



READING SOUND AND THE BODY IN *KRAPP'S LAST TAPE*

Jane Boyes

From the first (spoken) words of Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*, in which Krapp rolls the word "spool" over his tongue in obvious enjoyment of its sound,¹ it is evident that the 1958 play similarly revels in its attention to its soundscape. The one-act, one-man play sees Krapp, on the occasion of his sixty-ninth birthday, listening and relistening to the monologues he recorded on tape decades earlier. As Krapp immerses himself in his past voices, he becomes increasingly agitated, and, in the final moments of the play, is rendered speechless by emotions triggered by what he has heard. Despite the centrality of sound for *Krapp's Last Tape*, many studies of the play do not approach the subject in any concerted manner; when they do, it is usually in the interest of looking at sound production and the technology of tape, rather than sound reception. But for Krapp, the experience of listening is profound—it is in these moments that he faces who he was and who he has become, and the effects of that realization are written on his body.

Using N. Katherine Hayles's and Steven Connor's work on the role of tape technology in *Krapp's Last Tape* as a starting point, I argue that Krapp's desperate need to relive his past relationships is ultimately unfulfilled because his sonic quest lacks the substantiation of an embodied copresence. Krapp listens to his past selves reflect on these relationships, and demonstrates an obsession with the visual memories captured on tape, yet neither hearing the tapes nor "seeing" the memories allow him to re-enter the past. For Krapp, both of these actions are mediated by tape technology and the passage of time, which deprive him of the physical copresence that can overcome his isolation and communicative failure. As Krapp immerses himself in his tapes, the comingling of desire and failure is written on his body, thus forging a link between his body and the tape machine, the latter of which Connor and Hayles have shown demonstrate written and embodied qualities.

The Written and Embodied Tape

In thinking through the nature of tape technology and its metaphoric possibilities for the play, Connor illustrates how tape can be thought of as a form of writing. Comparing the tape to a scroll, Connor positions the tape as a "continuum of

¹ Samuel Beckett, *Krapp's Last Tape and Other Dramatic Pieces* (New York: Grove Press, 1960), 12. From this point forward, page numbers from this source will be included in the running text.

recorded sounds.”² There are, of course, caveats to this argument, as Connor acknowledges: the markings on tape—composed of microscopic magnetic patterns—are not visible to the naked eye, unlike the more legible markings of the phonograph, for example.³ Tape remains, however, subject to the graphical inscription of its materiality, especially when it comes to its editing: like its sister-technology film, tape is read in “two dimensions: the vertical one of cutting and splicing, and the horizontal one of the soundstream.”⁴ In fact, this graphical representation of the editing process has been so influential and easy to work with that it is still used for electronic files. Emphasizing the looping quality of the tape’s writing, Connor argues that the similarity of the tape machine to the typewriter would have been particularly meaningful for postwar authors, as both technologies required the “operator . . . to wind the material to be inscribed around a drum” while the inscribed tape unrolled “from a spool on the left to one on the right, and then back again.”⁵

If tape can persuasively be thought of as a form of writing, as Connor demonstrates, then the image of Krapp, listening intently to his tape machine in his small, isolated circle of starkly bright light, evokes an image of a reader at study. The object of study for Krapp, however, is not the written word, but the sonic one. Krapp’s desire to capture sound, replay it, and relive it, presents an interesting problem: after all, how do you capture something that is necessarily ephemeral?

As Walter J. Ong demonstrates, “Sound exists only when it is going out of existence.”⁶ Because of this ephemerality, sound has a special relationship to time: even as it is being heard, it is becoming a part of the past. Thus, recorded sound—Krapp’s object of study—is by its very nature a representation of that past, but also a reminder of the irrevocable distance between the present and the past, and the impossibility of re-entering that past. Through the technology of the tape machine, Krapp can record and replay his past thoughts and feelings, but he can never actually relive them in any embodied way: the tape machine is not a time machine. This separation of the present from the past is further highlighted by the fact that Krapp’s recordings do not document an actual event in itself, but instead his reflections on events that happened in his life, thus further removing the present Krapp from the events of his past, and highlighting the tapes’ role as mediating texts, composed as they are of the sonic word.

For Ong, sound is dynamic and active: existing as it does in the moment of time, sound is a product of the *movement* of time. Krapp’s recorded sound—written on the tape and experienced only through the movement of the tape through the playback machine—is a product of both movement (of time and tape) and unmoving, material inscription. For Krapp, on his sixty-ninth birthday, the movement of time has been one of his greatest enemies, as it has increasingly separated him from his past relationships: the production of ephemeral sound

² Steven Connor, “Looping the Loop: Tape-Time in Burroughs and Beckett,” *Beckett, Modernism, and the Material Imagination* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 87.

³ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁶ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 31.

through the movement of time and the tape thus mirrors the loss of Krapp's similarly ephemeral relationships through the passage of time.

Unlike Ong's dynamic sound, Krapp's sound, a product of material inscription that does not change with time, is stagnant: Krapp's attempt to seize sound, to record it for future study, and to access his past through its reverberations, only highlights his own pathetic attempts to reconnect with the people of his past. Some critics have proposed that Krapp's interaction with his tapes functions as a kind of dialogue.⁷ Yet the use of the term "dialogue" suggests reciprocity, whereas the voices on Krapp's tapes cannot speak back to him, bound as they are to a specific moment in the past. The fact that these voices are all his own further accentuates his isolation from human interaction. If anything, Krapp's use of the tape machine is a mockery of dialogue.

While listening typically implies a social interaction, for Krapp, listening is an *isolated* and *isolating* act. Perhaps this is precisely Beckett's point: in the age of technology, listening is no longer exclusively a social interaction. *Krapp's Last Tape* demonstrates an anxiety with the proliferation of increasingly sophisticated sound recording technology in our modern times—a proliferation that has only increased exponentially in the six decades since Beckett's play first appeared—which seems to speak to the increasing replacement of interaction among humans with human interaction with technology, thus demonstrating the failure of communication in modernity. Although sound technology has typically been celebrated for its ability to facilitate communication across distance and time, Beckett reverses this idea, and instead locates the *failure* of communication in the tape machine. Rather than employing it as a symbol of the modern possibilities of communication, the tape machine becomes, in Beckett's play, the site of the disembodiment and the technologizing (and thus dehumanization) of the voice.

Although Krapp is initially fascinated with the spools of tape and the sound of the word "spool" on his tongue (12), by the end of the play, his fascination devolves into speechlessness, and he angrily destroys the tape he has been recording. His handling of the spools of tape forge an intimate connection between sound and its physical embodiment, while also serving as a reminder of his loss of that physical embodiment in his relationships. Furthermore, just as Krapp's repetition of the word "spool" later in the play (25) demonstrates how words, spoken over and over, quickly lose their meaning, the play is also interested in the failure of speech to communicate. Krapp's reliance on words and other concrete forms of communication earlier in his life has betrayed him. He is, after all, an author, although an unsuccessful one, with only "seventeen copies sold" (25). His failure in the realm of written communication, despite the grand ambitions of his thirty-nine-year-old self, corresponds with his earlier failures at human communication, revealing his, not only physical, but also emotional isolation. Krapp's repeated return to concrete images—like those supplied by the punt scene, which focuses on eyes and bodies—suggests his desire for a relationship with a real, embodied human, and not the disembodied voice of his thirty-nine-year-old self, as captured on tape.

⁷ See, for example, Ryan Bishop and Walter Spitz, "'Run on in Silence': Language, Dialogue, and the Self in Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*," *Language and Literature* 15 (1990): 57–78.

N. Katherine Hayles illustrates the importance of embodiment for Beckett's play in her investigation of the embodied (and disembodied) nature of tape. Like Connor, Hayles similarly explores the materiality of tape, although she emphasizes the capability of tape technology to separate the voice from the body, and for the tape machine to be re-imagined as a body in itself. The disembodiment of the voice, of course, has been a central concern of sound technology from its beginnings, with the development of the telephone that could be used to "transport voice over distance"⁸ and the phonograph, whose ability to replay the voices of the dead was particularly unnerving for late nineteenth and early twentieth-century users. The audiotape, as a sound technology of material inscription, works in the same tradition as the phonograph, although tape technology would have been unique (at the time of Beckett's writing of the play) for its possibilities of editing, which could be done even by the common user at home.⁹ At the same time, Hayles argues, the emanation of the voice from the tape machine relocates the body of the disembodied voice in the tape machine itself. Thus Hayles demonstrates that the tape machine, as a form of inscription technology, signifies both the material and immaterial, the embodied and disembodied.

The play between the material and immaterial of tape technology thus becomes particularly important in a play that stages Krapp's obsessive desire to relive his past relationships, and his ultimate failure to do so because of the lack of physical copresence to substantiate them. Krapp craves the intimacy of an embodied presence, but his search for that intimacy through immaterial, disembodied sound is ultimately counterproductive: instead, the sound of his tapes only heightens his feeling of loss.

Perhaps Krapp seeks the immersive quality of sound to which Ong attests: "Whereas sight situates the observer outside what he views, at a distance, sound pours into the hearer."¹⁰ Eyelids can block out sight, but we do not have "ear-lids" to do the same for sound. The nature of human anatomy dictates that our heads must be pointed in the direction of the visual stimuli we are receiving, whereas sound envelops the hearer, enforcing an intimacy between sound and the hearer that is made physical in the workings of sound vibrations on the organ of the ear. If the hearer is immersed in a sphere of sound, then sound is also embedded in the consciousness of the hearer. Ong argues that sound, more so than the other senses, has a "unique relationship ... to interiority," namely the "interiority of human consciousness and of human communication itself."¹¹ Although not explicitly explored in his argument, Ong's statements on interiority speak to the nature of human thought: while we may engage in some visualization, thought is primarily language based. Consequently, the most explicit thoughts are a kind of interiorized

⁸ N. Katherine Hayles, "Voices Out of Bodies, Bodies Out of Voices: Audiotape and the Production of Subjectivity," in *Sound States: Innovative Poetics and Acoustical Technologies*, ed. Adalaide Morris (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 76.

⁹ However, Beckett's lack of experience with the tape machine at the time of his writing *Krapp's Last Tape* in 1958 suggests his ignorance of the editing capabilities of tape, thereby complicating Connor's argument, which insists upon the revisionist quality of tape and the materiality of its easy editing in relation to Beckett's play.

¹⁰ Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, 70.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 69.

speaking, and may even take on the sonic qualities of tone and expression. Thus sound becomes intimately linked to the expression of the inner self.

For Krapp, the act of listening to his recorded tapes is an attempt to immerse himself in a quasi-physical way in the past, while he also “sounds” the interiority of his thirty-nine-year-old self, as captured on the tape. Yet Krapp cannot re-enter the past, and his taped monologues, which presume to capture his “true” inner self, are dishonest. Sound fails Krapp, and in failing him, allows for the true Krapp—the physical and embodied Krapp—to express himself. As he listens to his dishonest self on the tapes, and reacts accordingly, his body acts as a legible indicator of his true inner self.

Reading the Body and the Body Reading

In this one-man play, Krapp’s body becomes the central focus. By foregrounding Krapp’s actions of reading and listening, and firmly grounding them in his body, Beckett encourages the audience’s awareness of their own acts of reading and listening—so that they can see beyond Krapp’s earlier dishonest self-representations, and truly hear him and effectively read his body. Beckett ensures that his reading audience, as well as his stage audience, are given the tools to read Krapp’s body, as stage descriptions give ample description of “*the wearish old man,*” describing him as “*Very near sighted (but unspectacled). Hard of hearing*” (9). (In fact, the preponderance of these stage descriptions, usually focusing on Krapp and his actions, illustrates the importance of these visual clues for the play.)

Significantly, Beckett notes the traits of sight and hearing in conjunction, thus highlighting not only the importance of these senses for the play and how they work together, but also drawing attention to their failings in Krapp, especially insofar as they are the primary senses of communication. Krapp’s inability to see or hear effectively suggests his systemic failure to communicate. Furthermore, the stage directions include very specific notes as to his minute actions throughout the course of the play—his hesitations, his peering, his laughs—often breaking up the text of the speech. Thus the textual Krapp, the Krapp in the printed version, is in many ways just as active, just as disruptive of the text and the soundstream of the play, as the performed Krapp might be. In a play where very little of the speech is produced by the Krapp onstage (instead, most of the speech comes from the tape recordings), the little noises that he makes create a soundscape that, despite its lack of words, can still be read—and are often more truthful than Krapp’s verbose monologues.

Furthermore, Krapp’s manner and movements—often made manifest in sound—illustrate his reaction to the sounds of the tape. That is, sound speaks to sound, and his laughs and pauses as he listens to the tape give us more insight into his psyche than when he communicates his thoughts in speech. When Krapp “*assumes listening posture, i.e. leaning forward, elbows on table, hand cupping ear towards machine, face front*” (13), Beckett is actively drawing attention to the act of listening itself. Krapp’s posture of intent listening and his obsessive replaying of the tapes both complicates and symbolically illustrates, in a very bodily way,

what Ong describes as the immersive quality of sound. If sound is immersive, and the listener can do only very little to increase or prevent his listening, then Krapp's distinct posture with his "*hand cupping ear towards machine*" (13) draws attention to his attempt to physically remove the obstructions between himself and the voice emanating from the machine, symbolically allowing for greater (bodily) access to the past represented by the voice. At the same time, his intent listening, and the effect it has on his body, illustrate how sound, especially through the medium of language, can immerse the listener in the moment being described.

Although associated with more mental processes, both listening and reading are also fundamentally physical acts. After all, our experience of the world—in whatever form that takes—is necessarily mediated by the body and its reception of physical stimuli. The act of reading has long been subject to anxiety, especially regarding assumptions of the negative toll it takes on the body. A 1795 treatise by J. G. Heinzmann enumerates a plethora of the physical and mental consequences of reading, such as "susceptibility to colds, headaches, weakening of the eyes, heat rashes, gout, arthritis, haemorrhoids, asthma, apoplexy, pulmonary disease, indigestion, blocking of the bowels, nervous disorder, migraines, epilepsy, hypochondria, and melancholy."¹² (It is interesting to note that Krapp suffers from many of the same afflictions.) In our own modern day, users of screen technology are often warned of the degree of stress on the eyes that such reading can induce.

In *Krapp's Last Tape*, both reading and listening induce curious bodily effects: while reading the ledger containing descriptions of the tapes that he has recorded, Krapp intermittently "*peers at ledger ... He raises his head, stares blankly front. Puzzled ... He peers again at ledger ... He shrugs his shoulders*" (13). The enumeration of these reactions (and others) and their repetition throughout this section, as Krapp alternates between peering and reacting, reinforces the play's emphasis on the act of reading, while also associating it with his confusion. We see similar alternations in Krapp's listening: he frequently stops the tape to brood, switches it on again, impatiently rewinds or fast-forwards the tape.

While listening, Krapp comes across a word that he clearly once knew (the tape's voice is, after all, his own, albeit from an earlier time), but no longer understands: "*Krapp switches [the machine] off, raises his head, stares blankly before him. His lips move in the syllables of 'viduity.' No sound*" (18sd). This lack of sound is particularly interesting: the word is made visible as a dynamic inscription on Krapp's face, but it is divested of its sonic trace. In the act of listening and attempting to understand, he inscribes the movement of speech on his face for the audience to read (or to imagine reading). In thinking through the significance of this passage, Connor notes that "viduity," meaning "the state of being or remaining a widow"¹³ comes "from viduare, meaning to deprive ... Itself bereft of its familiar

¹² Qtd. in Robert Darnton, "First Steps Toward a History of Reading," *Australian Journal of French Studies* 51, no. 2/3 (2014): 166. In discussions of the history of reading in this paper, I rely on studies of the Western tradition in which *Krapp's Last Tape* is firmly grounded.

¹³ "viduity, n.," OED Online, June 2017, Oxford University Press, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/223280?redirectedFrom=viduity> (accessed September 29, 2017). Krapp offers the same definition from his dictionary (possibly also the *OED?*), although with substantially more pauses, thus perhaps also miming a kind of separation between the parts of its own definition.

prefix, ‘viduity’ seems to mime the condition of bereavement it signifies.”¹⁴ While Connor sees the cutting and splicing of tape as a manifestation of this “condition of bereavement,” it is important to note that the meaning of the word “viduity”—that is, deprivation—is also associated with the loss of Krapp’s memory of the word itself. Thus, his legible, inaudible spoken word—a manifestation of the embodied connection between sound, reading, and listening—is the agent through which the play emphasizes Krapp’s loss. His repeated sense of confusion suggests that this loss of understanding and inability to benefit fully from the communication of listening is systemic and comparable to his other losses.

Even when Krapp’s listening triggers his memory, rather than his confusion, his bodily reaction signifies loss. His frustration and impatience mounts as he searches for the passage that he wants—“*Krapp curses, switches off, winds tape forward, switches on again*” (21) a number of times—suggesting that he is desperate to relive the captured moment. He knows what he will find in the sonic text and uses his listening to trigger his recall and immerse himself in his memories; yet the more he listens, the more it is written on his body that those memories do not provide an adequate substitute for an embodied relationship. Instead, they exacerbate his sense of loss. Krapp is impatiently searching for his memory of the punt scene, the most embodied scene of the tape recordings, in which he enjoys the physical company of a lover, his relationship with whom he has just ended. Not only is this memory lost to the past, but it also signifies the loss caused by the relationship’s rupture. His obsessive listening and relistening to this moment further relegates this moment to the past and entrenches its presence—and its loss—in Krapp’s own history. Furthermore, the loss of physical copresence signified by this memory is compounded by its transmission through the disembodied voice of the tape machine.

Embodiment and the Eye

While listening, Krapp’s bodily reactions, which demonstrate his physical, mental, and emotional distress at what he has heard, suggests his annoyance and anguish with his recorded selves’ short-sighted plan for self-fulfillment, involving increased attention to work and rejection of relationships. If the Krapp we see is more trustworthy than the Krapp we hear, does the play thus privilege the honesty of the visual? After all, *Krapp’s Last Tape* demonstrates a concerted interest in the possible connection between eyes and insight. If Krapp can be thought of as a reader who finds hard truths in the sonic text, then it is fitting that reading, a fundamentally visual exercise, was traditionally thought of as “provid[ing] access to absolute truth.”¹⁵ The recorded Krapp, at least, seems to think of his “retrospect” (16) as a kind of seeing; in fact, “spect,” a linguistic root that is associated with the eye, is contained in this very term. As the recorded Krapp launches into his retrospect, he declares that he will “look ... back on the year that has gone, with what I hope is a glint of the old eye to come” (17–18). In this way, he privileges the act of looking, especially through the wise “old eye” (18). By this point in the play, however, the discrepancy between the arrogant confidence of the recorded Krapp

¹⁴ Connor, “Looping the Loop: Tape-Time in Burroughs and Beckett,” 96.

¹⁵ Darnton, “First Steps Toward a History of Reading,” 166.

and the “*wearish[ness]*” (9) of Krapp’s appearance and actions as he listens has already begun to cast doubt on the recorded Krapp’s claims. His ability (as one who is “*Very near sighted*” [9] but does not use glasses) to look back, even metaphorically, is questionable. Whereas Krapp’s physical presence facilitates the audience’s ability to read his body, his recorded voice attempts to look back without the aid of that embodied copresence so that his “vision” is mediated through his recorded memory, the tape machine, and the passage of time, all of which separate Krapp further and further from the physical copresence that he craves.

Krapp’s distance from the memories of his retrospectives due to the passage of time is reinforced by Beckett’s staging. When the recorded Krapp reflects on his intention to “look ... back on the year that has gone,” there is a substantial amount of intervening action between when the tape plays the word “look” and when it plays the word “back” (17–18). Between these words, Krapp switches off the machine, gets a couple of drinks, sings a little tune, and finally comes back to the tape recording. The intervening time obstructs the meaning of the sentence and perhaps suggests how time might do the same for the truth of Krapp’s retrospectives.

Elsewhere, the recorded Krapp states, “These old P.M.s are gruesome, but I often find them—(*Krapp switches off, broods, switches on*)—a help before embarking on a new ... (*hesitates*) ... retrospect” (16). Here we find the same kinds of interrupted speech that complicates the integrity of the “P.M.s.” It seems likely from the context of Krapp’s speech that the “P.M.s” refer to Krapp’s earlier recordings (that is, the recordings of the pre-thirty-nine-year-old Krapp), but what do the initials “P.M.” stand for? Does it denote postmeridian, suggesting a looking back from the latter half of the (metaphoric) day? Is it a private monologue, from one Krapp in time to another, thus reinforcing the insularity of his interactions? Or is it a postmortem, in which Krapp assesses the failures and losses of the past year? The possible references to postmeridian and postmortem both reinforce the idea of the passage of time, either over the course of a day or a lifetime. Through its shared abbreviation with postmeridian and postmortem, the private monologue thus becomes associated with a similar passage of time, as well as the connotations of evening (from postmeridian) and death (from postmortem). For the sixty-nine-year old Krapp, who has neither maintained his relationships nor achieved the desired success of his magnum opus, neither connotation is particularly positive. Whatever Beckett’s intended denotation of “P.M.,” all of these possible definitions become a part of a constellation of meanings that undermine the recorded Krapp’s claims.

These claims, and their naiveté, are similarly exposed when the recorded Krapp extends the eye imagery he has used for his retrospectives to his magnum opus. After “a year of profound gloom and indigence,” the recorded Krapp declares, “suddenly I saw the whole thing. The vision, at last” (20). In this description of his magnum opus, the recorded Krapp paints his work as a light in the darkness; not only is his life’s work a “vision” to be awaited, but its magnificence is apprehended, and comprehended, through sight. In contrast, the listening Krapp evidently cares very little about that work and is made impatient by its mention on the tape. With each claim that the recorded Krapp makes regarding his magnum opus and its insight, Krapp becomes increasingly annoyed: he switches the tape off, winds the tape forward and switches it on again, repeating this action three times as soon as

the recorded Krapp begins to offer some great truth regarding the “light of the understanding and the fire” of his work and presumably to rationalize his choice to abandon his relationships (21). At the ripe age of sixty-nine, Krapp does not have the time or the inclination to listen to the grand pronouncements of his youth, especially as they prove to be without substance or true vision.

The recorded Krapp’s retrospectives and magnum opus are not the only kinds of problematic “vision” in the play: Krapp is also a voyeur who watches, rather than communicates with, the people in his life. The recorded Krapp recalls watching his mother’s window from a park bench as she lies dying; he does this often enough that he gets to know the regulars of the area—“by appearance of course I mean!” (19). Krapp’s voyeurism of his mother’s window suggests a conflicted son who “wish[es] she were gone” yet attends on her from a distance (19), thus demonstrating his attempts to both distance himself from his relationships and to assure himself that this distancing is what he really wants. However, the image of Krapp sitting there “in the biting wind” (19) suggests a more caring Krapp than he wishes to project: when he sees the blind being lowering to indicate his mother’s death, he continues to sit, holding “A small, old, black, hard, solid rubber ball” (20). Reflecting on this event, he declares, “I shall feel it, in my hand, until my dying day” (20). Krapp transfers his memory of his mother and that moment to the ball; his focus on its embodied qualities—“small, old, black, hard, solid rubber”—highlights the importance of the physical, especially in this moment of loss. Furthermore, he vows not that he will see the ball, but that he will “*feel* it, in my hand, until my dying day” (20).¹⁶ The ball is a physical representation of not only memory, but also mutual interaction, as he had been throwing the ball to a small dog in one of the few instances that we see him interact (positively) with another being. Krapp gives the ball away (20), however, and without the physical reminder, his memories of his mother fade. His confusion at the mention of the black ball in the ledger at the beginning of the play thus heart-wrenchingly restages his loss of his mother and her memory.

At the same time (and in the same episode), Krapp also functions as a more traditionally threatening voyeur. His encounter with the “dark young beauty,” who according to Krapp always “had her eye on [him]” whenever he looked at her, but “threaten[s] to call a policeman” when he speaks to her, presents Krapp as a sexually-threatening voyeur (19). Yet his amusement at this—“As if I had designs on her virtue!”—only further illustrates another of his losses, in this case, the physical intimacy of sex (19). In listening to the recorded memories of the tape, and especially in relistening to the punt scene with its descriptions of the female body, Krapp also functions as a sonic voyeur of his past and the women in it. Although written in the context of medieval narrative, A.C. Spearing’s statement on the sense of sight nonetheless applies: “The ‘subtlety’ of sight,” he writes, “has to do with its unique status among the senses as the only one that involves no material contact with its object ... and this means that it gives least satisfaction to bodily desire.”¹⁷ The inefficacy of Krapp’s attempt to relive his memories in an embodied way is illustrated first by his attempt to do so over the time lapse of

¹⁶ Emphasis added.

¹⁷ A.C. Spearing, *The Medieval Poet as Voyeur* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 5.

several decades through the mediation of recordings of memories and not the actual events, and second, through the recordings' focus on images that suggest physicality but are not physical in and of themselves.

Krapp's need for physical copresence, alongside his investment in vision and its access to insight, is illustrated in his treatment of (and obsession with) the eye as an object. Several times throughout the play, both the recorded and the present Krapps dismiss their relationship with a specific woman, only to launch into a rhapsody about her eyes. After each mention, the present Krapp switches off the machine and broods for a moment. In describing a recording by Krapp in his late twenties, the recorded Krapp states, "Not much about her, apart from a tribute to her eyes. Very warm. I suddenly saw them again. (*Pause.*) Incomparable! (*Pause.*) Ah well..." (24). Clearly, an obsession with women's eyes is a trait that all the Krapps share, and is perhaps one of the few things that the present Krapp does not get annoyed with in the recordings of his past selves. Indeed, it seems to be a characteristic accentuated with age: just a few lines into his own retrospective, and without any specific mention of a woman, the present Krapp exclaims, "The eyes she had!" (24). This treatment of the eye as an object evokes the traditional belief that posits that the eye is a window to the soul: Krapp's interest in the eyes of his previous female companions suggests his desire to know them on a fundamental level. The emphasis on the physicality of the eye as an object suggests that truly knowing the other includes a physical component. Whereas Krapp becomes annoyed with the recorded Krapp's claims to vision and understanding regarding his magnum opus, he reacts much more positively towards the meditations on eyes: in a way, their embodied quality make them more substantial for him. Despite the promise of physicality that the eyes present, however, Krapp can only access them through memory and the tape machine; their disembodiment signifies his inability to achieve the embodied communication necessary for truly knowing another person.

The play's emphasis on the importance of physical copresence is perhaps best expressed in the punt scene to which Krapp repeatedly, and obsessively, returns. As the most embodied of all of the episodes, in sharp contrast to the disembodied nature of the Krapp's tapes, this scene clearly carries the most weight for Krapp. The recorded Krapp relates,

She lay stretched out on the floorboards with her hands under her head and her eyes closed ... I said again it was hopeless and no good going on, and she agreed, without opening her eyes. (*Pause.*) I asked her to look at me and after a few moments—(*pause*)—after a few moments she did, but the eyes just slits, because of the glare. I bent over her to get them in the shadow and they opened. (*Pause. Low.*) Let me in. (22, 27)

With his quiet "Let me in," the recorded Krapp is by far at his most vulnerable, as he asks for the one thing—human companionship and its intimate knowledge of the other—that he needs most and that the "rational," ambitious Krapp of the recordings has actively sought to banish from his life. Even as he denies his most basic need and confirms his life track towards the sad, shuffling, "*wearish old man*" (9) that he will become, the recorded Krapp recognizes the desire for true communication, and relies on the act of mutual looking to fulfill this function. Yet

the fact that Krapp ends up where he does—listening to his tapes, mostly silent and alone—suggests that the act of mutual looking is not sufficient to overcome his isolation. Although his companion’s eyes open, Krapp’s final, most personal plea to “Let me in” remains ultimately unanswered; while he communicates visually in this moment, he is denied the physical aspect of communication suggested by “Let me in,” which the play implies is the most intimate (22). In this moment, the components of communication—speech, sight, and the body—are united, illustrating the importance of all three for successful communication: when one component is neglected, communication becomes increasingly troubled. For the listening Krapp, who only has the tapes of his earlier selves’ voices, stripped of their visual and physical complements and made stagnant by their inscription, communication is an even more impossible desire.

If the recorded Krapp’s most vulnerable, most communicative scene takes place in the punt, then the present Krapp’s takes place in the closing moments of the play, in which his failure to communicate through language becomes clearest. As he finishes relistening to the punt episode,

Krapp’s lips move. No sound.

Past midnight. Never knew such silence. The earth may be uninhabited.

...

Perhaps my best years are gone. When there was a chance of happiness. But I wouldn’t want them back. Not with the fire in me now.

No, I wouldn’t want them back.

Krapp motionless staring before him. The tape runs on in silence. (28)

Despite or perhaps *because* of the recorded Krapp’s insistence that he “wouldn’t want [his best years] back” (28) not once, but twice, his confidence in the “fire” of his literary work to sustain him rings false. In describing the profound silence of the night, as if the world were “uninhabited,” the recorded Krapp unknowingly predicts his own future, void as it is of human communication. But it is the present Krapp’s reaction, the effects of listening on his body, that are the most telling. Similar to the moment when he encounters the word “viduity,” his lips move, but make no sound. He is inscribed by the movement of the spoken word as he tries to make the past real and embodied through speaking; but the recorded word is inevitably of the past, and there is no moving backward in time, however much Krapp may rewind the tape.

Confronted as he is with the realization of his earlier self’s mistaken values and how they profoundly shape his present, there is nothing that Krapp can say. Words fail him, just as they have his entire life, despite his attempt to master them. His dismissal of the body’s appetites and needs demonstrates a profound misunderstanding of what it means to be human and to communicate. If Krapp does not have the time to listen to his youthful claims to understand, it is because he knows that they are hollow. True understanding has not come in the speech of his retrospectives, but in the listening of them, and in the silent, embodied recognition of their dishonesty. The present Krapp does not say much; in fact, what he records, he wrenches off the machine and throws away. Yet he communicates much more powerfully and honestly in his bodily reactions towards what he hears than the recorded Krapp ever did in his grand pronouncements. The listening,

embodied Krapp is the *real* Krapp of the play: through Krapp's legible body and his relationship to sound and vision, Beckett's play stages the human need for physical copresence, especially in an age of technology and disembodied communication.

Jane Boyes is a PhD student in English at Dalhousie University, where she specializes in postmodern and contemporary experimental literature.