

Keir Elam

«Extraordinary silence this evening»:  
Beckett, the Royal Court Theatre and *Krapp's Last Tape*

The relationship between Samuel Beckett and the Royal Court Theatre did not begin in 1958 with *Krapp's Last Tape*, but a year earlier in 1957 with the world premiere of *Endgame* in its original French version, *Fin de partie*. The Court was not the obvious place to stage the play, since the English Stage Company was mainly dedicated to new writing in English. To stage a play in French, with a French director, Roger Blin, was a dubious enterprise economically, but such was the generosity of the Royal Court and of its artistic director George Devine towards new writing that Beckett's otherwise homeless masterpiece was offered a venue for its première.

This encounter between Beckett and the Royal Court was important not only in presenting his second play to a largely uncomprehending world and more especially an uncomprehending London audience, but also in consolidating Beckett's own relationship with the stage. This event at the Court was decisive in turning Beckett into a man of the theatre, in the full sense, so much so that the Royal Court was to become in many ways the natural London home for Beckett the dramatist. Beckett's next play, *Krapp's Last Tape*, had its première there in English in October 1958. Three of his later plays had either their world premières or the first British performances there: for example, in 1962 *Happy Days* received its British debut in its original English version at the Court, directed by George Devine

himself. Likewise the first British performance of *Not I* took place in an extraordinary double bill in January 1973 together with the second Royal Court production of *Krapp's Last Tape*, this time directed by Beckett himself, while in 1976 the Court hosted the world première of *Footfalls*, again directed by Beckett himself. Beckett gradually became the director of his own plays, especially at, and thanks to, the Royal Court. The Court has been the home of various celebrations, festivals and anniversaries on Beckett's behalf, such as the *Samuel Beckett Festival*, staged in May 1976.

1976 also saw the première of *That Time*, which is a particularly interesting episode in the relationship between the Royal Court and Beckett, since the play may be described as a sort of offspring of *Krapp*, given that the single character is deeply concerned with memory and story-telling. The only actor in the play was again Patrick Magee, who played *Krapp's Last Tape* in 1958, and likewise the director, Donald McWhinnie, was the same as the 1958 production of *Krapp*. The 1976 *That time* thus represented a conscious return to the scene of the original sin, as Beckett might have said, in going back to the Royal Court to stage another memory play with the same actor and the same director.

Almost every Beckett play has a cyclical or returning structure, which in a way mirrors Beckett's own career in connection with the Royal Court. The latter was therefore an entirely appropriate venue, thirty years later, for Harold Pinter's 2006 performance of *Krapp* in celebration of the centenary of Beckett's birth, and indeed this event was in many ways a crowning moment in the extraordinary relationship between the playhouse and the great dramatist.

The connection between the Royal Court and *Krapp's Last Tape* is of particular importance in Beckett's career. The playtext of *Krapp* was in many ways the direct product of Beckett's relatively recent theatrical experience, but it was, above all, the result of the earlier Royal Court production of *Fin de partie*. One of the problems with

the latter, as Beckett himself came to realise, was that its characters and somewhat oppressive set seemed at times rather abstract, at times resembling an allegorical representation of Beckett's deconstruction of metaphysics. In contrast, *Krapp's Last Tape* springs directly from a highly theatrical image, an essential, irreducible stage icon, namely the image of a solitary figure brightly illuminated on an otherwise dark stage. It was crucially important that the actor be placed in the centre of the stage, because it was the actor's body, movements and voice that became the focal point for the whole performance. This set up a new relationship in Beckett's work between telling and showing, between narrating and staging. *Krapp's Last Tape* is the first Beckett play to inaugurate what would become a hallmark of his later poetics, namely the elimination or reduction of anything but the most essential verbal and visual elements. Such reductionism became almost an obsession with Beckett, who went on to coin, in the manuscript of *That time*, the paradoxical equation, 'less equals more'. This equation is the great dramaturgical challenge for Beckett, and it begins with *Krapp's Last Tape*, much shorter than the earlier plays and much more essential. In the opening icon Beckett attempts to create a brief but hypnotic perceptual experience for the spectator, and this is the starting point to which he will return again and again in plays like *Play*, *Footfalls* or *Not I*. When *Not I* was performed at the Royal Court, the effect on the audience was literally hypnotic, in the sense that the spectator barely but irresistibly perceived a pulsating organ, namely Billie Whitelaw's mouth, illuminated about eight feet above the stage. *Krapp's Last Tape* is also the first of Beckett's plays to be conceived, from the very beginning, as an actor's performance on an actor's stage and indeed for a specific actor: Patrick Magee (in fact, in the first draft the play was provisionally called *Magee Monologue*).

*Krapp's Last Tape* is a play about listening, which is a very difficult activity to stage. In choosing this theme, Beckett introduced into

this stage play his other dramaturgical experience as a radio playwright. In addition to writing *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, Beckett had also written plays for BBC radio, which had a direct fallout in *Krapp's Last Tape*. 1957 was the year not only of *Endgame* but also of the wonderful radio play *All That Fall*, which was again directed by Donald McWhinnie. There is an obvious connection between *All That Fall* and *Krapp*, not only because they had the same director but also because one of the voices in the original transmission of the radio play belonged to Patrick Magee. Beckett himself told Magee that the genesis of *Krapp's Last Tape* was the playwright's experience of listening to *All That Fall*, with Magee's voice coming out of the dark. *Krapp* is therefore in some ways a kind of radio drama coming out through the dark and brought on to the stage into the light. Beckett adopts a double strategy for turning a listening play, a voice play, into an authentic theatrical stage experience, namely the use of two of the most theatre's prized technological means: direct lighting and recorded sound. Bringing the tape recorder not only directly on stage but actually to the centre of the stage action, probably for the first time in theatrical history, is more than a Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* designed to reveal stage machinery and destroy dramatic illusion. Beckett turns the machine into a second character, a second self, Krapp's alter ego or alter vox, the voice of the other. So it is not only a way of importing radio drama into the theatre but it is also the first example of interactive drama using mechanical media.

All of this has a somewhat bizarre effect on the chronology of the play, since what we are shown in *Krapp's Last Tape* is a 69-year-old man who has been recording his thoughts and his stories for several decades. Obviously this was something that, in 1958, was technically impossible because the tape recorder had not been invented for long enough. Beckett's solution to this problem is to set the play in «a late evening in the future», resulting in a strange temporal aporia: the old

Krapp, situated at some unspecified time in the future, listening to the voice of a younger, 39-year-old Krapp who is situated in the past, but whom we can hear in the present. This uncertain chronological relationship poses the question «Who is speaking when?». It is actually the younger, 'past' Krapp that we hear on stage now (in 1958), while the old, 'present' Krapp is projected thirty or fifty years' ahead in time (in 1988 or 2008). In some ways this is Beckett's first science fiction play. The chronology changes dramatically when we watch the play today, because now the spools and the tape recorder seem more like archaeology than science fiction. There have been productions, like that of the Krypton theatre in Scandicci, that have attempted to update the technology, using laser lights and avant-garde recording machinery to renew this sense of the 1958 tape recorder as an innovative device.

*Krapp's Last Tape* at the Royal Court was in many ways a revolutionary moment in Beckett's career, the moment in which he definitively became a committed man of the theatre. Indeed the play is full of an awareness of its own theatrical quality and stage destiny, as for example when the younger Krapp describes «the extraordinary silence this evening, I strain my ears and do not hear a sound». This may be an expression of hope, the idea that the audience will be absolutely attentive in its intense listening to the play, or it might be seen as the opposite, namely the fear that the play would be a total flop, hence the theatrical silence (including lack of applause).

Another aspect of the *Krapp* revolution is that it is a play which Beckett intended to be an 'unfinished' script for its first performance and for any number of future performances, unlike, for example, *Endgame* and *Godot*. He was continually changing *Krapp's Last Tape*, restlessly revising and adapting it for new productions, in new languages, for radio, for television, even for opera (there is an operatic version of it, in which he collaborated, and he changed the text and translated it himself into French and even into German, his first

attempt at German translation). Every time Beckett returned to the text he modified it, so it was a work continually in progress, and it was probably the first time that Beckett realised that a text for the stage is not a fixed literary object but a kind of provisional artefact, that has to be reinvented every time it goes on stage.

This is why *Krapp's Last Tape* is the play that has undergone the most significant evolution over time. One of the play's dominant themes is the contrast between darkness and light represented iconically in the incipit. In the play Beckett develops this contrast into a kind of metaphysical and even theological theme of dualism, Cartesian dualism but also and above all the dualism of Gnostic theology, in particular Manichaeism. The text evokes directly the dualist theology of Mani, which affirms that the Creation actually involved two forces, not a single perfect God, but two Gods, one the force of Good expressed by light and the other the force of Evil expressed by darkness. In this theology the human being, especially the human body, like Krapp's, becomes a kind of battleground between Good, i.e. the soul composed of light, and Evil, i.e. the body itself composed of dark corruptness. A follower of the Manichean religion had a duty to purify his soul by mortifying his body, thereby expelling the evil and the darkness, and there were specific ascetic practices designed to achieve this state of beatitude.

This theme is central not only to the play's staging choices but also to its narrative structure. Manichean ethics are characterized by three signacula or seals: a seal on the mouth, namely the obligation to speak the truth and to abstain from impure food and drink, especially alcohol (particularly significant in the case of Krapp); is a seal on the hand, namely to refrain from war but also manual labour, which is a sort of dirty business; and a seal on the breast, namely the avoidance of carnal desire and its expression. Krapp himself is a kind of failed Manichean, once but no longer in search of purification and illumination. The crucial episode regarding his erstwhile re-

ligious aspirations is that of the «memorable equinox», when light and dark are in perfect balance and the younger Krapp looks for a final revelation and illumination, a kind of Joycean epiphany which never arrives. He intends to become a Manichean, but the tapes narrate Krapp's transgression of all three seals: he drinks and continually, thus sinning against the seal of the mouth; he is a writer, and is therefore involved in a form of manual labour; and he is a confessed fornicator, thereby going against the seal of the breast.

Unlike *Endgame*, where the metaphysical theme seems to be somewhat imposed on the stage, in the case of *Krapp* the struggle between darkness and light, between these two primordial forces, has developed directly out of the stage icon. In other words, it seems to be the choice of the dominant visual image that gives rise to the Manichean theme, the philosophical struggle being suggested by the theatrical configuration rather than vice versa.

In the original 1958 production, and to some extent in Pinter's 2006 production, the Manichean opposition is visible especially in Krapp's costume: rusty black narrow trousers and a black waistcoat, in contrast with the grimy white shirt open at the neck and a surprising pair of dirty white boots and, of course, a clown-like white face. Thus the contrast is worked out not between pitch black and pure white, but between near black and dirty white, which again suggests that Krapp is a lapsed Manichean rather than a purist. The text contains endless references to black and white, and the dialogue between the two is a good example of the way in which Beckett's work evolves over time. In 1969, when he translated his own play into German and then produced it at the *Schiller Theatre* in Berlin with Martin Held, he endeavoured to emphasize this contrast even further. In his director's notebook he makes specific references to Manicheism, and to how he intended to emphasise it on stage, using a black curtain to separate centre stage from the recess where Krapp

goes to drink and sing hymns<sup>1</sup>. Beckett himself recognized, perhaps, that he had overdone this contrast somewhat. In his later productions, notably in 1973, he went in exactly the opposite direction. Krapp, in this case, was dressed in a darkish dressing gown and was enveloped in muted grey rather than total darkness. Beckett also decided to cut out some of the clowning business<sup>2</sup>.

There is one final aspect of *Krapp* that brings us back indirectly to the relationship between Beckett and Pinter. *Krapp's Last Tape* was in many ways Beckett's most autobiographical play, not only for the episode of the love affair, which so closely resembles his first love affair, and the death of the mother, who is also in many ways Beckett's mother, but also in the existential situation of the solitary writer himself. Krapp is a failed writer, and he recalls the commercial flop of his books «Seventeen copies sold! ....»), akin to the sales of *Murphy* or, for example, of *Watt*, which was commercially the most unsuccessful novel Beckett ever wrote. «Getting known», affirms Krapp ironically. One of the autobiographical themes that Beckett works out in the play is the relationship between the old Krapp and the younger Krapp, which among other things figures the relationship between himself, the 52-year-old Beckett in 1958 and his earlier self, the younger Beckett, especially the Beckett of his very first works. In fact in the play there are really three Krapps: the 69-year-old Krapp and the 39-year-old, who in turn refers to tapes recorded by an even younger, 29-year-old Krapp. In this triangular relationship, the 39-year-old Krapp makes fun of and despises the 29-year-old, the 69-year-old despises the 39-year-old, and both despise the 29-year-old. One of the most intense moments in the play, and one of the funniest, is when the old man listens to the younger man talk-

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<sup>1</sup> See *The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett*, Vol. III, *Krapp's Last Tape*, ed. James Knowlson. London: Faber and Faber, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> See James Knowlson, "Krapp's Last Tape: The Evolution of a play, 1958-75", *Journal of Beckett Studies* 1 (Winter 1976): 50-65.

ing about the even younger man, the 29-year-old, when the 39-year-old Krapp affirms: «Just been listening to an old year [...] hard to believe I was ever that young whelp», and then he goes on to say: «The voice! Jesus! And the aspirations! (*Brief laugh in which Krapp joins.*)»; this is the only moment in which the old and middle-aged Krapps come together, in making fun of the even younger Krapp for his literary aspirations but also, perhaps, for his desire for ascetic purification.

What Beckett may have had in mind was his very young self, namely his own 23-year-old self. Beckett's first published work, in 1930, was his essay on Proust and the Beckett of *Krapp* seems to reflect a good deal about this essay, which he later repudiated and classified as an immature work written in cheap, flashy, philosophical jargon, thereby deriding, in Krapp-like fashion, his own aspirations and resolutions as a young critic. What the young Beckett describes and attributes to Proust is actually a perfect description of *Krapp's Last Tape* itself; it is as if he is talking about his own future play rather than *A la recherche du temps perdu*. I would just like to quote a few lines from the *Proust* essay, in which the 23-year-old Beckett observes:

There is no escape from yesterday because yesterday has deformed us, or been deformed by us. The word is of no importance. Deformation has taken place. Yesterday is not a milestone, which has been passed, but a daystone on the beaten track of the years, and irremediably part of us, within us, heavy and dangerous. We are not merely more weary because of yesterday, we are other, no longer what we were before the calamity of yesterday.

This is a wonderful description of what happens in almost all Beckett's work, in which the effects of time on the self are devastating, and in which is no connection between different versions of the «I» over time: the Krapp of yesterday or the Krapp of today, or the Beckett of yesterday, or even the Vladimir of yesterday and the Vla-

dimir of today are completely different people. There is no relation between Krapp and his younger self because in the meantime there has been the destructive intervention of time. For the Beckett of *Proust* self-knowledge is impossible, because continuity of the self over time is a mere illusion.

Beckett has a lot to say about memory in *Proust*. Marcel in *Proust* is a kind of world champion of memory, with total recall. Krapp, on the contrary, remembers nothing at all, and in some ways may be seen as an anti-Marcel. Beckett draws a distinction in *Proust* between involuntary memory, which he calls an unruly magician; in other words, involuntary memory cannot be controlled or predicted, it just happens against one's will. This is the only authentic form of memory, and the famous example of its operation in Proust is Marcel's madeleine, which sets off an infinite series of memories and associations. On the other hand there is what Proust calls voluntary memory, which, says the young Beckett, has no value as an instrument of evocation, since any conscious attempt to conjure up the past is futile.

This is one of the central themes of *Krapp's Last Tape*, which stages the conflict between voluntary and involuntary memory. The tape recorder is a mechanical form of memory, designed to fix experiences in time, but it does not work as a mnemonic device because it registers but no longer evokes the past. On the other hand, there are occasional moments of involuntary memory that Krapp conserves over time: for example, the episode of the girl («Farewell to love») which comes back endlessly and obsessively, is beyond Krapp control and still exercises a powerful emotional hold over him in his old age. Involuntary memory, the recollection of the girl and her eyes, is the one thing that (unwittingly) unites all three Krapps.

This brings us back to Harold Pinter, because among Pinter's many affinities with Beckett there is also the fact that Pinter himself wrote plays about time and memory and that he was equally fasci-

nated by Proust. In the 1970s, one of the periods in which Pinter was most influenced by Beckett, he wrote a series of 'memory plays', such as *Old Times* or *No Man's Land*, dramatizing the unreliability of memory and the arbitrariness of all reconstructions of the past. Like Beckett, although in different ways from Beckett, Pinter represents the devastations of time on the self and on its pretences to unitary wholeness. In 1972, the film director Joseph Losey commissioned a film script by Pinter based on Proust's *Recherche*: an impossible task, but Pinter was undoubtedly the best person to take it on; the script was never produced, due to Losey's death, but it was eventually published in 1977 and is generally considered one of Pinter's masterpieces in the dramaturgy of memory. This triangular relationship between Beckett, Pinter and Proust is a theme that probably deserves further critical exploration. In the meantime, it makes it even more appropriate that it should have been Pinter who played Beckett's memory-less, anti-Proustan Krapp in 2006, not as a commemoration but as a homage to the master, in Beckett's own preferred theatrical venue, namely the Royal Court.