

## Subjects of Desire: Gaze and Voice in *Krapp's Last Tape*

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### *Abstract*

In the latter period of his work, Samuel Beckett began to devote much of his writing to exploring the nature of the voice and the gaze. Even those works that directly concerned silence and blindness implicitly thematized the voice and the gaze by embodying their absence. With later works, Beckett began to call into question the way in which these phenomena contributed to the constitution of subjects, modes of self-identification, and their relation to chosen objects of desire. In the 1950s and 1960s, Beckett produced dozens of short pieces of prose and theatrical works that wholly dispensed with traditional plot and character in favor of a series of experimental reductions, for example, to breath and light (*Breath*), to a disembodied voice (*Company*, *Eh Joe*, *That Time*, *Cascando*), or to a mouth illuminated by a point of light (*Not I*). Jacques Lacan, who would come to secure the place of the voice and the gaze in the philosophical canon, wrote and lectured on these concepts at the same time. If brought into dialogue, the work of each thinker—each highly nuanced and complex in its own right—can serve as a hermeneutic tool for better elucidating the function of the voice and the gaze and the role that they play in the formation of subjects. A great deal of critics have erroneously

overlooked Lacan's insistence that when he invokes these concepts he is not speaking about the phenomenal voice or the gaze of perception as such; similarly, Beckett's work, though it directly thematizes their phenomenal aspects, treats these concepts in a thoroughly Lacanian manner.

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Any reading of Beckett's short play *Krapp's Last Tape* that does not take into account Lacan's conception of "the gaze and the voice as the two paramount embodiments of the object *a*," will certainly be deficient.<sup>68</sup> In the play, we are presented with a subject of representation whose desires and means of self-recognition are wholly constituted by the object *a* in its many manifestations, namely in those of the voice and the gaze. The work serves a quintessential exemplification of these concepts in their complex and ambiguous functions. We witness the manner in which the object voice of the Other functions to stand in for what is irretrievably lost, enveloping the void of being and determining the sublimations of meaning that constitute the subject's supplementary objects of desire, which impossibly serve to fill the lack of subject. In this work, Beckett experiments with mechanisms that serve as Lacanian screens illuminated by the point of light emanating from the outside gaze of the Other. Before these mediating screens, the subjects are presented with sublimated objects of desire that give rise to fantasies of wholeness, constructed retrospectively. It is in virtue of these fantasy narratives—linked by nodes of desired objects, projected from the voice and the gaze onto

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<sup>68</sup> Mladen Dolar, "The Object Voice" in *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*, 13.

these subjects of representation—that retrospective identification is made possible, engendering the modes of self-recognition that are always those of misrecognition. Projecting an illusory sense of self-presence, the voice is at once the means to constructing a false sense of completion and an immediacy of self-recognition. At the same time, the voice produces a rupture in the fabric of presence that introduces the void in being, producing anxiety, isolation, and despair.

First we must recount how Lacan characterizes the voice and the gaze as objects *petit a*. Lacan adds the voice and the gaze to Freud's list of partial objects, such as breasts, feces, and phallus, which are "those parts of the body that *seem* to be attached to an organ or produced by an organ. But, in fact, they are perpetually detachable from the organ and from the body."<sup>69</sup> In this sense, the ambiguity of object *a* is figured in relation to the subject. It is both present to and absent from the subject; it is not being and yet it is not nothingness. However, it is not the partial object that is suspended from the subject, as this figure would suggest, but the reverse. Object *a* functions by "symbolizing the central lack of desire"<sup>70</sup> and "denoting both an empty *place* in being and body and the 'object' that one chooses to stop it up because this void place produces anxiety."<sup>71</sup> The voice and the gaze are so powerful in this work of "covering over the void that resides in consciousness that Lacan describes the human subject as suspended from the gaze, 'in an

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<sup>69</sup> Ellie Ragland, "The Relation between the Voice and the Gaze" in *Reading Seminar XI*, 188.

<sup>70</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1998), 105.

<sup>71</sup> Ragland, *Reading Seminar*, 189.

essential vacillation.”<sup>72</sup> Fantasies then are suspended from the subject, which is itself suspended from object *a*.

According to this schema, the “cut” that marks a loss in the life of the subject is sublimated into words and images (of fantasy) attaching loss to particular objects of the world.<sup>73</sup> The object *a*, then, is a fundamentally “lost Ur-object that resides at the center of the fantasies from which each person constructs desire around substitute objects that can never fill up a real void in being.”<sup>74</sup> Between this irretrievably lost Ur-object and the partial objects which, in symbolizing the former, cause desire, there are “lure objects we use in trying to concretize our desire by fetishizing things, people, or acts. Layer upon layer of heterogeneous associations build up sublimated meaning, ‘implicated assumptions’ about what will appease lack and fill void space.”<sup>75</sup> The voice and the gaze are partial objects that the subject takes for the lost object itself. These objects *a* then produce desire in subjects who wish to fill the lack or void from the loss of the “primordial object.” This is then directed toward various fetishized, lure objects each of which function as a veil or a stand-in for something else. Desire for Lacan is the desire to suture over this lack, to remedy the effects of loss, but this is never possible. Lacan argues that “where an object is sought,” breasts, a fetishized material object for example, “there is an empty place that ultimately cannot be filled, causing a dissatisfaction that is finally unappeasable.”<sup>76</sup> The structure of desire is such that these objects occupy an empty place that cannot be filled, as such there is already a gap between the object and its

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 189.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 197.

retrieval, one that is never necessarily diminished. This results in unappeasable dissatisfaction and anxiety in the subject.<sup>77</sup>

In response to this, the partial objects of desire give rise to “the fantasy of oneness” that serves to constitute the subject’s self-apprehension as complete. Further, as objects *a* give rise to fantasy, it is the latter that gives direction to the drives. This endeavor to take stock of one’s wholeness, to put it simply, or the desire to apprehend whether or not one’s lack is covered over, can only be undertaken by the gaze or the voice. The subject must hear himself speaking (voice) or see himself looking (gaze) to assess its self-presence and wholeness; in this sense, these partial objects do not reside in the phenomenal senses of the body but outside, in the Other. Indeed, Lacan reiterates that “man’s desire is the desire of the Other.”<sup>78</sup> For Lacan consciousness is the illusion of total self-presence; the gaze and the voice are the ultimate figures that convey and enable this misrecognition. Our self-image, as unified and contained in an organic-cognitive whole, is constituted by the immediacy of hearing one’s own voice and of seeing one’s reflection. Lacan writes that the illusion of consciousness is “that form of vision that is satisfied with itself” and without lack.<sup>79</sup> But insofar as it is the object’s cause of desire, the voice and the gaze, which enable this faulty self-conception and fill the hole in being with objects of desire, “institute consciousness as desire.”<sup>80</sup> Therefore it is against the voice and the gaze of the Other that we constitute our self-image, one whose fallacious wholeness is predicated on the unending pursuit of symbolic objects of desire. It is in this sense that we are always subjects of representation whose

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, 235.

<sup>79</sup> qtd. in Ragland, *Reading Seminar*, 193.

<sup>80</sup> Ragland, *Reading Seminar*, 197.

consciousness-as-desire is constituted by the voice of the Other. It is in virtue of the structure of the gaze that we misrecognize and idealize ourselves and “refuse to see ourselves as we are,” namely, fragmented, necessarily incomplete, and represented by the voice of the Other.<sup>81</sup>

Ellie Ragland explains, “the *truth* is that we lie, painting ourselves as we should be, not as we really are.”<sup>82</sup> We see ourselves looking at ourselves, but the paradox is that we never look from the place in which we are seen. Desire mediates self-recognition, skewing the self-image that is seen by projecting a representation on the screen that elides reality—that is, what we see of ourselves (the place in which we are seen) is never who we really are (the place from which we look). It is in this sense that “we are seen, not seeing; objects not subjects of free will.”<sup>83</sup> What we see when we look at ourselves looking, what we hear when we hear ourselves speaking, is not the immediate mark of conscious self-presence but rather objects *a*—the voice and the gaze—and their supplementary fantasy objects of desire, which function to represent individuals, to allow them to imagine themselves as whole. The gaze then circumscribes us, making “us beings who are looked at, but without showing this [to us].”<sup>84</sup> For Lacan, as subjects of representation, we are constituted by the gaze of the Other insofar as our means of self-recognition is determined by the manner in which we see ourselves being seen within the web of signifiers that make up the symbolic order.

Beckett’s *Krapp’s Last Tape* takes this very process of constituting desirous subjects of representation via the retrospective and

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 195.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

prospective vectors of objects *a*, the voice and the gaze. *Krapp's Last Tape* depicts an old man who is engaged in the yearly compulsion that commemorates the "awful occasion" of his birthday. Throughout the adult years of his life, he has observed the ritual of making tape recordings of monologues in which he reflects on the year's events, recounting the particularly affective moments and memories of the last year. In addition to this, he listens to tapes that he has made over the course of his life. Krapp not only attempts to concretize and make static the fragmentary events and stages of his life by creating an exhaustive, exterior archive of his life in the form of voice recordings, but he also keeps a meticulous ledger in which is set down the content of each reel and its place within a numerical organizing system that orders and hierarchizes the recordings. By doing this, Krapp attempts to construct a kind of acoustic mirror that will unify his life, one that can serve as an identical exterior embodiment of his consciousness where one can observe the holistic, logical narrative of his life. He constructs an exteriorized prosthetic memory so that particular fetishized events and narrated condensations of desire will "never be forgotten," protecting "the whole thing...against the day when my work will be done and perhaps no place left in my memory."<sup>85</sup> The evidence of desire here is for the total possession of himself and the ability to conveniently and immediately access the various memories, figures, and events that function as his fetishized objects of desire.

Initially contriving this project, Krapp reveals himself to be a subject who presupposes the veridicality of the metaphysics of presence. This narcissistic endeavor assumes that one's vocal reflection will yield an immediate self-presence, is a vocalic version of Lacan's mirror stage. Krapp's endeavor to *s'entendre parler*, to

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<sup>85</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Collected Shorter Plays* (New York: Grove, 1984), 60.

hear himself speaking, is “an elementary formula of narcissism that is needed to produce a minimal form of a self.”<sup>86</sup> Krapp’s meticulous attention to detail in the way he organizes the recordings and makes a ritual of this process is his attempt to gain a comprehensive vocal reflection of his self, making a unified whole which is fundamentally a fragmented lack. Like Lacan’s mirror stage, here the acoustic mirror functions “to provide the minimal support needed to produce a self-recognition, the imaginary completion offered to the multiple body, . . . the constitution of an ‘I’ as well as the matrix of a relationship to one’s equals, the ambiguous source of love.”<sup>87</sup> This ritual for Krapp is an attempt to cover an implicitly felt lack, an attempt to recapture an impossible origin of completion. The voice in this instance acts as a supplement for Krapp through which he feels he can gain a substantive relationship to presence.<sup>88</sup>

Paradoxically, this endeavor yields a “recognition that is intrinsically a misrecognition.”<sup>89</sup> In the first reel that Krapp listens to, we hear the “*rather pompous*” and “*strong voice*” of a younger Krapp that is radically distinct from his present “*cracked voice*” that possesses a “*distinctive intonation*.”<sup>90</sup> On this recording Krapp mocks the self-overheard in an even earlier reel: “the voice! . . . Hard to believe I was ever that young whelp.”<sup>91</sup> When recording his tape in the present Krapp reflects on this derisive voice: “just been listening to that stupid bastard I took myself for thirty years ago,

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<sup>86</sup> Dolar, *Gaze and Voice*, 13.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>90</sup> Beckett, *Collected Shorter Plays*, 55-57.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

hard to believe I was ever as bad as that.”<sup>92</sup> Reflected on the screen of the recorder, rather than yielding a voice he identifies with himself, he hears instead the voice of the Other. Krapp, then, does not speak from the place in which he is heard. Mladen Dolar writes that when “there is a surface that returns the voice,” in this instance of reel to reel, “the voice acquires an autonomy of its own and enters into the dimension of the Other, it becomes a deferred voice.”<sup>93</sup> Here, the object *a*, the voice, at once “offers a *semblance* of [holistic] being that Krapp can identify with narcissistically, but at the same time, as the voice of the Other, it keeps Krapp from seeing himself as he truly is.”<sup>94</sup> Dolar explains that “the auto-affective voice of self-presence and self-mastery [is] constantly opposed by its reverse side, the intractable voice of the Other, the voice that one cannot control.”<sup>95</sup> Krapp’s phenomenal voice contains the object voice that ruptures presence, but the encounter that he has is ambiguous because the object *a* functions to cause desire in such a way to conceal this rupture in self-presence. Beckett adeptly represents the ambiguity of the voice; Krapp both recognizes the voice as his own, and refers to himself in the third person, conceding to the desire this voice causes: “Ah well, maybe he was right. Maybe he was right.”<sup>96</sup> Dolar explains that the object voice is never simply present nor absent but is “the pivotal point at the intersection” where one recognizes oneself “as the addressee of the voice of the Other as well as recognizing one’s own voice in a self-presence—but is at the same time what inherently lacks and disrupts any notion of full presence; it makes it a truncated

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>93</sup> Dolar, *Gaze and Voice*, 14.

<sup>94</sup> Ragland, *Reading Seminar*, 200.

<sup>95</sup> Dolar, *Gaze and Voice*, 15.

<sup>96</sup> Beckett, *Collected Shorter Plays*, 62.

presence, which covers a lack.”<sup>97</sup> The voice of the Other here functions to perform in the pivotal intersection of the screen—the tape machine—the roles of both Narcissus and Echo, providing the illusory self-presence figured by the former and the fragmented signification of the latter, whose reverberant enunciations conceal a lack; taken together these functions serve to constitute Krapp’s self-image, representing both who he is in the present as well as the past. The voice as object *a* functions in a dual role; it both introduces “the rupture at the core of self-presence”<sup>98</sup> and serves as the means to suturing that tear by concealing it with lure objects, metonymies, which stand-in for the irretrievable lost presence at the heart of the subject, “enveloping the central void.”<sup>99</sup>

Striking a very Lacanian figure, Krapp resides in a circular point of light that is surrounded by the void of darkness. Beckett’s stage directions read, “*table and immediate adjacent area in strong white light. Rest of stage in darkness.*”<sup>100</sup> The voice that emanates from one of the recordings indicates this is a preference of Krapp’s. He says, “with all this darkness around me I feel less alone...In a way...I love to get up and move about in it, then back here to...me.”<sup>101</sup> Outside of the point of light, he loses his conception of self. It is only when he returns to the light that he can conceive of who he is, “back here to...me...Krapp.”<sup>102</sup> It is within this point of light that Krapp is figured as a subject of representation whose present desires and self-image are wholly constituted by what he hears himself saying and through memories in which he sees himself looking at

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<sup>97</sup> Dolar, *Gaze and Voice*, 27.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>100</sup> Beckett, *Collected Shorter Plays*, 55.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

the varying objects of desire that have defined the contours of his life. Ragland writes that “the voice enables us to call up the gaze against which we reconstitute ourselves in memory, the gaze of judgment and idealizations that gives us a place in our fantasies. There we are suspended from the gaze that functions as a marker in the real.”<sup>103</sup> Krapp’s self-identification occurs retrospectively. The voice of the Other constitutes the way Krapp perceives himself in the present as well as the way he recalls past events that have since taken on significance of fetish objects. The imagined repetition of past events or ideas are recounted and set down on the reels—imagined because he recounts them at years end, and as such, they are mediated by the gaze. Their auditory repetition through the years and the altered signification that accompanies Krapp’s method of selective listening becomes an exterior performance of the mythical echo’s alteration of meaning through fragmentary repetition. A series of concentric cuts are made with each recollection; on each birthday certain affective impressions are recalled and recorded. This is the cut (not the first, as many have been made since the initial experience) made at the moment of recording. His method of listening each year, his ability to literally edit memory on the outside, constitutes the subsequent cuts. In this way, Krapp is able to further alter memory in terms of present desire. His tendency to rewind and fast-forward the tapes, as well as his periodic exit from the stage recalls Freud’s *fort / da*, where his objects of desire are now present and absent. As an old man, he has become obsessed with particular moments and mnemonic objects of desire; the repetition of these memories becomes an annual compulsion. For Krapp, the reels are a material instantiation of his perceived self, and, by controlling the reverberant voice of memory and the imagined life that it recalls, old Krapp can retrospectively

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<sup>103</sup> Ragland, *Reading Seminar*, 200.

formulate who he was and what he has become. It is in this way that his archived voice—and the fantasy echoes that it articulates—determine Krapp’s conception of himself.

Lacan argues that the “the subject...is produced in the retrospective vector.”<sup>104</sup> We can observe how this functions by examining the retrospective vectors of *Krapp’s Last Tape* and the way in which they produce the main character. For Krapp, the object voice, from the standpoint of the past, informs the present where he becomes a subject of representation by listening to himself (the self that is also Other) speak; at the same time, when he produces the new recording for the year, he is constituted by the object gaze of the Other insofar as he sees himself looking at himself from the future position of listening to come. The voice speaks from the past and the gaze looks back, retrospectively, from a future position. Perhaps we can envision a doubling of Lacan’s graph of the gaze in which the subject, Krapp, is caught between emanations from the voice’s point of light—projecting from the past onto the present—and those of the gaze—projecting from a future position onto the present; each contributes to the retrospective representation of the subject of desire. This may be what Žižek means when he claims that “gaze and voice relate to each other as life and death: voice vivifies, whereas gaze mortifies.”<sup>105</sup>

The bulk of Beckett’s short play consists of Krapp locating and listening to one particular reel. This reel is especially complicated because it contains the recapitulation of another older reel as well. This tape contains nested narratives that are corrupted and re-constructed by subsequent experiences of listening. It is hard to say

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<sup>104</sup> Dolar, *Gaze and Voice*, 11.

<sup>105</sup> Slavoj Žižek, “I Hear You with My Eyes; or, The Invisible Master” in *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*. (Durham: Duke UP, 1996), 94.

for how many years Krapp has listened to this old recording of his youthful voice before, in a sense rewriting it from the perspective that he now speaks from. The recording then contains a number of overlapping, echoic voices of the Other. This synthetic recording contains Krapp's memories of the death of both his parents as well as his relationships with a number of women. The fetishized objects of desire, which are symbolized here, function to constitute Krapp's self-representation in the present.

For Lacan, identification and constructions of the self are always retrospective, and the material for such reconstructions are the objects *a*. Joan Scott characterizes the process of retrospective identification as one of "fantasy echo." Scott's term names the process in which the remembered voices, images, events, and affects continue to reverberate in the mind; they become increasingly distorted in their anomalous, altering returns and constitute the protean material of our plagiarized selves. It is not so much that memory becomes corrupted or that its accuracy diminishes, causing our backwards glance to fall upon an inauthentic scene: rather, the basic condition of all rememberers is one of paramnesia, that is the "condition involving distorted memory or confusions of fact and fantasy."<sup>106</sup> Scott describes the retrospective identificatory process characterized by fantasy echo as one that enacts "the repetition of something imagined or an imagined repetition. In either case the repetition is not exact since an echo is an imperfect return of sound...Retrospective identifications, after all, are imagined repetitions *and* repetitions of imagined resemblances. The echo is a fantasy, the fantasy an echo; the two are inextricably intertwined."<sup>107</sup> Similarly, it would be fair to say that memory is a

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<sup>106</sup> *Concise OED 11<sup>th</sup> Ed.*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004), 1038.

<sup>107</sup> Joan Scott, "Fantasy Echo: History and the Construction of Identity" in *Critical Inquiry* 27, (2001), 287.

fantasy, fantasy a memory. Scott describes identification as a process “of writing oneself” according to the fantasized repetitions of memory and the imagined resemblances that we find between the self of the past and that of the present; perhaps it would be more accurate to understand this in light of Lacan’s object *a* as the construction of the self on the basis of desire that functions to cover the absence of the subject’s primordial completeness.

The figure of the echo is particularly helpful in developing our understanding of how memory, fantasy, repetition, and desire are employed by the voice and the gaze to construct the self. Scott writes, “Echoes are delayed returns of sound; they are incomplete reproductions” that create “gaps of meaning and intelligibility” and constitute an “incomplete, belated, and often contradictory kind of repetition.”<sup>108</sup> When Ovid’s Echo responds to the voice of Narcissus, her repetition of the latter’s words are fragmented, and stress is placed differently on his words, wholly altering their original meaning.

Like the interaction of remembered and perceived voices and images, “the melodic toll of bells can become cacophonous when echoes mingle with the original sound; when the sounds are words, the return of partial phrases alters the original sense and comments on it as well.”<sup>109</sup> The mental repetition of voice and image mingles memory of the past with the perceptions of the present. In this way, the self is constructed dialectically as the altered echoes of past voices affect our construal of the present, and present scenarios cause the past to be re-imagined. Scott claims, “In either case, repetition constitutes alteration. It is thus that echo undermines the

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 291.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

notion of enduring sameness that often attaches to identity.”<sup>110</sup> Identity, like an echo, is protean in the sense that the meanings of memory’s voices become altered by fragmentary self-reference and fantasy echo; we self-identify on the basis of these meanings and their apparent relation to the self in the present. The repetitions of echoic object voice are the “processes by which subjects come into being as ‘a play of repetition and difference among signifiers.’”<sup>111</sup>

Imagination and fantasy are inextricably linked to the workings of memory and retrospective identification. Active memory is both echoic and palimpsest; it is a circuit of writing and overwriting in which the traces of previous impressions are still apparent beneath the new impressions. The repetitions or echoes of the voices of memory are fantasies insofar as they are constructed, distorted, or narrated instantiations of previous experience. Scott explains that the act of fantasizing itself is not the “object of desire, but its setting. In fantasy the subject does not pursue the object or its sign: he appears caught up himself in the sequence of images.”<sup>112</sup>

Invoking Žižek, she writes, “fantasy operates as a (tightly condensed) narrative” in which “contradictory elements (or, for that matter, incoherent ones) are rearranged diachronically, becoming causes and effects.”<sup>113</sup> Krapp’s memories, are then the “imagined repetitions” of previous experience and are constructed as tightly condensed narratives that rearrange contradictory elements into a coherent scene in which the rememberer gets “caught up...in a sequence of images.” Rather than being the resonance of one voice, a fantasy-memory is a conglomerate of a multiplicity of voices and images that are cut or edited to form an

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> qtd. in Ibid., 288.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 289.

apparently logical narrative. To invert Gerard de Nerval's famous statement that "to create is to remember again," it is clear that to remember is to create again.

Krapp's tapes function to construct a fantasy narrative to encompass the whole of his life, but each of the mini-narratives that we are presented with (each serving to obviate a recognition of the void) are tightly composed layers of sublimated desire, where a variety of partial and lure objects are observably what structure Krapp's subjectivity. To begin with the lesser—though more obvious—of these, the scatological pun implied in the main character's name is not lost on any reader familiar with Beckett and is given further credence when we read that Krapp's "bowel condition," his "old weakness," is persistent enough to be addressed on multiple occasions. This is referenced in relation to another of the partial objects of Krapp's desire, namely bananas. He silently eats three at the outset of the play before he utters a word. We find that these are a veritable obsession for him when, "listening to an old year," we hear, "have just eaten I regret to say three bananas and only with difficulty refrained from a fourth. Fatal things for a man with my condition."<sup>114</sup> Beckett constructs a web connected of partial objects: the voice, feces, and the banana, that we can perhaps, at least provisionally, associate with Lacan invocatory, anal, and oral drives. In a sense, Krapp is willing to obsessively eat shit even though, or perhaps because, it can lead to his death.

The more crucial objects of Krapp's desire are the various women that serve as markers in the fantasy narrative of his life: "the dark nurse," Bianca, Effie, "the punt," and his Mother. It seems that Krapp's life with Bianca is not associated with anything substantive

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<sup>114</sup> Beckett, *Collected Shorter Plays*, 57.

but only with fetishized objects and places, such as “Kedar Street,” a “shabby green coat,” and a “railway platform.”<sup>115</sup> Recalling a previous recording, Krapp says, “not much about her, apart from a tribute to her eyes. Very warm. I suddenly saw them again. Incomparable! Ah well.” But if there isn’t much that is genuinely memorable about Bianca, then why continue to immortalize her in the grand narrative of his acoustic mirror? We find that what the important association is here when, referring to himself in the third person, Krapp states fragmentarily, “last illness of his father.”<sup>116</sup> In accordance with the Lacanian structure, the desire of the Other (“*his* father”) determines the sublimated meaning here. The desire for his lost father—a desire which conceals a more primordial lack—is sublimated into the fetishized, warm, incomparable eyes of Bianca, a woman whose relationship with Krapp was otherwise unpleasant. The voice of the Other asks, “what remains of all that old misery? A girl in a shabby green coat, on a railway platform.”<sup>117</sup> At this early stage in his life, the object *a*’s cause-of-desire sublimates a traumatic loss into the fetishized eyes of a woman which take on the significance of the Other’s gaze through which Krapp sees himself looking at himself in the moment of losing, in this instance, his father.

The next to become an object of Krapp’s desire is the woman who he simply refers to as “the dark nurse.” Refusing to sit at the bedside of his dying mother, Krapp chooses instead to sit on a “bench by the weir from where I could see her window...wishing she were gone.”<sup>118</sup> The mother’s window is the point from which the gaze emits—for as we must remember the “gaze should not be subjectivized” but rather emanated from a kind of *a priori* blind

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

spot—and causes the assignation of the lure object of desire, the nurse. Krapp relates,

one dark young beauty I recollect particularly, all white and starch, incomparable bosom, with a big black hooded perambulator, most funereal thing. Whenever I looked in her direction she had her eyes on me. And yet when I was bold enough to speak to her...she threatened to call a policeman. As if I had designs on her virtue! The face she had! The eyes! Like...chrysolite! Ah well.<sup>119</sup>

As before, the loss of his mother is sublimated into a desire for this woman and affects the fetishized of her eyes. The felt gaze from the mother's window is reassigned to the nurse who "had her eyes on" him each time he looked at her. Through an associative sublimation, Beckett manages to represent both the way in which—given the nurse's reaction to Krapp's advances—"you never look at me from the place from which I see you," as well as the fact that "what I look at is never what I wish to see."<sup>120</sup> Tellingly, the nurse's breasts, a partial object like the voice and the gaze, are described using the exact same language as that used when Krapp refers to the fetishized eyes of Bianca; they are "incomparable." Again Beckett presents us with a web of associated signifiers, the networked meaning of which is lost on Krapp but is easy enough to map and be readily accessible to a reader or spectator. Here birth (the pram), sex (the nurse), shame (the policeman), and death (the "funereal...black hooded" pram) are intricately connected and determine the assignation of lure objects where desire is reallocated to compensate for the loss of the mother. Of course all of this occurs under the gaze of the hospital window.

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>120</sup> Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, 103.

The death of Krapp's mother is figured as a closing eye, as the secession of the gaze of the Other. He recounts,

I was there when the blind went down, one of those dirty brown roller affairs, throwing a ball for a little white dog as chance would have it. I happened to look up and there it was. All over and done with at last. I sat on for a few moments with the ball in my hand and the dog yelping and pawing at me. Moments. Her moments, my moments. The dog's moments. In the end I held it out to him and he took it in his mouth, gently, gently. A small, old, black, hard, solid rubber ball. I shall feel it, in my hand until my dying day. I might have kept it. But I gave it to the dog. Ah well.<sup>121</sup>

The figurative blinding of the gaze and the loss of the mother cause desire to be shifted to substitute lure objects—such as the ball, the dog, and its mouth—in which evanescent desire is concretized into something that can be literally grasped in one's hand in the effort to alleviate the tremendous feeling of anxiety that accompanies such a loss. We should recall that, for both Lacan and Beckett, the mother and the father are not the primordial objects of desire that ensure the fullness of being but are the paradigmatic stand-ins that conceal the real void in being. They cover over a lack, and with their death, the desire that veils that lack must be shifted elsewhere. In this case, it is shifted onto fetishized objects that, in their proximity to the scission caused by these deaths, become imbued with a great deal of significance. This is why Krapp continues to feel the ball in his hand and why he personifies it with adjectives he

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<sup>121</sup> Beckett, *Collected Shorter Plays*, 60.

might have used to describe his mother. The strange dog, oddly enough, becomes a major component of Krapp's life narrative when its "moments" mingle with his at this formative instant. The moment in which the void is revealed has a massive impact on the subject and serves to forever alter its constitution. Around these moments of traumatic loss, when the unappeasable nature of desire is revealed to the subject, "layers of heterogeneous associations build up sublimated meaning about what will appease lack and fill void space," causing lure objects—such as the ball and the eyes of women—to be imbued with life altering significance.<sup>122</sup> The uniformity of language used to describe the fetishized objects of desire ("incomparable!"), along with the repeated refrain "ah well" at the end of each narrative account, serve to connect these processes of reassigned desire, the logical consistency of which remains unrecognized by Krapp.

These instances culminate in the memory of another of Krapp's lost loves, whom he only refers to as "the punt." The audience gets the unambiguous sense that all of the memories heard up to this point have been merely a preamble to this one, and yet we are not even given the name of this woman. Why? The significance of the memory has nothing to do with the person herself; she is merely a stand-in, a placeholder, and an object of desire that protects the subject from exposure to the void that is being. Moreover, it is a memory in which the subject is represented by being caught in the gaze of the Other, a moment that has become fetishized in order to be compulsively re-experienced through the constituting voice on the reel. He wishes to become a statically unified self by remaining in that moment. Krapp listens to the disembodied voice of the Other, who determines his desire and self-conception and recalls,

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<sup>122</sup> Ragland, *Reading Seminar*, 188.

She lay stretched out on the floorboards with her hands under her head and her eyes closed... I said again I thought it was hopeless and no good going on and she agreed, without opening her eyes. [*Pause.*] I asked her to look at me and after a few moments—[*Pause.*]—after a few moments she did, but the eyes just slits, because of the glare. I bent over her to get them in the shadow and they opened... I lay down across her with my face in her breasts and my hand on her.<sup>123</sup>

In the present stage in his life, when he is “drowned in dreams and burning to be gone,” he would rather hear himself speaking this memory in order to be represented in the mode of this *regard*.<sup>124</sup> Though illusory, it represents for Krapp a rare moment of wholeness. In the absence of all other fetishized objects of desire, his recordings have taken their place and become a veritable archive of desire, his most loyal companion, in which the object *a* is reduced to the uncanny and autonomous voice of the Other.

But Krapp’s intent is not merely one of nostalgia; rather, he thinks that he can achieve a fullness of being, wholly filling the lack that causes his anxiety and dread, by preserving and re-experiencing those paradoxical instances when the ambiguity of the gaze and the voice simultaneously revealed and recovered the void in being by shifting desire into fetishized objects. The disembodied voice of a younger Krapp ponders, “perhaps the best years of my life are gone. When there was a chance for happiness. But I wouldn’t want them back.”<sup>125</sup> Now, reliving these years allows him to “lie propped up in

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<sup>123</sup><sup>123</sup> Beckett, *Collected Shorter Plays*, 62.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 63.

the dark and wander. Be again in a dingle on a Christmas Eve...be again on Croghan on a Sunday morning."<sup>126</sup> To "be again, be again. All that old misery."<sup>127</sup> For "in the unconscious, in the realm of fantasy, one identifies...with the gaze that first structured one as a subject of desire;" Krapp seeks to retrieve what is to be represented in the light of that gaze, to retrieve that original desire, however miserable its possession.<sup>128</sup> He believes, as do all subjects of desire according to Beckett and Lacan, that only in doing so can he regain a fullness of being. The voice of the Other demands, "once wasn't enough for you. Lie down across her."<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>128</sup> Ragland, *Reading Seminar*, 197.

<sup>129</sup> Beckett, *Collected Shorter Plays*, 63.