offer her “more” words, and at times she utters some of the phrases together with her recorded voice, specifically “time she stopped”, “living soul”, and “rock her off” (Beckett 435-442). As the play progresses, W's “more” becomes softer and by the fourth and final repetition, it is only half heard (Beckett 440). The recorded voice and W herself ask the rocking chair to “rock her off”; the voice and the rocking cease, and the lights fade out (Beckett 442).

Krapp's tapes as diaries and tokens of existence

The recorded voice, in both plays, is not there to fill up space; it is there to satisfy basic needs, to drag into the light a basic part of human existence. The first need it satisfies is the need for certainty, for proof of having been alive. It becomes a piece of evidence of having existed before the present moment and having uttered, which becomes synonymous with

having been present. It is something that might be left behind when the characters are no longer there.

In *Krapp's Last Tape* the emphasis placed on the recorded voice is clear, since the tape recorder is placed on the table, which is at the front center of the stage. Krapp's recorded voice is there, physically present, in the form of tapes in front of the audience's eyes, even before Krapp starts playing them. Then, the promise of the recorded voice is realized for the audience, when Krapp goes through an almost ceremonial series of actions, which begins by choosing a tape, then reading the description from the ledger, and finally sitting down to listen to it, which entails assuming a "listening posture" (Beckett 217). The audience members might not have expected Krapp's own, younger voice, but that is what they – and more importantly Krapp himself – will be listening to for the duration of the play.

As the play progresses, it becomes evident that Krapp records himself every year on his birthday, as a peculiar birthday tradition, and he records the events of the year that has passed. There is no evidence of Krapp recording these tapes for anyone other than himself. What the audience encounters on stage is a meeting between a past and a present voice, additionally carrying the feel of a repeated action, of something that has happened before and will happen again, ritual-like. It is not only that Krapp records himself; he deeply enjoys listening to his own tapes. He focuses all his attention on this act of listening and he becomes, simultaneously, mouth and ear, speaker and listener.

Krapp seems to connect with and acknowledge his past self only through the tapes, as if he has no proper recollection of who he was before the very moment the audience sees on stage. He actively reacts to his recorded voice: he disapproves of his past self, he stops the tape to look up a word in the dictionary, he broods. The audience feels that without the tapes, most of his memories, if not all of them, would have been lost. His thirty-nine-year-old self mocks and judges the person he was about a decade before based on a tape he was listening to then, as the old Krapp on stage mocks and judges his thirty-nine-year-old self based on the tape he is listening to at that very moment. So, the tapes function as sonic diaries, records and recordings of a life that might otherwise be lost, a vehicle for Krapp to access and remember his past life and his past self. His own recorded voice functions as memory, and so, it becomes a necessity.

Krapp needs to remind himself of his own life, and to prove to himself his own existence, since he seems to be almost completely isolated, either by choice or not. Through the sonic diaries, the audience hears of him being alone on his thirty-ninth birthday, and they see him

alone on stage, during the birthday that functions as the present moment of the play. The only other person who seems to interact with the iteration of Krapp on stage is Fanny, who “came in a couple of times”, Krapp says, then describing her as a “[b]ony old ghost of a whore” (Beckett 222). Through the recordings, the audience members also see glimpses of Krapp’s past relationships, and, in his ledger for his thirty-ninth year he has written “Farewell to...love” (Beckett 217). On stage, the old man is completely alone, accompanied only by his tapes and tape recorder.

Ultimately, Krapp’s tapes operate as tokens of his existence simply by being recordings of his own voice. He narrates his life to his future self through them, and through that narration he marks them as diaries and pieces of evidence of his existence. Yet his recorded voice, by itself, is enough to do the latter, irrespective of the meaning of the words he utters. This can be argued because a voice is irreversibly tied to the physical person that produces it. It is body as much as it is sound, since it is connected to lungs, vocal cords, oral cavity. Labelle writes that one’s own voice “points to an existential certainty, asserting physical presence as a condition of being. Such certainty finds its reinforcement through an uncanny removal of the actual body through audio recording. Recording and playback, while removing the body, reasserts the body” (129). So, Krapp’s recorded voice, played back to Krapp himself, becomes evidence that he has been there by its connection to his body, even though that body is removed in the recording. When he plays the tapes back, they are not only reminders of his personal history and his voice, but of his physical, corporeal existence.

Her recorded voice as an existence token

Rockaby is, at the same time, similar and dissimilar to *Krapp’s Last Tape*. In this play as well, the recorded voice is present not for aesthetic purposes, but to satisfy basic human needs, like the need to feel present and alive. If Krapp needs a token of his own existence, W needs it even more, since she is also nameless and in the middle of a death ritual that makes her indistinguishable from her own mother. W is even more isolated than Krapp: there are no other voices present in *Rockaby*, except a single instance of reported speech at the fourth and final part of the play, where some unspecified speakers characterize the mother as not sane, but “harmless” (Beckett 440). Unlike other Beckett characters, W is a whole body on stage, yet an immobile one, and one that refuses to speak, except to ask for “More”. What the audience hears is her recorded voice, proof that she was present, that she has uttered words, that she is, as

mentioned previously, a body that can produce a voice, and therefore, a present body, existentially certain of itself.

Unlike Krapp's tapes, the narration of her recorded voice is unclear, minimal, poetic, and full of repetition. Moreover, while Krapp talks in the first person, W's narration is about a "not I", since it is in the third person, about an unspecified and unidentified "she". It can be pinned down to a story of sorts, a movement inwards, but the audience cannot be certain whether this is W's own life story, the story of her mother, or something completely different. At the same time, the audience cannot see a source for this recorded voice they hear. There is no tape recorder on stage nor is there any other visible source, though Beckett specifies in the text that it is "her recorded voice", and even includes it in the list of characters (435). Regardless, this uncertainty regarding the narrative and the source of the voice does not cancel the function of the recorded voice as evidence of existence. W, at some point in time, has uttered speech to be able to record it, and even now, when she is unmoving and only rocked by the chair, when she has assumed the role of a listener of her own recorded voice, she still speaks to ask for "more". This reflects the importance of her own recorded voice, since W, who already "went back in", who allowed herself to drift away from everything else except the rocking of the chair, demands (or perhaps begs for) "more" of her own voice, "more" of this circle of "saying to herself" (Beckett 435-442). Like Krapp, she becomes a recipient of her own voice. A voice that proves, that she once was and, since she still asks for "more", that she still is.

As a final note, Billie Whitelaw described her experience of playing W in the following way: "I'm in the chair, and I feel that as long as I can hear my own thoughts, then I'm still there. And when the thoughts stop it's terrifying. It feels quite terrifying in that chair when the words stop ... And so whenever I say 'more' it's like, don't let me go yet" (Whitelaw qtd. in Kalb 20). So, Whitelaw equates her own recorded voice with her presence in the rocking chair, while playing *Rockaby*, further strengthening the connection between the recorded voice and the physical entity that once produced it. It even appears like it is V, the recorded voice, that is keeping W alive. When she arrives at her death at the end of the play, the recorded voice stops, and the lights fade out. Not only is V a piece of evidence for W's physical existence, but it is also what guarantees her existence by keeping her present or alive.

Krapp's tapes as a companion

In addition to being a sonic proof of existence and physical presence, Krapp's own recorded voice acts as a companion, the only other presence in the room, the only thing to fill the silence, to keep it at bay. And Krapp interacts with his recorded voice: he chooses the tape he is going to listen to, he rewinds it, he winds it forward, he switches it on and off, he laughs together with his past self or at his past self, he broods, he looks a word up in the dictionary, he approves or disapproves (mostly disapproves) of the things he hears. He is not a passive listener. He reacts to his own past self as a separate speaking role, as a companion, as something beyond himself. As Hayman puts it: "For Krapp, who is a writer, the only reality is words. His own past self is only real for him in the form of words on a tape and the pleasure he enjoys most in the present is the pleasure of words" (46). This is also evident in how he delights "in the word spool. (*With relish.*) Spooool! Happiest moment of the past half million", Krapp declares (Beckett 222). It seems like this recorded voice liberates him from his loneliness, like it is all the companionship he chooses for himself.

It is worth remarking that even in the tape of thirty-nine-year-old Krapp, the audience encounters no other speaking role except Krapp himself, no reported speech, except for one phrase, "Picking gooseberries, she said" (Beckett 221). This is one of two instances in the whole play of another voice intercepting what Andrew Kennedy calls "Krapp's predominantly I-voiced narrative" (106). The other one is Fanny, who Krapp says asked him "How do you manage it... at your age?" at some point during the year he is summarizing, the seventy-ninth, and as the audience knows from the title, the last one (Beckett 222). As mentioned above, thirty-nine-year-old Krapp is, like the Krapp on stage, alone on his birthday, recording his tape for that year and listening to and reacting to previous tapes, years, and selves. "Not a soul", he briefly reports about the winehouse where he is spending his thirty-ninth birthday, further building a reading of his life as a lonesome one, far removed from the voices and company of others (Beckett 217). In addition, it is telling that thirty-nine-year-old Krapp describes his birthday evening in this way: "Extraordinary silence this evening, I strain my ears and do not hear a sound. Old Miss McGlome always sings at this hour. But not tonight." (Beckett 218). So not only is the evening ruled by silence, but the only voice Krapp expected was an overheard one, not someone speaking to him. There is another instance in the play where the audience, through the tapes, sees Krapp as someone who does not often interact with others, but perceives them from further away. The audience learns about how, during the thirty-ninth year of Krapp's life, "there is of course the house on the canal where mother lay a-dying" (Beckett 219). Krapp

talks about how he could see the people walking by from his mother's window. "I got to know them quite well—oh by appearance of course I mean!", Krapp says, and then he talks about how he tried to approach a woman he had repeatedly seen and found attractive, and she threatened to call the police (Beckett 219-220). So, both in the past and in the present moment, Krapp appears to barely interact with other people, and others' lives and voices only reach him unintentionally, observed or overheard from a distance.

Kennedy also discusses the interplay of voices belonging to different versions of Krapp. He writes that "It is the live voice of old Krapp which interacts with the taped voice of Krapp, aged thirty-nine, in a semblance of dialogue" (103). What the audience sees on stage is an unexpected kind of dialogue, rather than a monologue, because of the present Krapp's engagement with his past selves. This breaks up the tension of aloneness, of loneliness, of the darkness of the stage, of having to suffer through the silence, which is always heavily felt in a theatre. Like the words uttered by Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*, Krapp's taped voice is a way to fill up time and perhaps also space. As a result, Krapp's recorded voice is a relief for him, a relief from being completely alone and a relief from "(a)ll that misery" through being absorbed in a narrative (Beckett 218). At the same time, it is a relief for the audience since they do not have to suffer through more silence. Krapp's peculiar birthday tradition that enacts (or even replaces) togetherness, may also make the audience perceive him as not alone. The tape recorder and the tapes declare their presence on stage, physically and aurally, and they fulfill the inherent human need for "another living soul" (Beckett 436). Krapp chooses his own voice to keep his company.

Her recorded voice as a companion

As for W in *Rockaby*, her need for companionship is palpable; the recorded voice comes in to soothe this need, together with providing taped and tangible proof of existence. Throughout the whole play her recorded voice describes a constant searching for "another / another like herself / another creature like herself", a longing for "another living soul / one other living soul", until she reaches the conclusion that she "was her own other / own other living soul" (Beckett 435-441). As a result, the audience feels that the recorded voice is offering its presence to W, exemplified also by the four times she utters "More" (Beckett 433-440). This is quite different from Krapp's behavior, who seems more content in his own company and who might have even partly chosen his own isolation. The audience cannot be certain that this

need (and this story) as they hear it belongs to W, yet it is a possibility. Irrespective of whether it is her story, the need that is uttered and expressed cannot be denied. It is a very human need. This reaching for another is inherent, universally recognized, impossible to ignore. Regardless of whom this narrated story belongs to in terms of lived experience, the audience sees this “she” come full circle through W’s recorded voice: from looking desperately for “one other living soul” to the realization that she “was her own other living soul” (Beckett 435-441). She arrives there by being continually excluded from the presence or even the gaze of others, since what she sees from her window are drawn blinds. She pleads for “one blind up / no more / never mind a face / behind the pane”, she desperately wants “to see / be seen”, yet that does not happen (Beckett 439). However, W’s own recorded voice comes back to her to accompany her, to become “her own other” (Beckett 441); it is played (and re-played most probably) to become this mirror, this image of the self that acts as a companion, that becomes something separate from the self while staying together with the self. Her voice does not abandon her.

Moreover, this interpretation of the coupling between W and her recorded voice being her “own other” is in accordance with Beckett’s general tendency to offer pairs on stage (441). From Estragon and Vladimir to Hamm and Glov, Beckett usually places two parts of a whole on stage, rather than distinct individuals who act and react alone. This pattern could also be reflected in the pairing of W with her own recorded voice, as well as Krapp’s dialogue with his younger self, through the tapes.

Finally, there is one more absent presence in *Rockaby*, and that is the character of the mother. From the explicit reference to the image of the mother rocking, replicating perfectly what the audience sees on stage, to the relief of “those arms at last” (which could be the arms of the rocking chair or the mother’s embrace) to the rocking movement itself, the play is full of implications of infantilization, of returning to the mother (Beckett 441). In his notes for *Rockaby*, Beckett specifies that the rocking chairs needs to have “Rounded inward curving arms to suggest embrace” (433). This is combined perfectly with the recorded voice of W, if one considers Didier Anzieu’s theory of the sonorous envelope. According to Anzieu, the sonorous envelope, a fusion between voice and space, is first articulated when the mother’s voice bathes the child with words showing love and caring and gentleness. The voice of the mother cradles the child, it becomes as much of an embrace as the physical maternal embrace. This is something the individual carries with them throughout their life, since they try to reclaim the sonorous envelope of their childhood and the (aural) assurance it provides, through the voices of others, the sounds of the environment, and through music (Anzieu 173-186).

Following this theory, W's recorded voice could be an attempt towards that first sonorous envelope, one more way for her to go back to "those arms at last", and to find safety and peace (Beckett 441). In this case, the companion she is looking for is specified and it takes the form of her mother, in accordance with the rest of the play. So, her death, through the mirroring of her mother's death ritual, as well as the embrace of the chair can be read as a reunion with the mother. The rocking chair with its curved arms and all that they signify is also the only other addressee in the play, outside of W herself, since she moves from "saying to herself / whom else" throughout the play to "saying to the rocker" at the very end, further personifying it (Beckett 436, 442).

Conclusion

In a few words, Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* and *Rockaby*, although separated by many years and characterized by many differentiating elements, revolve around, and are realized through the employment of the recorded voice on stage. In true Beckettian fashion, the recorded voice is not in these plays simply as part of a theatrical aesthetic, but it is there to reflect and restate its own importance. It is there to satisfy two basic human needs, the need to feel present and the need for company. It allows Krapp and W to convince themselves and the audience of their own existence, to occupy their own and the audience's time, to take up more space, to cater to their own needs. It allows them to exist in the outskirts, if not completely outside, of the demands and company of others, excluded either willingly or unwillingly. And these recorded voices echo in the audience's minds and make both plays haunting and nothing but entirely and devastatingly human.

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