

POSTHUMAN ELEMENTS IN SAMUEL BECKETT'S *KRAPP'S LAST TAPE*

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ABSTRACT. *Posthuman Elements in Samuel Beckett's "Krapp's Last Tape".* The present paper aims to offer insight regarding the post-anthropocentric elements present in one of Samuel Beckett's most innovative plays, *Krapp's Last Tape*. In order to support my premise, I wrote a comprehensive theoretical outline of posthumanism, taking into account aspects such as the adaptation of the brain to new technologies and the influence they exert, the appearance and usage of prosthetics, symbiotic relationships and the interconnectedness between body, mind and environment. I then proceeded to offer my own interpretation of the target text, focusing on Beckett's recurrent tendency to represent the body as an aged, decaying and fallible organic vessel and relevant human-machine symbiosis. Humanity's centrality is deconstructed by focalising on its subservience to suffering.

Keywords: *Samuel Beckett, Krapp's Last Tape, Posthumanism, post-bodied minds, technological symbiosis, memory, corporeal decay, subjugation to mortality*

REZUMAT. *Elemente postumane în piesa "Ultima Bandă a lui Krapp" de Samuel Beckett.* Axată pe una dintre cele mai inovatoare piese din palmaresul Beckettian, lucrarea de față indică prezența elementelor post-antropocentrice în *Ultima Bandă a lui Krapp*. Pentru a demonstra validitatea acestei premise, am început prin a concepe un synopsis al teoriei postumaniste, axându-mă pe aspecte cum ar fi adaptarea creierului la noile tehnologii și influența exercitată de acestea, apariția și utilizarea elementelor prostetice, relațiile simbiotice și interconectivitatea dintre corp, minte și mediu. Interpretarea textului a luat în considerare tendința recurentă a lui Beckett de a reprezenta

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corpul uman ca un vehicul organic failibil, în descompunere, dar și simbioza dintre om și mașinărie. Piesa arată în repetate rânduri că omul este supus suferinței, deconstruind astfel poziția centrală a umanității.

Cuvinte cheie: *Samuel Beckett, "Ultima Bandă a lui Krapp", Postumanism, minți post-corporale, simbioză tehnologică, memorie, deconstrucție, mortalitate*

Nowadays an icon of the theatrical world, Beckett initially used this genre as an outlet from his laborious prose writings. Stripping bare the stage of jam-packed living room vaudevilles and turning it into a minimalistic space that invited meditation, he became a European sensation by immersing audiences in his dark, empathic and twistedly funny worlds. During his lifetime, he produced or published twenty plays, enumerated by Ruby Cohn as follows: "ten for theater, four for radio, three for television, two for mime and one for cinema" (1980, 4).

When directing, Beckett often revised his works, but never published his modifications. His plays resemble a balancing act: darkness becomes invaded by light, silence is broken up by words and mismatched couples dabble in compassion to the detriment of passion. Cohn also adds that on the rare occasions when Beckett spoke of his characters, he called them "my people" (1980, 13), which goes to show that to him they were not fictions, or objects, or symbols, but as relevant as living beings.

Often confused with a philosophical existentialist, it seems that as a playwright Beckett was more of an essentialist, always flaunting a carefully thought out economy of words and gestures which seemed to recede even more as the performance unfolded: questions were left unanswered, sentences became elliptical clauses, characters melted into a single, inward-looking mind. As signaled by Cohn, it suffices to read Beckett's earlier prose and poetry to notice that he was not always inclined towards this charged verbal scarcity, but rather perfected the style as his artistic growth took its course (1980, 13).

Beckett's work has been described as "highly vital play about a dying species" (Cohn 1980, 14). His choice of characters from among the "lowest common human denominator" (Cohn 14) and his relentless attempts at concentrating their suffering into haunting performances have brought out the shock of recognition from many a spectator. By building his plays around the fallibility of the human element, Beckett is actively deconstructing its centrality.

In order to identify the posthuman traits of *Krapp's Last Tape* it is relevant to first delve into a theoretical analysis of posthumanism and its significant

aspects. Assumptions that equate posthumanism to the downfall of humanity are as common as they are erroneous. Based on a wide-spread anxiety which stems from technological change, according to Pepperell, posthumanism postulates the end of anthropocentrism in favor of a more altruistic, interconnected outlook. Herbrechter defines posthumanism as “the cultural malaise or euphoria that arises once you start taking the idea of ‘postanthropocentrism’ seriously” (2013, 3). Sadly, the advent of consumerism and techno-culture coupled with the sheer difficulty of dissociating from the humanist perspective has created a displacement of theorisation (Badmington 2003,10).

In the words of Borbely and Petrar, while posthumanism is “inclusive of the human that dwells within it,” it dismisses “anthropocentric attempts at regulating alterity through exclusion or normalisation” (2014, 92). This means that the human’s dominant position in the grand scheme of things has been rethought and reconfigured. Even if posthumanism repeats certain aspects of humanism, it does so in order to deconstruct them; according to Derrida, deconstruction implies a certain type of repetition which exposes uncertainties (“to restate is not to reinstate,” Derrida 1972, 129). Humanity becomes an intermediary state and a transient manifestation. Herbrechter and Callus deem posthumanism a challenge to “humanism’s understanding of what it means to be human” (2011, 144). Our place at the top of the food chain is swapped for that of a point on a web of interconnected species and inhuman elements. Braidotti states that:

... the normatively human is deposed from a “universalistic posture,” divested of “delusions of grandeur,” and the “humanistic ideal that defined perfectibility in terms of autonomy and self-determination” is deconstructed (2013, 24)

It thus becomes quite clear that posthumanism is not an attack on humanity, but rather an attack on humanity’s egocentrism, chipping away at the conviction that we could continue to survive by cannibalising the world we live in. As Borbely and Petrar explain, “human subjectivity is entrenched in a chain of dependencies, but with new found dignity in connectivity” (2014, 61)

In an attempt to explain the profoundly ethical standpoint of posthumanism, Verbeek states that:

Human-world relationships should not be seen as relations between pre-existing subjects who perceive and act upon a pre-existing world of objects, but rather as sites where both the objectivity of the world and the subjectivity of those who are experiencing it and existing in it are constituted (Verbeek 2011, 15)

This quote underlines the transformative effect that emerges from the interaction between human and world, while also taking into account that the two represent independent parts of a whole. Hayles calls this “an “I” transformed into the “we” of autonomous agents operating together to make a self” (2012a, 6).

The posthuman subject is not unified, according to Damasio (1994, 238-9), and in a state of perpetual becoming, according to Vandenberghe (2004, 24-5). The lack of unity is traced in the many elements at work in order to produce a perception of reality: mind and body coexist in a torturous codependency, while the environment exerts influence whilst being influenced in its turn. Vandenberghe’s replacement of the term “being” with “becoming” refers to this influence of the external upon our cognitive capacities and the constant, steady transformation of our brain. Thus, it is made evident that the mind becomes hybridised more than the body, gaining what Clark calls “mindware upgrades” (2003, 3-4). The body’s response to the environment ensures the permanent penetration of corporeal boundaries by extraneous substances; it is no surprise, then, that technologies shape neurological structures. Living and unliving things exchanging properties make the distinctions between them more difficult to register.

Damasio pinpoints that the body acts as a “grounding reference” (Damasio 1994, 235) for the self, and thus for the production of subjectivity, which resonates with the many instances in which Beckett signaled the burden of being trapped in our organic life-vessels. Moreover, Damasio goes on to define the self as a series of successive, overlapping “organism states, each neutrally represented anew, in multiple concerted maps, moment by moment and each anchoring the self that exists at one moment” (1994, 235). This sustained transformation is a tragic premise that connotes both perfectibility and the struggles of aging, best showcased in *Krapp’s Last Tape*.

In addition, the body is no mere reference point, but also implicated in mediating the world “through senses and proprioception” (Borbely and Petrar, 81). The lack of unity characteristic to the human can be traced back to its distribution in non-overlapping sensory interfaces with the world as well. According to Manovich, the body is “the crucial mediator” between subjects and their environments (2003, 340). It will be interesting to explore how the power of perception of Beckett’s characters which display illnesses and handicaps is either enhanced or minimised. To Damasio, reasoning also stems from emotion (1994, xvi), and the intense awareness of the ineptitude and fragility of the human form that the target texts’ personae usually flaunt is bound to mutate that process.

Further contesting any pretense at exceptionalism on behalf of the human as a transcendental category, Braidotti defines the posthuman “within an eco-philosophy of multiple belongings, as a relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity, a subject that works across differences and is also internally differentiated” (2013, 49-50). Her statement shows the urgency of admitting and owning up to our codependency to all other aspects of the world, in a sacrificial ritual of egos unfolding for the greater good of all. Haraway believes that “to be one is always to become with many” (2008, 3-4), which suggests that the posthuman comes into her/his full potential only when aware and acceptant of this prevailing linkage which governs the world. This makes posthumanism a “heteromorphic state” (Hassan 1993, 835).

Not only is the human now stripped of its centrality and dominance, but the boundaries between it and nonhuman elements also become blurred: the omnipresence of machines, automation, prosthetic enhancements, Nano technological engineering and genetic manipulation have created and consolidated a technologised environment which humans have become increasingly reliant and dependent upon (Pepperell 2003, 2). Krapp is also dependent on his tape recorder, which functions as his disembodied memory. As the old man becomes progressively harder of hearing, this technological aid is rendered obsolete.

The appearance and widespread usage of prosthetic enhancements not only reconfigured the human form as we knew it, but also blurred the line between *bios* and *techne*, making the once popular dichotomy obsolete. Human condition is surpassed through the emergence of a “post-bodied mind” (Callus & Herbrechter, 144), which need not concern itself with the frailty of our decomposing organic vessels. Although Beckett’s characters are anything but cyborgs, they definitely display through their behavior how uncontainable their consciousness and suffering truly is.

Callus and Herbrechter suggest that a biotech condition’s timeframe exceeds the confines of the present, leading to instances of anachronism (2001, 144). This is most obvious in Krapp’s conjuring of his past selves through the desperate rewind and replay of his birthday tapes: precedent versions of himself suddenly coexist alongside his present iteration. Technology substitutes a relation of posteriority for one of anteriority and permanently mutates humans’ sense of time and nature. The prefix “post” also suggests a refracted temporality that is both contemporary to humanism and exceeding it.

Deleuze defines the man-form as “constituted within the folds of finitude” (1987, 130), since any organic being contains its death a priori. A painful awareness of this permeates all of Beckett’s work, in which birth becomes a death sentence and sex is stripped of any sentimental implications,

presented instead as a mere reproductive act subservient to instinct, whose grotesque unfolding perpetuates suffering.

Lyotard categorises mechanisation as de-humanising and de-subjectifying, while language is seen as self-reflexive (1999, 83-101). Furthermore, he deems the systemisation of civilisation inhuman. Contrarily, Clark underlines the inseparability of the human brain and body from their surroundings, and deems the posthuman “an inhabitant of the technosphere” who may enter certain symbiotic relationships with technological elements and unlock “extended cognition” (2003, 32). Additionally, Hayles signals the existence of a “technological unconscious” (2012b, 93), which presupposes the performance of adaptive actions and responses so deeply automatised that they are no longer registered while being performed. This rings true for many of Beckett’s characters, particularly Krapp, who turns the tape recorder into an extension of himself.

Petrar and Borbely point out that new technology means new brain development, which leads to a reconsideration of the hard categories of Enlightenment thinking: oppositions such as mind/matter, natural/artificial, individual/social become recalibrated (2014, 57). Throughout Beckett’s work, the most frequently occurring irreconcilable elements have been mind and matter, with an emphasis on the fallibility of the human body. Not only is human form coined to be obsolete, but its decrepitude underlines a need to uncover alternatives.

According to Clark and Verbeek, all technology produces subjectivity and moral values after which it becomes embedded into human identity (Verbeek 2011, 4). There is a perpetual contingency between selfhood and the things it interacts with; so much so, that an intricate feedback loop between selfhood and technology is formed. In *Krapp’s Last Tape* the tape recorder becomes a channel through which the old man’s past selves communicate. This technology, even if now out-of-date, helped shape Krapp’s interpretation of the world. By extension, such a postulation applies to any user of any type of technology: it is important to take into account the reciprocal influencing that characterises instances of posthumanism.

Technology and the human share both a social and material dimension; these dimensions reciprocally constitute themselves and the human. The social technological facet refers to its ability to interact with its user or to serve as a medium through which the user can interact with other users, objects or pieces of information. Because technology can also be considered a “context dependent mediation of reality” (Borbely and Petrar 64), it can shape moral decision making. In the case of Krapp, his tragedy arises from the irreversibility of the choices his past selves have made for him.

When confronted with their ideas and reality once more, he is left in an angry, helpless stupor. In addition, technology is seen as morally charged because of its creative and destructive powers combined: while it can be used to aid people in need or to make living less complicated, it can also be abused, taking its toll on both humanity and the environment. Furthermore, Verbeek believes that (technological) objects can influence not only human perception, but also human action, through predetermined use in accordance with the structures of invitation and inhibition (10).

Non-biological stuff and structure have become incorporated into our physical and cognitive routines; the same is true for Beckett's characters, who navigate their disabilities by using what looks like home-made prosthetics or through near-symbiotic relationships with a submissive counterpart. Borbely and Petrar define symbiosis as a mechanism that enables ontological dissolution between species (2014, 103), but in the case of Beckett, this dissolution is restricted to man, in his fallible splendor. Krapp is the only one to use an actual piece of technology to retrace the source of his discontent and to punctuate his fleeing life force. This "deep human-machine symbiosis" (Clark, 32) changes the manner in which we perceive cognition: because of the "two-way flow of influence between brain, body and world" (Clark, 114), cognition is seen as residing in the hybrid architecture of biology and the objects we use.

According to Kroker, because of technological development, archiving has become less selective and "expanded to encompass the totality of life itself" (Kroker 2014, 80). This is understandable, taking into account the popularity of social media, where people become impromptu curators of their day to day lives. Widespread archiving is bound to bring about the "end of visualisation" and the beginning of "remix culture," turning people away from objective reality as it is unfolding in favor of observing other people's interpretation of it (Kroker, 94). Krapp is isolated from the rest of the world in a circle of light which seems to shut him in with the tales of his past selves acting as heartbreaking mermaids' songs. He too is absorbed by the archive he has been compiling and uses it to retrace past wrongdoings, now impossible to make right.

The post-anthropocentric worldview and its implication of a fragmented self in perpetual transformation resonate with the philosophies of certain Beckettian characters. Because of their aged and withered forms, Hamm, Vladimir, Estragon and Krapp become symbolic "post-bodied minds" who survive by relying on prosthetics, technologies or near symbiotic relationships with a counterpart alongside which they dissolve ontologies. In *Krapp's Last Tape* the recorder itself becomes a powerful on-stage presence, overpowering the actor. The detestable light in which their organic vessels are presented, coupled with Beckett's view on sexuality and reproduction, all

convey a pressing need to go beyond the anthropocene. While the plays themselves offer no method of doing so and many times relish in a claustrophobic atmosphere, they never cease to point out the frailty and vulnerability of man, whose youth is but a fleeing moment and whose adult life is a constant struggle against unrelenting illness.

A work that managed to create the illusion of perfect realism through the exactness of its scenography, *Krapp's Last Tape* showcases the isolation of an old man and his tape recorder "on a late evening in the future" (Beckett, 215). While the premise seems inherently simple, the juxtaposition between the decayed organic vessel and the younger strains of consciousness that endure through the power of the machine is extremely striking and accentuates the implied Cartesian dualism. Krapp is described as a purple-nosed, hard of hearing, near-sighted alcoholic that refuses to wear spectacles, a sign that he has already given up on himself. His name, homonymous with the word crap, is a lurid reference to life's futility.

The play's title suggests both finality and the perpetuation of suffering. As the old man tries to distract himself from his nearing death, the refuge he seeks is nowhere to be found in his past. Memory is used as a means of thrusting horror upon the present and no consolation comes from the voices narrating the mistakes that led to Krapp's current situation. As he jumps through time using his recorder, the constancy of his loneliness becomes stupefying. In addition, Krapp is also vulnerable to the revived pain of traumatic moments, such as the death of his mother and the farewell to love. The replays demonstrate that he is unable to progress beyond his personal history.

The slapstick undertones of his agitated fumbling (especially the near slip on the banana peel) further parody his decrepitude and incapability. The word "spool" triggers reversion to a childish state as Krapp seeks out box three spool five after reading its synopsis in his ledger. By making the protagonist rely on archiving devices to access his past, Beckett showcases that Krapp's own memory is defective (as he hears the word "viduity" on tape, he stops in order to look it up in the dictionary). Despite the measures he has taken to preserve the past, the tapes will become useless once the old man completely loses his hearing.

Thirty-nine-year-old Krapp's voice greatly contrasts that of his present self. Considering this moment in time to be the intellectual "crest of the wave" (Beckett, 217), he recounts his birthday celebration spent in perfect solitude "separating the grain from the husks" (Beckett, 217). This metaphor embellishes his longing for the beautiful and transcendental, which he believes will only be accessed when "all [his] dust has settled" (217). Further on, the voice yells "Cut'em out!" (217) after admitting to eating three bananas,

a shout aimed at the present Krapp, who has failed to give up the fruit even now, at seventy. References made to his neighbor, Miss McGlome, who has broken her routine of singing in the evenings, make Krapp think about how his life has lacked the joy of music since boyhood. To contradict the pessimistic statement of his past self, present Krapp attempts to sing, but stops after subsiding to coughing fits.

Both versions of the man join in tragic laughter at his 27-year-old self, which attempted to settle down with a girl named Bianca in a house on Kedar Street. On the other hand, it is only present Krapp that laughs heartily at his younger versions' attempts to drink less. His reaction amplifies the pointlessness of all his prior efforts and his attempts to reform are all ridiculous in the context of his miserable state.

The death of Krapp's mother is overshadowed by his memories of a "dark young" (Beckett, 219) nursemaid who threatened to call the police after he had stared at her intensely. As any human being, Krapp desires love but finds he is incapable of loving and seems unaware of the intricacies of human interaction. The woman's disgusted gaze causes him to feel inadequate and his description of her eyes eternalises the uncomfortable moment. Subsequently, thirty-nine-year-old Krapp notices the blind from his mother's room being lowered as he tosses a rubber ball to a dog outside. The reality of her passing, so incongruous with his moment of tranquility, causes him to think about the temporal parallelism of the situation. The sensation of the rubber ball being gently taken out of his hand by the dog becomes an unlikely equivalent to death.

Krapp's surrender to darkness at the end of the jetty offers him a mysterious vision that inspires him and fuels his determination to focus on his work:

The vision, at last. This fancy is what I have chiefly to record this evening, against the day when my work will be done and perhaps no place left in my memory, warm or cold, for the miracle that. (*hesitates*). for the fire that set it alight. What I suddenly saw then was this, that the belief I had been going on all my life, namely... (Beckett, 220)

Whatever he saw remains unsaid and is never explained; Krapp quickly skips forward from this passage, cursing the recorder. His unwillingness to linger upon the vision enforces the theory that his present situation is a direct consequence of it. As a failed artist with a failed existence, he has yet to come to terms with the hopeless situation he finds himself in.

Perhaps the singular instance in which Beckett does not portray romantic sentiment and physicality as sordid aberrations, Krapp's farewell to

love is the only segment of the tape that is replayed three times. Triggering the old man's bereavement of his lost self, the episode consists of his retelling of the intimate exchange he had with his lover on the Baltic Sea. Their breakup comes across as brusque without the context of the vision that might have triggered it and is punctuated with a few moments of physical closeness. It appears that while young Krapp is the initiator of their separation, he remains baffled by how readily the woman agrees to his proposal and then proceeds to seek consolation between her arms. His need to make eye contact with her, to establish a connection, suggests how terrified Krapp truly is of the isolation he is about to self-impose.

After replaying the scene a second time, the old man retreats into the darkness surrounding his desk to grab a drink. The contrast between darkness and light is relevant to the succession of selves: young Krapp basked in sunlight and enjoyed the outdoors, while thirty-nine-year-old Krapp is responsible for the nocturnal revelation that irreparably mutated the course of events. Having attempted to diminish his loneliness by using an overhead desk lamp that creates shadows, Krapp has also made it possible for himself to withdraw in the blackness to indulge in vice.

Subsequently ceasing his shuffle around the room, the old man proceeds to the recording of a new tape, this time with none of the eloquence characteristic of his past selves. Besides admitting he has nothing left to say, Krapp mentions that what we can only assume is his magnum opus has only sold seventeen copies. Recapitulating the scenes of his "farewell to love," he wonders whether staying with his sweetheart would have made him happy and tries to silence such depressing thoughts by describing his most recent sexual encounters with Fanny, an old whore. His physical relationship with her is borderline grotesque, rarely yielding any form of relief (Krapp jokes about his impotence). The refrain of "Be again, be again. (*Pause.*) All that old misery. (*Pause.*) Once wasn't enough for you. (*Pause.*) Lie down across her..." (Beckett, 223) underlines that the real human tragedy is the transience of moments of happiness.

For the final replay, Krapp begins silently moving his lips as the tape goes on, as if he is attempting to memorise the sequence. It seems that this moment so special to him that he would like to hold onto it even after his hearing fails. Once the scene is described yet again, the voice adds: "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" (Beckett, 223). Thirty-nine-year-old Krapp's statement is in total dissonance with his present self's feelings and convictions. Heartbreakingly, there is no

more time to fix what has been broken: having sacrificed companionship for the sake of his art, the old man is left alone with his unfortunate decision.

In conclusion, I believe that I was able to successfully demonstrate that the selected work from Beckett's dramatic opus presents certain post-anthropocentric elements, the most prevalent of which is the failure of the human body. The present thesis represents an informative theoretical progression which culminates in personal interpretation. The work chosen as a target text, *Krapp's Last Tape*, is significant to the premise: its main character is an aged man suffering from various diseases which never comes to peace with the decrepitude of his condition. In addition, Krapp's tape recorder is not merely the device he uses to archive his past failures, but also his disembodied memory and conscience.

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