

Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* and Transcendent Reality

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*"I am not a religious man but I cannot help seeing
every problem from a religious point of view."
—Ludwig Wittgenstein*

Krapp's Last Tape (1958) has often been described as Samuel Beckett's most perfect work for the theater.¹ Also, uniquely among Beckett's major plays, it was immediately recognized by drama critics and the literary world as a masterpiece.² To some degree this was due to its accessibility. Compared with Beckett's other plays, *Krapp's Last Tape*—despite its theatrical innovations—is almost old-fashioned in presenting a dramatic situation that is not abstract or metaphorical, and in exploring familiar human themes. The most important of these themes is that of lost love, or rather love abandoned—which brings us to another exceptional characteristic of the play. *Krapp's Last Tape* holds a singular place in Beckett's canon, both in drama and fiction, in being the one major work in which the experience or thought of love is not undercut by irony, rendered grotesque through vicious comedy, or reduced to vulgarity. It alone, among the central works, lets the emphasis of Beckett's compassion fall on the tenderness of love rather

¹ See, for example, John Fletcher, *Samuel Beckett: Waiting for Godot; Endgame; Krapp's Last Tape* (London: Faber & Faber, 2000), 16: "*Krapp's Last Tape* [is] perhaps his most perfect theatre piece . . . Perfect dramatic form, beautifully crafted, and totally convincing in its effortless modernity . . .". Hugh Kenner has called it "the most remarkable short dramatic piece in the language," and Michael Robinson "the most remarkable monologue in the English language." Hugh Kenner, *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2nd ed., 1968), 184; Michael Robinson, *The Long Sonata of the Dead: A Study of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove Press, 1969), 283.

² "'Flawless', 'economical', 'haunting' and 'harrowing' were some of the laudatory epithets heaped on the production by critics . . ." when *Krapp* was first produced at the Royal Court Theatre in London in 1958. This critical response was repeated on occasion of the first New York production in 1960, leading Beckett to write to his friend Thomas MacGreevy, "*Krapp* has got off to a very good start in New York . . . I have never had such good notices . . .". John Fletcher, *Samuel Beckett: Waiting for Godot; Endgame; Krapp's Last Tape*, 47-48; *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Volume III: 1957-1965*, eds. George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn, and Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 299; Letter of February 7, 1960, to Thomas MacGreevy.

than on its comic or distressing futilities. Even more remarkably for Beckett, the dramatic power of *Krapp's Last Tape* is built on the question as to whether love might not be the most significant of life's experiences, even suggesting that it might have a meaning that, since it transcends alterations in the self, might transcend the vicissitudes of time.

This essay aims first to explore Beckett's portrayal of love's meaningfulness in *Krapp's Last Tape*, and second how this portrayal might be understood in the context of Beckett's overall vision and presentation of the human condition. This will require starting with a brief synopsis of the play.

The setting and structure of the play could not be simpler. The scene is a late evening in the future, in the den of an old man, a failed writer it turns out, named Krapp—in German a common name, but in the play's original English the pun on dung of course intentional. The set consists of a desk and chair, in strong light with darkness surrounding, and on the desk a reel-to-reel tape-recorder, a microphone, and boxes that contain spools of tape. Krapp is seated at the table—he is old, described by Beckett as “wearish,” unkempt, with grey hair and a nose purple from drinking. The first thing he does is to raise himself laboriously to take out from a desk drawer a banana, unpeeling and eating it while musing and shuffling in a circle around the desk. He repeats this with a second banana, and naturally—this being Beckett—slips and almost falls on the first discarded banana peel. He then produces a huge ledger from the dark back of the den, drops it on the desk, looks in it to identify a certain tape that he wants to hear, and locates it: “Box three, spool five.”³

What the ensuing action discloses is that Krapp has made a tape recording each year on his birthday, has done for forty-odd years, wherein he records what seems most memorable and

³ Samuel Beckett, *Krapp's Last Tape, and Other Dramatic Pieces* (New York: Grove Press, Evergreen Edition, 1960), 10-12.

worth recording of the previous year's experiences.⁴ And each year he precedes making this *new* recording by listening to one selected from a prior year. This is his sixty-ninth birthday, and the tape he specifically wants to hear before making this year's is the tape he made on his thirty-ninth birthday. Before listening to it this evening, he reads from the ledger, in a cracked and weak voice, its themes: "Mother at rest at last ... The black ball ... The dark nurse ... Slight improvement in bowel condition ... Memorable equinox ... [and] Farewell to—(*turning page*) —love."⁵

He threads up the tape, switches on, and we hear the thirty-nine year old Krapp, recognizably the voice of the same man but strong with youth, speaking in confident sentences. This Krapp recalls having just listened to a recording from ten or twelve years earlier—so, the twenty-seven or twenty-nine year old Krapp—describing him as "that young whelp" he can hardly believe having been. *That* earlier Krapp, listened to by the thirty-nine year old Krapp, had mentioned an unhappy love affair with a girl named Bianca living on Kedar Street, summing it up as a "[h]opeless business," but also including a tribute to her "[i]ncomparable" eyes. The thirty-nine year old we are listening to on tape sneers at this younger self's ambitions and resolutions (especially to drink less), notes his reports of "[u]nnattainable laxation," of his father's last illness, of his shadowy sense of the opus magnum he hopes to write—and then the thirty-nine year old concludes his review of the self of the earlier tape: "What remains of all that misery? A girl in a shabby green coat, on a railway-station platform? No?"⁶

⁴ Ruby Cohn states: "Beckett calculates that Krapp has been recording for forty-five years, since there are nine boxes, each containing five spools of tape." This math does not *quite* add up for "spool five" from "box three" to be that recorded by the (as we find it has been) thirty-nine year-old Krapp—unless box nine has only three spools in it, making for forty-three tapes in total). Ruby Cohn, "Beckett Directs: 'Endgame' and 'Krapp's Last Tape,'" in S. E. Gontarski, ed., *On Beckett: Essays and Criticism* (New York: Grove Press, 1986), 303.

⁵ Beckett, *Krapp's Last Tape*, 13.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 15-17.

The thirty-nine year old self on tape—which the onstage Krapp continues to listen to after first switching off the machine and shuffling backstage into the darkness to have a drink—then proceeds to recount the memorable events of *his* recent year. He describes sitting in a park by a canal outside of the nursing home where his mother is dying, after her long “viduity.” Krapp looks up, stops the tape, gets up and brings back from the darkness a huge dictionary, and, looking up the word *viduity*, reads aloud: “State or condition of being or remaining a widow or widower.” Krapp lovingly pronounces the word “viduity,” just as earlier he had delighted in repeating the word “spool”: “Spooooooooool.” It’s clear he has always been in love with words. He turns the tape back on: his thirty-nine year old self describes waiting in the park by the canal to see the window blind pulled down that will signify his mother’s death, and while doing so tossing a little black ball repeatedly to a white dog; he also recalls a beautiful nursemaid in the park dressed in white pushing a black perambulator, whom he offends merely by speaking to her. But what he best remembers about the nurse are her eyes. From the tape: “The face she had! The eyes! Like . . . (*hesitates*) . . . chrysolite!” The shade goes down; and he gives the ball to the dog, “gently, gently.”⁷

The thirty-nine year-old on tape then goes on to recount what he has “chiefly to record this evening,” what he calls “[t]he vision at last.” It is his great revelation of what the nature of his literary work should be, the vision coming to him on the spring equinox, as he is standing out on a jetty at night in a storm in howling wind and crashing waves; he describes his vision as a “miracle” and a “fire” that has set his mind alight with creative understanding . . . and we would hear more about this if the Krapp on stage didn’t angrily wind the tape forward to skip the rest of

⁷ Ibid., 17-20.

the passage; it makes him furious to hear it.⁸ Because, as we learn, Krapp's literary efforts have come to nothing; what he thought to be grand vision was false fire; he has disgust for these ambitions, now, and for what he has become. He fast-forwards the tape until he arrives at what he has, all along it appears, been longing to listen to—the passage notated in the ledger as “Farewell to love.”

When he stops fast-forwarding the tape he finds he has arrived at the end of this “farewell”; we hear a few lyrical, closing sentences, followed by the thirty-nine year old starting to close on his year's reminiscences, but then Krapp rewinds the tape to hear the “Farewell to love” more fully. What follows is a passage that, in its lyrical beauty, emotional evocativeness, and symbolic eloquence, is comparable to Shakespeare, Keats, or Joyce.⁹ Lying together with a woman in a punt on a lake, drifting, Krapp calmly and sadly ends their affair—which will be his last—telling her it is “hopeless and no good going on”; she agrees; he leans over her to get her eyes in shadow, and she opens them to “let him in” one last time; then he lies across her with his face in her breasts; the punt drifts into the rushes and sticks there; he and she remain silent and unmoving, while the water moves them slowly up and down, and from side to side.¹⁰

After a long pause, the voice on the tape resumes: “Past midnight. Never knew such silence. The earth might be uninhabited.” Krapp switches off; goes into the shadows again for a drink; returns to take the old tape off the recorder and spool up a virgin tape. Having taken from his pocket an envelope with a few notes for this year's reminiscence, he begins his tape by calling his thirty-nine year old self a “stupid bastard,” and thanking God he's past all that. But he

⁸ Ibid., 21.

⁹ There is a poem by John Donne (1572-1631) titled “Farewell to Love,” whose mood echoes that of Krapp's renunciation—a poem that Beckett would likely have known. For a fine account of Beckett's erudition, and how it is reflected in various of his works, see Dirk van Hulle and Mark Nixon, *Samuel Beckett's Library* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

¹⁰ Beckett, *Krapp's Last Tape*, 21-23.

suddenly exclaims: “The eyes she had! Everything there, everything on this old muckball, all the light and dark and famine and feasting of . . . (*hesitates*) . . . the ages!” Then he reflects: “Maybe he was right.” That is: to bid love farewell. Then he starts to describe his past year: too many bananas; a few occasions of meager sex; going to church and falling asleep off the pew; finding that seventeen copies of his magnum opus have been sold; noting that he has again been reading Theodor Fontane’s novel *Effi Briest*, one page a day, “with tears again.” But Krapp soon tires of this reporting and, unthinkingly still recording, wanders aloud into memories of his past, as a child with his father, out in the hills on a Christmas morning with the dog, among the berries, listening to church bells. He mutters, “Be again, be again. (*Pause*). All that old misery. (*Pause*). Once wasn’t enough for you. (*Pause*). Lie down across her.”¹¹

Suddenly he tears the new tape off the machine and replaces it with the other one, rewinds, and listens again to the punt scene. This time he allows his thirty-nine year old self to speak on to the end of his tape. “Here I end this reel . . . Perhaps my best years are gone . . . But I wouldn’t want them back. Not with the fire in me now. No, I wouldn’t want them back.” The tape then continues to run on in silence, as old Krapp sits upright and motionless at the table, staring straight ahead at nothing, and after a while the stage lights slowly go down.¹²

This brief synopsis has, unavoidably, omitted much of the play’s dialogue on the part of both the Krapp on tape and the onstage Krapp, and significant stage action—and almost completely ignored its comedic dimension—in order to present only the dialogue and development directly relevant to understanding how the drama moves and some of the key themes it presents. Before exploring these themes, however, a few details about the play should be noted, as well as what Beckett achieved through its dramatic architecture.

¹¹ Ibid., 23-27.

¹² Ibid., 27-28.

First, the name Krapp suggests that the protagonist is detritus, refuse, and what we discover is that Krapp sees himself as just that.¹³ Ruination is a theme of the drama. *We* know from the play's title that Krapp will not record after this. When Beckett first came to direct the play, in Germany (in his own German translation) in 1969, he told the actor Martin Held that Krapp senses death "standing behind him," and the next year, directing the play in Paris (in his French translation) he instructed the actor Jean Martin to look round into the darkness a few times, Beckett telling him: "It is death who is waiting for him there . . . Next day[,] he is found dead at his table."¹⁴ Second, Krapp, a writer in love with words, manifests the human need for ritual in a peculiar but coherent way by making his recordings each birthday. The ritualistic element is emphasized by Krapp looking at his watch to make sure the time is exactly correct to begin the proceedings each year.¹⁵ Third, he has a clownish element to his features and dress (not to mention the bananas), although Beckett played this down in his own direction, since he wanted the comedic and the tragic dimensions to blend as thoroughly as possible (in a manner Chekhovian).¹⁶ Fourth, when Krapp attends to his boxes, spools, and tape-recorder, it is clear that his capacity for human affection has transferred itself largely to inanimate things; as the

¹³ Beckett, whose love of obscure and evocative words equaled that of Joyce, may well have known of one obsolete meaning of the word "crap" listed in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (of which his library held four copies—the complete dictionary in the two-volume *Compact Edition* of 1971, as well as three abbreviated versions), which defines it as "the husk of grain; chaff," derived etymologically from "rejected . . . matter, residue, dregs, dust." Krapp himself indicates a possible awareness of this meaning when he refers (in the tape made at age thirty-nine) to his annual recording as a matter of "separating the grain from the husk" and muses, "The grain, now what I wonder do I mean by that [. . .] I suppose I mean those things worth having . . . when all *my* dust has settled" (Beckett, *Krapp's Last Tape*, 14-15). See Daniel Sack, *Samuel Beckett's Krapp's Last Tape* (London: Routledge, 2016), 37; and van Hulle and Nixon, *Samuel Beckett's Library*, 194.

¹⁴ John Fletcher, *About Beckett: The Playwright & the Work* (London: Faber & Faber, 2003), 179, 190.

¹⁵ Sack, *Samuel Beckett's Krapp's Last Tape*, 3; on the significance of Krapp's pocketwatch as a prop, see 10-11.

¹⁶ Ruby Cohn, "Beckett Directs," 303; Dougald McMillan and Martha Fehsenfeld, *Beckett in the Theatre: The Author as Practical Playwright and Director: Volume 1: From Waiting for Godot to Krapp's Last Tape* (London: John Calder, 1988), 261. I am not the first to mark the resemblance of the play's tone to that of Chekhov's plays; Alan Schneider, director and longtime collaborator with Beckett, and director of the first American production of the play, once wrote: ". . . Krapp to me has always seemed almost Chekhovian in its blend of emotional colors." Alan Schneider, "Working with Beckett," in Gontarski, ed., *On Beckett*, 247.

“Farewell to love” passage plays in full, Krapp (in Beckett’s direction) lays his head on the table and wraps his arm around the machine tenderly as if it were the woman he is remembering.¹⁷

And fifth, Krapp is profoundly alone. Words, books, and drink are his principal companions.

The Krapp whom we encounter dramatically is not, however, one man alone. His former selves also inhabit the stage. Not only is the sixty-nine year old Krapp present; so is the thirty-nine year old Krapp; we listen to him, while we watch and hear the older Krapp responding to him. And through *his* tape, we find also “present” the Krapp of twenty-seven or twenty-nine. And, implicitly, these three personae are supplemented by all the selves mutely present in the other spools in the boxes on stage. In this way Beckett achieves something remarkable: by way of a technology new in the late 1950s (the personal tape-recorder), he supplies the “backstory” needed to appreciate character and development in a drama, while still keeping the drama to one character. Monologue becomes dialogue between multiple stages of a self, and the *changing* of a self through time is made audible and palpable. The Proustian inwardness of memory of past selves has been eerily transformed into audible externality.¹⁸ In addition, the tapes and multiple selves show us vividly how our identities and self-understanding are constructed through language and narrative, and that these narratives are always changing—which raises the issue of the paradox that we are both one person and many persons as we develop through time. Our

¹⁷ In Beckett’s original direction of this passage of the play, in 1969, he instructed the actor Martin Held to let his head, arm, and body slowly sink to an tender embrace of the machine until he was holding it “erotically.” Ruby Cohn, “Beckett Directs,” 303. This embrace is the culmination of Krapp’s “emotional” relationship with the tape-recorder and his taped voice, revealing “Krapp as a man who has substituted a relationship with things for one with people”—an important enough image for Beckett that eventually, in his direction, “[b]ecoming one with the tape recorder became the principle image of the play.” McMillan and Fehsenfeld, *Beckett in the Theatre*, 268, 292, 293. See 293-94 for a discussion of “The Emotional Relationship with the Machine.”

¹⁸ Beckett was fully aware of displaying in his play “the Proustian past of an individual in time” and its “ever-changing identity of the Self” (Robinson, *The Long Sonata of the Dead*, 283, 284), being intimately familiar with Proust’s novel. His first major publication was a brilliant, extended essay on Proust, written in 1930 (at age twenty-four) and published in 1931. See Samuel Beckett, *Proust; and Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit* (London: John Calder, 1965). On the genesis and writing of the essay, see James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 118-22.

sense of identity *is* our apprehension of our own story, the play reminds us. But as personality develops, our self-interpretation of our identity not only expands, but alters in unexpected and, at times, self-contradictory or self-erasing ways. What was once of utmost importance now is forgotten; who we are now serves as ironic, or comic, or tragic comment on selves we have been before; meanings we have staked our worth on can crumble; and experiences we once dismissed as either irrelevant or alien can come back, against our will, to permeate our consciousness and show how deeply they have defined us.

Bearing these factors in mind will be useful in considering not only the play's main themes but the imagery, both visual and verbal, employed by Beckett in developing them.

Foremost among these themes is Krapp's choice of solitude, made, at age thirty-nine. This was a decision against social life, romantic relationships, friendships, intimacy of any kind—for the sake of his intellectual life, and the writing of his “opus magnum.” Beckett, in his director's notes for an actor in the play (Rick Cluchey, in 1977), described Krapp as “an absolute being, he chooses either black or white,” and stated that Krapp's decision for “the life of the mind,” made under the influence of his vision on the jetty, is comprehensively against “the life of the body,” sensuality, human interaction, and nature, with his “farewell to love” its poignant epitome.¹⁹ But the choice has been a disaster; it has led Krapp, as we see, to failure upon failure. His intellectual work has come to little or nothing; whatever ambition, energy, and happiness he once experienced have vanished; he is at sixty-nine a mere husk of a man. Worst of all, he has not been able to stay *true*, in his mind, to his “Farewell to love,” to his rejection of the beauty of women, of their romantic and existential allure. In fact the play turns out to be, in a sense, *about* women. Eight women are mentioned in it, factoring in its story in one form or another—five

¹⁹ McMillan and Fehsenfeld, *Beckett in the Theatre*, 298.

young ones and three old ones. Beckett as director in 1977 explained: “A woman’s tone goes through the entire play, returning always, a lyrical tone”—because Krapp, despite his grand renunciation, Beckett wrote, “feels tenderness and frustration for the feminine beings.”²⁰ In sum: Krapp has not been able to renounce love, despite his farewell; and the play is, above all, about *this* failure. The continued importance of love to Krapp is symbolized strikingly by his permanent fascination with the eyes of women he has loved. And it is the eyes of the woman in the punt that are, as James Knowlson (Beckett’s authorized biographer) remarks, “the touchstone for all the others”—since in them Krapp finds the entire world, all of history, all meaning.²¹ As Krapp exclaims: “*Everything* there . . . all the light and dark and famine and feasting of . . . the ages!”²²

But this theme of love and Krapp’s failed renunciation spreads beyond the central image of romantic intimacy and women’s beauty to include other dimensions of love. There are two more principal varieties of love in the play, each important: Krapp’s love for his mother (and thus familial love); and the love of beauty in nature, so poignantly evoked in the old Krapp’s final words as he remembers his childhood, his memory leading him back, to “Be again in the dingle on a Christmas Eve, gathering holly, the red-berried,” and to “Be again on Croghan on a Sunday morning, in the haze, with the bitch, stop and listen to the bells.”²³ It is not only love of, and with, women that the play is about, but love in all the forms that unite us with what is

²⁰ Ibid., 300.

²¹ Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 397.

²² Beckett, *Krapp’s Last Tape*, 24 (emphasis added).

²³ Ibid., 26. Michael Robinson notes the importance of the “tender description” of Krapp’s mother’s death to the theme of love in the play; and Josephine Jacobsen and William R. Mueller describe how in Beckett’s work generally “[n]atural beauty will be rejected” only to reappear with “a curious intensity and intimation, as though it were its own luminous ghost.” Robinson, *The Long Sonata*, 285; Josephine Jacobsen and William R. Mueller, *The Testament of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 133.

beyond our selves.²⁴ Krapp's failed farewell to love is in fact his failed attempt to reject communion with the rest of reality itself—leaving Krapp as we see him on stage: lonely, weary, dissipated, and depressed, continually evincing self-disgust, longing, and regret. The point Beckett drives home in the course of the play is that Krapp has *never* been able to cleave his mind from devotions to the world of sensuality, nature, and beauty, and to live for his intellect alone. Imagistically, Beckett conveys this fact in two important ways, one obvious and one more subtle.

At the level of the explicit and obvious, there is Krapp's repeated emotional returning to sense-drenched memories. Most significant, of course, are his memories of the women presented to us through the tapes: Bianca of Kedar Street; the girl on the railway-station platform; his dying mother; the nursemaid with eyes like chrysolite; and above all, the woman in the punt. Also important, though, are his memories of childhood walks in the hills with his father and their dog, and of the hills, early morning haze, berries, church bells. To all of these, in turn, he attempts to deny meaning; but he finds them, and their meaningfulness, always resurging.

At a subtler but consistently suggestive level, there is Beckett's use in the play of symbols of black and white, and of light and dark, to indicate both the nature of Krapp's renunciation and his failure to carry it through. The "system" underlying this symbolization is Manichaeism in principle, though it is unclear whether Beckett had Manichaeism in mind when he wrote the play; certainly, however, in his directing of the work, as one discovers through Beckett's *Director's Notebooks*, he relied on research into Manichaeism, symbols, vows, and

²⁴ Daniel Sack notes how Krapp's final "cascade of reminiscence" about childhood is linked by the words it dies into ("Lie down across her") to the punt scene, thus merging love and loss of childhood happiness with love and loss in the realm of romantic communion. Sack, *Samuel Beckett's Krapp's Last Tape*, 19.

rituals to organize these imagistic elements.²⁵ In Manichaean teaching, darkness or blackness is equated with the senses and the physical world, with all forms of sensual pleasures (including indulgence in alcohol, to which we can see Krapp has stayed addicted), and with worldly vocations. Light and whiteness, in contrast, are identified with the world of mind: with intellect, spirit, and the processes of reason. Krapp's "absoluteness" of temperament has led him to try to live solely the life of intellect—the life, as it were, of "light," as if he were attempting to be true to Manichaean principles (which Krapp as a character is certainly unaware of). What the play reveals is that Krapp has never been able to effect successfully a Manichaean-type renunciation of the worldly and sensual; that he has, despite his decision, remained desirous of involvement with women, with beauty, and with nature.

Krapp's betrayal of Manichaean principles of separating himself from the world and the senses (black, darkness) and living for intellect alone (white, light) is indicated through a

²⁵ Dougal McMillan and Martha Fehsenfeld, studying the holographs of the two initial handwritten drafts and four subsequent typed revisions of the play, find "germs" of "Manichaean organisation and images" in the first draft, and state that "[i]n the second draft and the four typescripts Beckett devoted much of his attention to expanding and refining the Manichaean elements inherent in the first draft" (*Beckett in the Theatre*, 242, 244). The implication is that Beckett relied on a Manichaean interpretation of the play's imagery of light and dark, black and white, body and mind, and so on, from the start of its composition. But James Knowlson asserts that it was only "later"—specifically, in preparing to direct the 1969 German production of the play—that Beckett described the play's "carefully structured pattern of images of black and white, sense and spirit" in terms of a "Manichean dualism" (*Damned to Fame*, 399); and Daniel Sack avers that "Beckett would emphasize that this [Manichaean] reading came to him only with the distance of years, that this had not been a conscious principle at the time of writing and does not offer some consummate meaning to the play" (*Samuel Beckett's Krapp's Last Tape*, 32). There is little question that Beckett relied solely on the article entry on "Manichaeism" in the eleventh edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* for his understanding of Manichaeism; and he received this *Encyclopaedia* as a gift in the first half of March, 1958, at the very time he was composing the play (February 25 to March 17). So, as van Hulle and Nixon note in *Samuel Beckett's Library* (13), "[i]t is not implausible that Beckett had consulted the article" while first composing the play"; but the comments of Knowlson and Beckett himself that he had not would appear to carry more authority. For details on Beckett's use of Manichean symbols and imagery, see McMillan and Fehsenfeld, *Beckett in the Theatre*, 243-51, 259, 261, 283. On dating the play's initial composition, see *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Vol. III: 1957-1965*, 85, 111; "Chronology 1958," and Letter of February 25, 1958, to Donald McWhinnie. In the course of Beckett's directing of the play (in his German translation in 1969 in Berlin; in his French translation in 1975 in Paris; in its original English in 1977 in Berlin; and, for a French production in 1970 in Paris, when he "took over much of the directing"—see McMillan and Fehsenfeld, *Beckett in the Theatre*, 256, and Cohn, "Beckett Directs," 295, 304-305), Beckett continually revised the play with regard to stage directions for Krapp's bodily actions and facial expressions, and also with respect to costume, lighting, and set arrangement, in order to highlight the light/dark and black/white symbols correlating to Manichaean views and teaching.

constant blending, or intertwining, of black and white and of light and dark in the play's visual components, and in Krapp's memories and stories.²⁶ Krapp's clothes are "grey ex black, grey ex white" (in the original text, Krapp is wearing a black waistcoat and trousers along with oversized clownish white boots, but Beckett amended these to grey for later productions).²⁷ The remembered nursemaid by the canal is dressed in white and wheels a large black perambulator. Krapp, in the park by the canal, throws a black ball for a white dog, and finally gives it into his mouth, gently, thus *blending* it with him.²⁸ Eyes, windows into souls, are both bright like "chrysolite" or, in the punt, the darkness that "lets him in." Bianca—whose name means "white"—lives on Kedar Street, which is both an anagram of "darke" (as Beckett once explained), and also means dusky, or dark-skinned, in Hebrew.²⁹ Krapp's epiphany occurs on the Spring equinox, a day when daylight and nighttime are equally balanced, on a jetty near a lighthouse in the night. The thirty-nine year old Krapp refers to the singing of "Old Miss McGlome"—suggestive of *gloaming*, i.e., dusk. The young Krapp's intimations of his "opus magnum" is described as "shadows."³⁰ Krapp in the play moves back and forth between the bright light over the table and the darkness around it. And so on. The point of the symbolisms is that Krapp cannot escape, and cannot escape desiring, the intertwinement, the enmeshing, of black and white, light and dark—that is, the mixture of spirit and matter, mind and body, intellect

²⁶ Krapp's "transgression" of Manichaeic principles were developed to a highly complex degree in Beckett's construction and interpretation of the play's symbols. For example, Krapp violates the three "seals" or prohibitions taught in Manichaeism: the "seal of the hand," the "seal of the breast," and the "seal of the mouth," which prohibit respectively dedication to a worldly profession, sexual desire, and drinking wine. Beckett takes care to show that Krapp has violated all three. See McMillan and Fehsenfeld, *Beckett in the Theatre*, 244-46.

²⁷ McMillan and Fehsenfeld, quoting from Beckett's *Director's Notebook* for the 1969 production; *Beckett in the Theatre*, 261.

²⁸ Beckett: "[N]ote that if the giving of the black ball to the white dog represents the sacrifice of sense to spirit the form too is that of a mingling." From Beckett's 1969 *Director's Notebook*; quoted in McMillan and Fehsenfeld, *Beckett in the Theatre*, 259.

²⁹ *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Vol. III: 1957-1965*, 279; Letter of January 4, 1960, to Alan Schneider.

³⁰ Beckett, *Krapp's Last Tape*, 15, 17.

and world, the rational and the inexplicable.³¹ And Krapp's fate, with his memories and regret, suggest that this mixture and mingling *cannot* be escaped, because a human being is *just that* mingling, as the cosmos is *just that* mingling ("as shown by the aeons," as Beckett notes).³² Thus Krapp, in trying to renounce the world and love, has attempted the impossible: to exist as a human being without humanness, and to escape the cosmos while remaining in and of it.³³

Krapp's attempted renunciation of love is thus shown to have been—unintentionally on his part but inevitably—a rejection of existence itself. Thus Krapp has betrayed his authentic being. Three images in play underscore this self-betrayal with simplicity and poignancy.

First, there is the moment in the punt, after Krapp and his lover have agreed that it's hopeless to go on, when he leans over her to get her eyes in his shadow so that she can open them, which she does in order to—as Krapp's voice intones—"Let me in." The phrase in context means that his lover allowed his soul for a final time into her soul—Krapp's last experience of existential communion. But the phrase, spoken by Krapp after a pause and in a "low" tone and volume, as per Beckett's stage directions,³⁴ also carries the overtone of a plea: "Let me in." That overtone resonates throughout the rest of the play, underscoring the fact that Krapp has for

³¹ In Beckett's *Director's Notebook* for the 1969 production, he lists "27 points in the play at which the contrast of light and dark is stressed" and "18 instances in which there is 'Explicit integration of light and dark.'" McMillan and Fehsenfeld, *Beckett in the Theatre*, 259.

³² Beckett in his 1969 *Director's Notebook*; quoted in McMillan and Fehsenfeld, *Beckett in the Theatre*, 259.

³³ Beckett indicates in his 1969 *Director's Notebook* that Krapp has "transgressed" the principle of separating spirit from sense, of "light" from "dark," *from the very start of his renunciation*, because of the very nature of his grand "vision" on the jetty of his future work. As we hear from the passages on tape about it, Krapp's vision is one in which he intuits he must embrace as themes in his work the irrational, darkness, folly, failure—elements he had previously tried to keep out of his work. What this means, however, is that Krapp has rejected the sensual (darkness) only through attempting the *reconciliation* of darkness with spirit [light] in the form of *the union of rational-irrational*. As Beckett laconically wrote: "[Krapp] turns from fact of anti-mind alien to mind [i.e., matter] to thought of anti-mind constituent of mind [i.e., irrational]." This "intellectual transgression" indicates that Krapp has never relinquished, as James Knowlson puts it, his "desire to reconcile and promote a kind of union between sense and spirit"—as his dialogue and actions, and the play's symbolism, continually show. Beckett and Knowlson quoted in Fletcher, *Samuel Beckett: Waiting for Godot; Endgame; Krapp's Last Tape*, 133; see also Cohn, "Beckett Directs," 302, and McMillan and Fehsenfeld, *Beckett in the Theatre*, 259.

³⁴ Beckett, *Krapp's Last Tape*, 22.

decades denied his deeper self's continual longing for love. Second, there is Krapp's one-word description of the nursemaid's eyes: they are "[l]ike . . . (*hesitates*) . . . chrysolite!"—a word used so rarely in literature that it instantly calls up its one famous usage, in Shakespeare's *Othello*.³⁵ In that play's final scene, the hero says of his wife Desdemona, whom he has just killed in a deluded and self-destroying passion of jealousy, "Nay, had she been true, / If heaven would make me such another world / Of one entire and perfect chrysolite, / I'd not have sold her for it." (V, ii, 142-45). The word "chrysolite" thus reverberates with connotations of self-betrayal through "the exchange of love for other values"³⁶—in *Othello*'s case for the value of honor, in Krapp's for the value of an idealized pure intellectuality. And third, when Krapp's memories of childhood invade his last recording and he repeats, "Be again, be again," Beckett directed that this should be spoken to sound like the churchbells that Krapp longs, despite himself, to hear again: the word "be" to be held in a vibrato, like bells ringing.³⁷ The theme of self-betrayal resonates in all these motifs.

By the play's end we understand how deeply Krapp wants love back, in all of its dimensions, because he wants his self-betrayed self back, wants back the meaningfulness of love he has experienced—which invests with cruel irony the final words we hear in the play, the voice of the robust and confident thirty-nine year old Krapp who has just made his farewell to love, and who finishes his tape by concluding: "Perhaps my best years are gone . . . But I wouldn't want them back. Not with the fire in me now. No, I wouldn't want them back."³⁸ Beckett once said that he wanted to give his plays what he called "the power to claw"; and, as Rosemary

³⁵ Beckett, *Krapp's Last Tape*, 19. John Pilling points out that the younger Krapp, as a writer and lover of language, would be consciously "stealing" the word from Shakespeare. John Pilling, *Samuel Beckett* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976), 84.

³⁶ McMillan and Fehsenfeld, *Beckett in the Theater*, 248.

³⁷ Cohn, "Beckett Directs," 306; McMillan and Fehsenfeld, *Beckett in the Theatre*, 310.

³⁸ Beckett, *Krapp's Last Tape*, 28.

Pountney writes, “the ending of *Krapp’s Last Tape* is a particularly strong example” of his success in achieving that aim.³⁹

What we watch Krapp suffering, in his last evening, is a classically structured moment of tragic self-recognition: he is suffused with remorse and regret for love wasted and rejected, and realizes he has been guilty of a “selfish detachment” from the world.⁴⁰ And it is Krapp’s acceptance of this fact that leads, in the play’s last minutes, to his abandonment of his long-endured conflict between his desire to renounce the world and his longing for loving involvement in it—that is, to his abandonment of all interest in living. He is finished with everything: love, work, religion.⁴¹ Beckett portrayed this when directing the play by having Krapp—once he has put spool five back on, to hear again his farewell to love—sit upright, unmoved, and completely still, staring ahead of him vacantly into space, no longer invested in the lyrical reminiscence or the recording’s ironic final words. Krapp is ready for death. Now he knows, as do we from the play’s title, that there will be no more tapes.

Now, the most important question that the play, and Krapp’s fate, presents to the audience or reader is the question of the meaningfulness of love. Let us examine the question from the side of the subject—in terms of Krapp’s psyche and his struggle—and then “objectively,” as a metaphysical question.

In Krapp’s consciousness, the meaningfulness of love has endured. It has endured across the decades, through all of his decisions and actions, from childhood experiences through to the present. On the evening the play takes place, we observe Krapp emotionally coming to terms, at

³⁹ Rosemary Pountney, “Beckett’s Stagecraft,” in S. E. Wilmer, ed., *Beckett in Dublin* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1992), 97.

⁴⁰ Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 474.

⁴¹ On this, see the comments of Martin Held, who played Krapp in the 1969 Berlin production that Beckett directed, quoted in Fletcher, *About Beckett*, 179.

last, with the wrongness of his choice for solitude; he is tragically forced, against himself, to recognize that, beyond all other experiences and values, it is his experiences of love that have given his life meaning. As Michael Robinson summarizes, love seems to Krapp to have been the one factor in his life “which was not an illusion” in the sense that it is the one dimension “where meaning endures.”⁴² Love’s meaningfulness has transcended all the alterations in his character, all the multiplicities of Krapp’s selves unfolding through time. Time—which Beckett once called “the indubitable villain” of the play—has not conquered love.⁴³

And this brings us to the metaphysical, or objective side of the question. If love has constituted not only the central, but also a *transtemporal* meaning in Krapp’s existence, might it not also be the case that love’s meaningfulness endures beyond even the transitoriness of his existence in time? This question does not have the “ring” of the usual type of question raised by Beckett’s work. But as the sorrow, regret, and final resigned despair of Krapp impresses itself upon the viewer, *Krapp’s Last Tape* makes these questions inescapable: is love the central human experience? and, does the meaningfulness of love perdure beyond existence itself?

Beckett’s play, of course, provides no answer to the question of whether or not love is truly meaningful, or to what purpose, either on the side of the subject, or in an objective or ontological sense. The play shows the trajectory of Krapp’s existence—and Beckett, the artist, is concerned only with the showing. Krapp’s existence through time, his decisions and conflicts, his failures and his final self-abandonment and resignation, are all suffered without Krapp being able to know if the memories and experiences of love that pull him into his deeper self like a whirlpool indicate that true existence, existential dignity, and fullness of meaning would have been found in living a life of loving communion with others, with women, and with the world;

⁴² Robinson, *The Long Sonata of the Dead*, 285.

⁴³ *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Vol. III: 1957-1965*, 155; Letter of June 28, 1958, to Marc Wilkinson.

neither could he know whether love has some sort of transcendent significance, a question he has likely never considered. Krapp cannot know these things because, Beckett would say, none of us can. As in all his mature works, Beckett reveals to us, through Krapp's existence, the horizon of ignorance and mystery that surrounds our most pressing existential questions. As Beckett once replied when questioned by director Alan Schneider about who or what Godot means in *Waiting for Godot*: "If I knew, I would have said so in the play."⁴⁴ Just so with regard to the question of love's existential or perduring ontological significance, as raised by this play: the answer is unknowable. But that means also that no answer, *including an affirmative one*, is foreclosed upon—a point that Beckett's audience and readers tend to overlook.

Keeping in mind, then, Beckett's emphasis in his works on human ignorance with regard to elemental questions, let us now try to situate the question of love's meaningfulness, as presented by *Krapp's Last Tape*, in the context of Beckett's overarching artistic vision, the mature vision of his postwar writing beginning with *Molloy* (1947). And let us begin doing so by attending more closely to its peculiar status in Beckett's canon.

Not only is *Krapp's Last Tape* the one major work of Beckett's in which experiences of love and tender longing are portrayed and described without ironic or sneering subversion, it is also commonly recognized as his "most lyrical" work, written in an "unashamedly poetic idiom."⁴⁵ These characteristics, accompanied by the Irish cadences of Krapp's speech and the Irish landscape that informs the play's imagery, makes its evocation of lost love feel unusually

⁴⁴ Alan Schneider, "Waiting for Beckett: A Personal Chronicle," in Ruby Cohn, ed., *Casebook on Waiting for Godot* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 55.

⁴⁵ John Fletcher and John Spurling, *Beckett: A Study of His Plays* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 88, 89. "Krapp's Last Tape is unusual in Beckett's theatrical opus for its tender lyricism and for a poignancy that verges on sentimentality." Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 397. The play is not the only work of Beckett's, of course, where tenderness plays a role; *Waiting for Godot* is graced with moments of lyrical compassion, and Beckett's late play for television, *Nacht und Träume*, is a ten-minute vignette, drawing on religious symbolism, portrays suffering comforted, and nothing else—a startling work to longtime Beckett aficionados. See Samuel Beckett, *Nacht und Träume*, in Beckett, *Collected Shorter Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), 303-306.

personal.⁴⁶ And this sense is made more intriguing by learning both of Beckett's special fondness for this play and of the autobiographical elements to be found in it.

Soon after the play's completion, Beckett wrote to Barney Rossett, his publisher in the United States, "I feel—to a disturbing degree—the strangest of solitudes for this little work." "I feel as clucky and beady and one-legged and barefoot about this little text as an old hen with her last chick."⁴⁷ There is little doubt these feelings were due in part to how much of himself Beckett had put into the play. As the actor Jean Martin (who played Krapp in the 1970 French production directed by Beckett) avowed, the drama is "very autobiographical," containing many "personal links" between Beckett and Krapp.⁴⁸ Without attempting to be exhaustive with regard to the issue, it will be helpful to mention some of the most important parallels between elements in the drama and Beckett's personal life.

To begin with, Beckett himself had had a "vision," a moment of profound inspiration and self-understanding, at age thirty-nine, which altered permanently the nature of his work and gave it its unique themes, perspectives, and styles—and the content of that vision is closely matched by what is intimated about Krapp's vision, the precise details of which we are prevented from hearing by his angrily fast-forwarding the tape to get past its narration.⁴⁹ (Needless to say, the

⁴⁶ Fletcher and Spurling, *Beckett*, 89: "*Krapp's Last Tape* [1958] shares with its neighboring works (the short prose-piece *From An Abandoned Work*, begun in 1955, and the radio play *Embers*, written in 1959) a mood of nostalgia, an atmosphere of the pastoral and idyllic . . . [They] form a kind of triptych on the theme of lost love in an Irish landscape. . . . [This landscape] has become in *Krapp's Last Tape* and the other two works of the 'triptych' something internal to the characters, evocative, romantic, personal."

⁴⁷ *Letters of Samuel Beckett, Vol. III: 1957-1965*, 123, 127; Letters of April 1, 1958, and of April 10, 1958, to Barney Rossett.

⁴⁸ French actor Jean Martin; quoted in McMillan and Fehsenfeld, *Beckett in the Theatre*, 257, and Fletcher, *About Beckett*, 189. Daniel Sack begins his study *Samuel Beckett's Krapp's Last Tape* by noting that it is Beckett's "most personal and most autobiographical creation" (2). For a general account of the autobiographical elements in the play, see Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 319, 346-47, 397-99.

⁴⁹ Beckett's biographer James Knowlson discusses the parallels between the two "visions," particularly regarding the thirty-nine year-old Krapp's exuberant declaration, ". . . clear to me at last that the dark I have always struggled to keep under is in reality my most—(*Krapp curses, switches off, winds tape forward . . .*)" (Beckett, *Krapp's Last Tape*, 21): "[O]ne element in particular of the Krapp passage relates it directly to Beckett's own experience: the

consequence of Beckett's vision, opposite to that of Krapp, was literary greatness and eventual fame.) Beckett too sat by a canal, in a park outside a nursing home where his mother lay dying.⁵⁰ Scholars have enjoyed tracking down the details of Beckett's romances that correspond to those remembered by Krapp, down to the green coat of the girl on the railway-station platform.⁵¹ And Beckett was always, James Knowlson writes, "hypersensitive to eyes."⁵² Behind Krapp's childhood memories of walking with his father in winter among the hills lay Beckett's fond memories of exactly such occasions: "At night, when I can't sleep," Beckett once wrote to a friend, "I do the old walks again and stand beside [my father] again one Xmas morning in the fields near Glencullen, listening to the chapel bells."⁵³ Even minor details conform. Like Krapp, Beckett loved and often re-read, and was moved to tears by, Fontane's novel *Effi Briest*.⁵⁴ Once, in directing the play, Beckett couldn't find a pair of shoes for the actor that created the shuffling sound of Krapp's walk the way he heard it in his mind; at last, he brought in an old pair of his own black slippers, which produced precisely the sound he wanted.⁵⁵ Finally, one actor in the role, Martin Held, even dared (with self-conscious temerity) to crook his little finger in imitation of Beckett's right hand which showed the effects of Dupuytren's contracture, a disease that

darkness of an inner world was, indeed, an image that Beckett reproduced with friends to whom he spoke about his revelation. Beckett explained precisely what he meant by this part of Krapp's 'vision.' He wrote that the dark was "'in reality my most—" Lost: [that is, when Krapp switches off the tape recorder and runs the tape forward] "my most precious ally" etc. meaning his true element at last and key to his opus magnum.' Light was therefore rejected in favor of darkness. And this darkness can certainly be seen as extending to a whole zone of being that includes folly and failure, impotence and ignorance." Beckett stressed to Knowlson, however, one factual difference: "Krapp's vision was on the pier at Dún Laoghaire; mine was in my mother's room [in Foxrock]. Make that clear once and for all." Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 319.

⁵⁰ Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 346-47. The home was the Merrion Nursing Home, "a top window of which could be seen from the canal bank" (Fletcher, *Samuel Beckett: Waiting for Godot, Endgame; Krapp's Last Tape*, 142).

⁵¹ For a summary and references to substantiating documents, see Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 397-98.

⁵² Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 91.

⁵³ Unpublished letter of December 22, 1959, to Susan Manning; quoted in Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 399.

⁵⁴ Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 397. In a letter to his American publisher Barney Rosset in 1956—less than two years before writing *Krapp's Last Tape*—Beckett remarked that he had "read [*Effi Briest*] for the fourth time the other day with the same old tears in the same old places." *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Vol II: 1941-1956*, ed. George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn and Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 621; Letter of May 26, 1956, to Barney Rosset.

⁵⁵ Fletcher, *About Beckett*, 74.

causes a gradual inward closing of the fingers usually beginning with the little finger. Remarking Held's hand, Beckett said: "Good."⁵⁶

None of this of course means that Beckett—who was fifty when he wrote the play—envisaged his basic character or imagined his destiny to be like Krapp's, or, especially, that Beckett himself had made or would make any kind of "farewell to love" or renunciation of friendships, intimacy, marriage, taking pleasure in the beauties of the natural world, or involvement in worldly matters. On the contrary, Beckett was renowned for his many close friendships and his loving concern for (and financial generosity to) innumerable relatives, friends, fellow artists, students of his work, stage and business associates, and even the sons and daughters, nephews and nieces of his many acquaintances—not to mention his partner and wife of over fifty years, Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil.⁵⁷ But both Beckett's special fondness for the play and the tellingly close autobiographical elements in it inevitably suggest questions about Beckett's own view of the significance of love in human existence. Already knowing that Beckett's vision as an artist keeps the question of love's ultimate meaningfulness constrained within a horizon of human ignorance and metaphysical mystery, let us consider that vision, so as to place the play's unique evocation of love in a broader interpretive context.

Contrary to much popular assumption, Beckett's vision of existence is not one of despair, or of claiming that life is meaningless, hopeless, or absurd. To claim to know as much, in his

⁵⁶ From an interview with Martin Held, conducted by Ronald Hayman, trans. Helen Watanabe, revised by James Knowlson, in James and Elizabeth Knowlson, eds., *Beckett Remembering, Remembering Beckett: A Centenary Celebration* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2006), 186; Anthony Cronin, *Samuel Beckett: The Last Modernist* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1997), 549.

⁵⁷ On Beckett's financial and moral generosity, see James Knowlson's comments in James and Elizabeth Knowlson, eds., *Beckett Remembering*, 250.

view, would be to pretend to know what one cannot know.⁵⁸ *Waiting for Godot* is the inevitable touchstone here; Godot does not come, but his reality—whatever that is—cannot be ruled out. The Boy Messenger arrives each evening, and so offers hope. The spirit of that play runs through all the other plays, however bleak their characters and conditions. “The key word in my plays,” Beckett once said, is ‘perhaps’.”⁵⁹ Perhaps Godot is real and will someday arrive; perhaps not. Perhaps love is the core value of human existence, and has transcendent significance; perhaps not. We are not to despair, as there may be hope; we are not to feel assured, since our hope remains only that. To be sure, Beckett frequently stated in various ways that he saw no “system” at work in the cosmos.⁶⁰ But he was also famously fond of St. Augustine’s sentence: “Do not despair; one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume; one of the thieves was damned.”⁶¹

The great Beckett actor Jack MacGowran once remarked: “[Beckett] writes about human *distress*, not human *despair*.”⁶² Distress, indeed, permeates Beckett’s work—because he found it, saw it, felt it, everywhere in human life. And a principal cause of that distress as he presents it in his works is inescapable human uncertainty as to whether existence entails any real or enduring meaning, a meaning that transcends the ephemerality of nature and time. For this source of distress, in Beckett’s view, there is no solution, since we are embedded within the universe and cannot attain to a perspective beyond that of our immersion in it, and so cannot know if there are any transcendent truths, or if so, what they might be. But this ignorance also means that Beckett sees himself as in no position to rule out any possibility of transcendent meaning; such a

⁵⁸ As Alec Reid states: “[Beckett] does not assert that life is hopeless, for that would be a definite statement and he has not the knowledge sufficient to make it.” Alec Reid, *All I Can Manage, More Than I Could: An Approach to the Plays of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove Press, 1968), 11.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁶⁰ See *ibid.*, 53.

⁶¹ “MacGowran on Beckett: Interview by Richard Toscan,” in Gontarski, ed., *On Beckett*, 215; see also Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 342-43.

⁶² “MacGowran on Beckett,” 215 (emphasis added).

judgment, as he sees it, would be presumptuous. Nevertheless for Beckett there is one overwhelming phenomenon that puts a halt to any impulse to affirm such a reality through some kind of religious or metaphysical “faith.” That is the extent and intensity of unexplained and unmerited physical and psychological suffering. And it is Beckett’s extreme sensitivity to suffering, which impressed itself upon all who knew him, that is, I would argue, an essential key to understanding his works and their vision.⁶³

The characters in Beckett’s plays, novels, and short prose works are always to be understood as representatives of human suffering generally. As his work progresses, these characters are increasingly isolated, solitary figures; but this constitutes merely a distillation to its essence of his artistic image of suffering existence, since—as anyone knows well who reads him closely—each protagonist is understood to be identical with every person who suffers. It is, as the Nobel Prize Committee noted, to a large degree his solidarity with humans in every manner of distress that charges Beckett’s works with a special power; and precisely in that manner, they manifest a loving concern for all people—which is why his work has been described, oddly to many ears, as in essence both “an art of goodwill” and “an art of love.”⁶⁴ As Josephine Jacobsen and William R. Mueller point out: “It is [Beckett’s sense of the] absolute communion of all suffering, communion of predicament, which is able to penetrate to the core, as one reads Beckett. . . . Life is one; suffering is one. All that fall, fall as one; [and thus] any

⁶³ Testimonies to this aspect of Beckett character are countless. His biographer James Knowlson states, “[Beckett] had an almost total inability to filter out pain and distress, no matter who was experiencing it . . .”. His close friend of later years Anne Atik emphasizes in her memoir of Beckett his deeply “visceral compassion,” as did his fellow playwright Robert Pinget, who described his “great compassion for human suffering,” while the well-known Beckett actor Jack MacGowran explained: “He sees life as it really is and has great compassion for humankind. Man’s inhumanity to man upsets him gravely.” Finally, the French actor Roger Blin maintained that the cruelty in Beckett’s work was “a form of self-defense against an acute sensibility.” Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 566; Anne Atik, *How It Was: A Memoir of Samuel Beckett* (no location cited: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2005), 33; Fletcher, *About Beckett*, 154; Robert Pinget quoted in *ibid.*, 91; “MacGowran on Beckett,” 222.

⁶⁴ Reid, *All I Can Manage*, 55. Beckett was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1969.

redemption must be one redemption.”⁶⁵ But of even the possibility of redemption—the possibility that unmerited distress and suffering, everywhere obvious, might in some mysterious way be meaningful after all—there are only a few glimmers in Beckett’s work.

The most significant of these glimmers (aside from the obvious example of the permanently offstage Godot) consists in what is represented, especially in Beckett’s major prose works, as a certain innate feature of interiority. There is, in himself and as far as he can see in all humans, an inner sense of basic *obligation*—what Beckett’s eponymous narrator in *Molloy* wittily calls (echoing, but parodying, Kant) a “hypothetical imperative”—to continue, to carry on, to struggle forward and to remain compassionate, whatever the cost and suffering.⁶⁶ Also to be noted, Beckett’s work is permeated with Christian imagery, biblical symbols, and theological language. It is a mythopoeisis he has thoroughly absorbed,⁶⁷ and which he usually employs ironically or sarcastically, but also, sometimes, with a direct and simple sincerity when the most profound longings and hopes of humans are expressed by his characters.⁶⁸ Precious few though

⁶⁵ Jacobsen and Mueller, *Testament*, 151, 161.

⁶⁶ Samuel Beckett, *Molloy*; *Malone Dies*; *The Unnamable* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Everyman’s Library edition, 1997), 95-96. “Charming things, hypothetical imperatives” (96). On the “imperative” in Beckett’s work, see especially Jacobsen and Mueller, *Testament*, 9, 31, 134, 147, and 174. The sense of obligation to carry on under any conditions and, repeatedly, “to try to say the unsayable” (Reid, *All I Can Manage*, 53), are the core human values communicated by Beckett’s writings; but these ground a host of other values—such as attending to suffering—even if Beckett makes clear that he cannot, on the basis of his own experience, escape the condition of human ignorance so far as to grant their metaphysical validity. As Jacobsen and Mueller state: “It is no good trying to isolate Beckett from values; if he has been unable to [definitively] establish them, for others, for himself, it is to their hypothetical postulation that he dedicates the full force of his work.” Jacobsen and Mueller, *Testament*, 174. For Beckett, imperatives are “hypothetical” because of the uncertainty of their metaphysical grounding; for Kant, from whom Beckett took the phrase, a “hypothetical imperative” (as distinct from a “categorical imperative”) is one in which the action one is commanded to do is not good in itself, or “absolutely,” but only “hypothetically,” as it serves merely as a means to achieve a goal that one *assumes* to be good. See Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, trans. H. J. Paton (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 82-83.

⁶⁷ Beckett replied to Colin Duckworth when asked whether a Christian interpretation of *Waiting for Godot* was justified: “Yes. Christianity is a mythology with which I am perfectly familiar, so naturally I use it.” Colin Duckworth, *Angels of Darkness* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1972), 18.

⁶⁸ For the purest expression of the value of compassion employing Christian imagery in Beckett’s *oeuvre*, in this case using allusions to the famous etching by Albrecht Dürer of praying hands, and to paintings of St. Veronica using her veil to wipe the brow of Jesus as he carried his cross, see the ten-minute television play already referred to,

they be, there *are* times in his work when he seems to “bend an ear toward some dimly perceived supernatural redemption.”⁶⁹ But for him, to affirm the reality of the Christian God who commands our obligation or who would, or could, redeem omnipresent and unjust misery, or to affirm that love or any other value has transcendent significance—that, to Beckett, would be to speak and write unjustifiably, well beyond what authentic existence and artistry allow.

If Beckett remains always skeptical about transcendent meaning, however, he is contemptuous of every form of “immanentism,” the reduction of the cosmos to a non-spiritual physical universe.⁷⁰ This is why he rejected the label of “absurdist”: it implies the metaphysical judgment that existence has no ultimate value or meaning, a judgment he would never make since it involves claiming to know what a person cannot know.⁷¹ Least of all is Beckett a humanist (in the modern anti-religious sense), since humans, whatever meaning their lives may have, are in his view laughably incapable of being the redeemers of human sufferings or the fulfillers of our profoundest hopes. Those hopes may or may not be ultimately justified in some mysterious way; but nothing in nature or in human nature contains their answer. As Jacobsen and Mueller succinctly put it, for Beckett, “[i]f the dogmas of belief are suspect, the dogmas of unbelief are ludicrous. . . . There may or may not be hope, but if there is, it is of supernatural initiation.”⁷²

Nacht und Träume, which he wrote for the German channel Süddeutscher Rundfunk in 1982, in Beckett, *Collected Shorter Plays*, 303-306.

⁶⁹ Jacobsen and Mueller, *Testament*, 105.

⁷⁰ Patrick Bowles, co-translator with Beckett of the novel *Molloy* from Beckett’s original French into English, conversing with Beckett in 1955, referred to “the contemporary malaise.” “‘It has been the malaise of all time,’ Beckett [replied]. ‘People are not in touch with their spirit. What counts is the *spirit*,’ he said with great emphasis.” James and Elizabeth Knowlson, *Beckett Remembering*, 110.

⁷¹ Fletcher, *About Beckett*, 93-94.

⁷² Jacobsen and Mueller, *Testament*, 105, 163. They further explain: “One large segment of [Beckett’s] work is in the direct line of Paul, Augustine, and Calvin, for he would resoundingly assert with them that man, if he is to be redeemed, must look well beyond himself and his kind.” (129-30).

Beckett's vision of the human situation expresses, then, a peculiar agnosticism: continual longing for transcendent meaning permanently unaffirmable.⁷³ But his strict rejection of all immanentist outlooks, it must be underscored, means that Beckett's vision has no other option but to take its *perspective* from the position, as it were, of that unaffirmable "beyond" toward which human hopes are ultimately aimed. The point of view of his vision must be described as the paradoxical-sounding one of a mystic who is denied faith; of one who cannot affirm transcendent reality, but who regards, as does the mystic, all worldly things and human experiences *precisely in their relation to* a transcendent truth and goodness—that is, as insignificant in themselves and as pointless stories unless redeemed by a divine story.⁷⁴

A biographical detail supports this interpretation of Beckett's perspective. When he was thirty and studying the *Ethics* of the seventeenth-century Flemish philosopher Geulincx, Beckett wrote to his close friend Tom McGreevy that his research in the Latin text, though difficult, was well worth doing because of the admirable "saturation" of Geulincx's work "in the conviction that the sub specie aeternitatis vision is the only excuse for remaining alive."⁷⁵ That comment may be taken as a credo for the outlook of Beckett and his work—not a credo of *faith*, of course, but as regarding the only *perspective* on the human condition that Beckett found to be intellectually and artistically responsible. Beckett may accurately be described, consequently, as

⁷³ Beckett's works reveal him to be, as John Fletcher writes, "the complete agnostic": the consummate *not-knower*, one who considers it impossible to know whether existence is meaningless or meaningful, or whether there is or is not any kind of redemption for human suffering. Fletcher, *Waiting for Godot; Endgame; Krapp's Last Tape*, 49. Beckett himself, to be sure, never professed or endorsed any religious faith; in a much reprinted interview from 1961 he stated, "I have no religious feeling." Fletcher, *About Beckett*, 67.

⁷⁴ Jacobsen and Mueller express Beckett's metaphysical stance with the greatest precision: "The controlling drive of Beckett's [work], below all its devices, is the frantic motion of the mystic deprived of his vision. Beckett's gaze at the world has as its overpowering characteristic the disabused and rejecting eye of the connoisseur offered a paste gem. . . . The immemorial voice of the most austere of the mystics, asserting that the possession of anything less than God is the possession of dung, speaks through his [works]." Jacobsen and Mueller, *Testament*, 48-49.

⁷⁵ *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Volume I: 1929-1940*, eds. Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 319; Letter of March 5, 1936, to Thomas McGreevy. Beckett's interest in Geulincx is discussed in Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 206-207; his fifty typed pages of notes (in Latin) on Geulincx's *Ethics* have survived.

an artist whose vision of world and humanity is that, not of a mystic *manqué*, but of a mystic *privé*, a mystic *oblitérée*.

The uncertainty about transcendent value that in Beckett's work throws all other values into question presents itself, at the everyday level of human concern, as the question of moral significance—of whether good and bad ultimately *mean* anything. As has been noted, “[t]he horrors of the Beckett landscape are moral horrors.”⁷⁶ They have a genuinely moral dimension because distress and struggle are never portrayed as *known* to be inconsequential, gratuitous, absurd. Rather, they are related to the human longing for an ultimate ground of value that presents itself to us as a vague and profoundly unlikely “perhaps”—but without whose reality, worldly existence is a grotesque exercise of stirring about in muck and nothingness. One might state correctly therefore that the essential question posed by all of Beckett's work is the *religious* question (despite Beckett's asseveration that he himself had “no religious feeling”).⁷⁷ Beckett did not demur when presented with such a formulation. Asked once if his plays dealt with the aspects of human experience dealt with by religion, he answered: “Yes, for they deal with distress.”⁷⁸ That is, they concern themselves with suffering of all kinds, together with elemental uncertainty about the transcendent meaning of that suffering, as these challenge the human mind for a satisfying answer—an answer which for Beckett, while not absolutely ruled out, is nowhere in sight.

Since Beckett offers no comfort and companionable vision, then, to either the secular humanist or to the religious believer, to neither the physicalist nor those with faith in transcendence, and furthermore is devoted to drawing us repeatedly into anxiously tragicomic

⁷⁶ Jacobsen and Mueller, *Testament*, 161.

⁷⁷ Fletcher, *About Beckett*, 67.

⁷⁸ Reid, *All I Can Manage*, 15.

self-interpretation as creatures whose efforts and actions, feelings and hopes, and above all loves, are enshadowed in a metaphysical “maybe” of meaningfulness—why read him or watch his plays? Why is *Krapp’s Last Tape* worth our attention?

An intelligible answer is: so that we may remember two essential facts about the human condition. First, that we are ignorant of many things we presume to know, especially as regards ultimate meaningfulness—for this remembrance inspires us to be honest about our ignorance. Second, that undeserved suffering and distress continue always and everywhere, including in ourselves—for *this* remembrance encourages us to pay attention to this suffering, to remain sensitive to it, so that we may act compassionately. At the dramatic climax of *Waiting for Godot*, the tramp Vladimir muses as his friend Estragon sleeps: “Was *I* sleeping, while the others suffered? Am I sleeping now? . . . We have time to grow old. The air is full of our cries. (*He listens.*) But habit is a great deadener.”⁷⁹ And indeed it is. But a powerful reason to read or watch Beckett’s work—aside from the enjoyment and inspiration to be had from his endlessly nuanced existential insights, his stylistic brilliance and originality, the often hilarious comedies of irony and slapstick, and evocations of human tragedy that will shake us as do the classical tragedies if we let them—is to revitalize awareness of our own and others’ conditions and deepest needs, by allowing ourselves to be touched by the anguish of Beckett’s characters. Habit is a great deadener, but, in the words of Alec Reid, “anguish is a great reviver.”⁸⁰

The anguish of the onstage Krapp in *Krapp’s Last Tape*, as he is torn by his longing for lost love and regret for love rejected, and the play’s prompting of our compassion for Krapp’s distress, are thus of a piece with Beckett’s overall work. What is exceptional about the work is that here the unanswerable question of transcendent meaning is presented specifically and

⁷⁹ Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (New York: Grove Press, 1954), 58A-58B (emphasis added).

⁸⁰ Reid, *All I Can Manage*, 56.

poignantly in terms of love—love that Krapp cannot deny has given his life its most profound and enduring meaning. As Michael Robinson notes, Krapp’s reliving of his experiences of love “is the nearest any of Beckett’s characters come to the end they search for”; the one occasion in Beckett’s works where what *might* be a permanent value beyond the detritus of worldly existence is both identified as love and allowed to resonate lyrically without scorn or irony.⁸¹ Given its richly autobiographical elements; Beckett’s special solicitude for the play; his reputation, of an almost saintly hue, for compassion and benevolence; and his constant directorial efforts to keep its performance from appearing “sentimental,”⁸² it does not seem unwarranted to conclude that it might well be the work that most closely reflects *the emotional center around which Beckett’s unbelief revolves*, and in relation to which that unbelief, in his many other mature works, discharges its disappointment in expression after expression of alienation, disgust, satirical humor, cruelty, and indifference. Perhaps the uniquely tender presentation of love in the play constitutes a uniquely unguarded revelation of the meaning that Beckett himself valued above all, and the value that would redeem—if any could, which he doubted—the anguish and the tragicomic “continuing on” that define and obligate his characters.

Beckett’s “Failure of Transcendence”

Beckett is mentioned only twice in Voegelin’s 34-volume *Collected Works*, once in a passing and inconsequential reference, but once in a telling manner. During the question-and-answer session following the delivery of his lecture “In Search of the Ground” in 1965 at the Thomas More Institute in Montreal, the question arose as to why some people have a “desire” that brings

⁸¹ Robinson, *The Long Sonata of the Dead*, 286.

⁸² See McMillan and Fehsenfeld, *Beckett in the Theatre*, 257, and Fletcher, *About Beckett*, 179, 189.

them to the “plane” where their search for the transcendent ground finds satisfaction, and some people don’t. Voegelin states that he has no idea why this is the way things are; as for those who lack such a desire, they may be trapped in an “attitude . . . determined by all sorts of things—for instance, by inertia, or by just plain stupidity . . .”. Then again, he continues, there are “really interesting cases” involving “the revolt against God”—and there

you get into the real metaphysical and religious questions of the “lost” soul. There are such people. Think of Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. A man like Beckett is also one who knows perfectly well that all that agnosticism is blooming nonsense—but he can’t get out of it. I don’t know why.⁸³

For Voegelin—to use a diagnostic term he adopted as a “literary critic” in correspondence with Donald E. Stanford in 1970—Beckett’s play manifests a “failure of transcendence,” and reveals Beckett, the artist, to be suffering a “deformation of existence” (i.e., is “lost”).⁸⁴ Yet Voegelin’s respect for Beckett’s existential insights as portrayed in *Godot* is obvious; and, given that grasp, and the intellect that made it possible, it is a mystery to Voegelin why Beckett remains in the posture of agnosticism. For Voegelin, Beckett must *know* it is intellectually indefensible and be able to think his way beyond it; yet his art shows that “he can’t get out of it,” for reasons inexplicable. Let us consider two questions: first, why Voegelin would hold Beckett in the high regard he clearly does; and second, why Beckett cannot “get out of” his agnosticism—why his “desire” won’t lead him out of that “mess.”⁸⁵

Even if Voegelin was unacquainted with any other of Beckett’s writings or information about him, his familiarity with *Waiting for Godot* would be enough to establish for him two facts

⁸³ Eric Voegelin, “In Search of the Ground,” in Voegelin, *Published Essays, 1953-1965*, ed. Ellis Sandoz, vol. 11 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 246-47.

⁸⁴ See Voegelin, *Selected Correspondence, 1950-1984*, trans. Sandy Adler, Thomas A. Hollweck, and William Petropulos, ed. Thomas A. Hollweck, vol. 30 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 665-666; Letter of September 15, 1970, to Donald E. Stanford.

⁸⁵ Voegelin, “In Search of the Ground,” 246.

about Beckett's perspective on human reality. First, that Beckett understands human existence to be structured, *experientially*, as metaxic. The waiting for and need of M. Godot, who never appears and may or may not be real, to validate the meaning of existence in time, is obviously a symbol of human longing for a transcendent meaning—a meaning whose reality Beckett cannot rule out and the foundation, furthermore, for a perspective on worldly existence that provides “the only excuse for remaining alive.”⁸⁶ The anxieties that haunt Vladimir and Estragon (as well as Pozzo and Lucky) may be seen to be all rooted in one fear: that time *perhaps* means nothing; but if Godot arrives (and the Boy Messenger's appearance at the end of both Acts renews their hope that he might indeed come), time will be redeemed, and they will be “saved.”⁸⁷ The play shows that Beckett is neither an “absurdist” (as he was quickly labeled in the 1950s) nor an immanentist, but rather—as we have already made clear—that for him, if religious belief is indeed “suspect,” unbelief (including the absurdist form of it) is “ludicrous,” since human existence, as represented by Vladimir and Estragon, is *defined by* hope for existential redemption by a transcendent reality which human consciousness *inescapably* longs for.⁸⁸

Also, *Waiting for Godot* makes clear that for Beckett, as for Voegelin, human existence entails essential ignorance about the overall meaning of the process of reality. And since for humans the meaning of the “whole” is a mystery, in Beckett's vision as in Voegelin's, it follows that “[a]t the center of his existence man is unknown to himself and must remain so, for the part of being that calls itself man could be known fully only if [the drama of being] in time were known as a whole.”⁸⁹ Beckett's play is an extended dramatic portrayal of this fact: that the

⁸⁶ *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Volume I: 1929-1940*, 319; Letter of March 5, 1936, to Thomas McGreevy.

⁸⁷ Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, 60B.

⁸⁸ Jacobsen and Mueller, *Testament*, 163.

⁸⁹ Eric Voegelin, *Order and History, Volume I: Israel and Revelation*, ed. Maurice P. Hogan, vol. 14 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2001), 40.

human search for meaning suffers from constant awareness that every person's essential nature, purpose, and destiny are mysteries, since the ultimate meaning of the cosmic process in which it takes place is unknowable. Voegelin could only have been impressed by Beckett's nuanced dramatic evocation of these basic truths of the human condition regularly eclipsed in modern immanentist anthropologies: that longing for a transcendent, redemptive reality is *constitutive* of human consciousness; that human beings however must always remain *ignorant of* what this awareness and longing for transcendence truly signify; and that from this ignorance "wells up the anxiety of existence."⁹⁰

For Voegelin, if Beckett is both insightful and honest enough to write such a play, then why, he wonders, can't Beckett move beyond the position of mere "agnosticism" portrayed in it, through recognizing that consciousness's desire for transcendence—if *the direction and implications of its questioning are brought to full and adequate consideration*—carries within it the revelation of the fact, the *reality*, of transcendence (shrouded though it is in mystery), and go on to affirm this reality, dramatically or otherwise, through an honest (if anxious) faith? Let us attempt to answer this question, at least in part, by considering various biographical data that shed light on Beckett's understanding of his own search for meaning and situation in existence, beginning with a look at his philosophical interests and influences.

Beckett told Gabriel D'Aubarède in February, 1961: "I never read philosophers. . . . I never understand anything they write."⁹¹ The statement was disingenuous at best. Beckett read philosophers from early in his life, and never stopped; he even took upon himself a systematic study of the history of philosophy. The philosophers he studied with particular attention included the Presocratics (Democritus making a notable impression), Pascal, Descartes, Descartes's

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Van Hulle and Nixon, *Samuel Beckett's Library*, 128.

disciple Arnold Geulincx (whose *Ethics* he worked through diligently in Latin, taking extensive notes), Malebranche, Spinoza, Berkeley, Kant (and Cassirer on Kant), Schopenhauer, the turn-of-the-twentieth-century skeptic Fritz Mauthner, Wittgenstein, Bachelard, and Sartre.⁹² The philosophers Beckett was drawn to is telling; and even more so the elements in their works that impressed him, that he expressed agreement with in his letters and conversations, and that are reflected occasionally in his novels and plays. Perhaps most fundamental to Beckett's personal philosophical vision was the impact of Descartes, who was the subject of Beckett's first major publication, the poem "Whoroscope."⁹³ Beckett embraced wholeheartedly Descartes's dualism between mind and body; but he rejected Descartes's "proof" of the existence of God. Likewise, in his appreciation of the Cartesian and Occasionalist Malebranche, Beckett agreed both with his Cartesian dualism and Malebranche's insistence that there is an unbridgeable gulf between man and God, but rejected the comforting elements of his insistence on God's mercy and an afterlife.⁹⁴ The pattern continues with other philosophers: Beckett agrees with every affirmation that the body and the mind are radically separate realities, and also with any argument that the mind, though necessarily having the idea of and longing for transcendent divine reality, cannot attain a *personal communion* with, or an understanding of the *nature* of, this divine reality—which invalidates, for Beckett, any belief in philosophical or theological dicta regarding God's

⁹² Ibid., 128-69. On Beckett and Geulincx, see Knowlson, *Samuel Beckett*, 206-207, and Kenner, *Samuel Beckett*, 83-91. Beckett ordered a complete set of Kant in 1937, receiving the eleven volumes from Munich in two huge parcels on January 5, 1938, the day before he was stabbed nearly to death (at one in the morning on Twelfth Night) by a Parisian pimp, the blade barely missing his heart and lung. Van Hulle and Nixon, *Samuel Beckett's Library*, 137, 140; Knowlson, *Samuel Beckett*, 259-60. Beckett's fluency in five languages, including French, German, and Latin, allowed him to read almost all of these authors in the original.

⁹³ "Whoroscope," written and published in 1930 when Beckett was twenty-four, was composed in a matter of hours upon Beckett's learning from his friend Tom McGreevy that the publisher Nancy Cunard and the poet and novelist Richard Aldington were sponsoring a competition, with a cash prize, for a poem of up to one hundred lines on the topic of time. Beckett's poem, "which has almost as many footnotes as it has lines, [and] is impenetrable without the aid of Aidrien's Baillet's 1691 *Life of Descartes*," which Beckett happened to be reading at the time, won the prize and was subsequently published by Cunard's Hours Press. Robinson, *The Long Sonata of the Dead*, 55. See Knowlson, *Samuel Beckett*, 116-17.

⁹⁴ See Pilling, *Samuel Beckett*, 112-16.

merciful concern for human beings. As John Pilling has summarized: “The whole of Beckett’s . . . philosophical thinking is determined by his acceptance of Descartes’s methods [of universal doubt and orderly analysis of problems, leading to his mind-body dualism] and rejection of Descartes’s [and anyone else’s] consolations.”⁹⁵

The existential and metaphysical consequences Beckett drew from the sharpening of his interpretation of the human situation through the study of philosophy are succinctly indicated in his reply to an inquiry by Lawrence Harvey, in 1962, on the sources of his writing. He told Harvey that if he [Beckett] were a critic setting out to write on the works of Beckett, he would begin with two quotations from Geulincx and Democritus. The quotation from Geulincx, a favorite of Beckett’s, is: “*Ubi nihil vales, ibi nihil velis*”: “Where you are worth nothing, you should wish for nothing.” The well-known quotation from Democritus is: “Nothing is more real than nothing.”⁹⁶

The appeal of these quotations for Beckett, and their relevance to his artworks, is readily deduced from combining 1) his strict dualisms (that which separates the body, viewed as a self-contained machine, from a purely spiritual mind, and that which separates both from any presumed God) with 2) his adoption of the *perspective* of “the strictest mystic,” which regards everything that is not God as being intrinsically worthless.⁹⁷ Why worthless? Because anything that is finite, including body, mind, and every cosmic thing, is temporary and perishable, a fleeting appearance without self-sufficiency; therefore nothingness *inheres* in it. “Nothing is more real than nothing.” And if all this nothingness is radically *separate* from any presumed reality that transcendentally endures, then it has no *inherent* value. Humans ought to be honest

⁹⁵ Ibid., 114.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 124; see 114-15.

⁹⁷ See Jacobsen and Mueller, *Testament*, 48, 49.

enough, in Beckett's regard, to admit into consciousness the inherent non-value of their worldly lives. And what then should they do? How should a human being act, given this knowledge? One should take one's bearings from the fact that, although finite reality has no intrinsic "worth," at the same time all sentient beings—including human beings—continually suffer. There is no access to an answer as to *why* created beings should suffer, and no way to logically reconcile this suffering with the idea of a merciful God; but the honest person must acknowledge and respond to suffering and distress with empathy and compassion, doing what he or she can to ameliorate it. As for the self, its principal goal should be to reduce its *desire*—for pleasure, beauty, ambition, knowledge—to *nothing* as far as possible, so that it may reduce its own mental suffering as much as possible, and be at one, as far as possible, with the ontological fact of its own nothingness. "Where you are worth nothing, you should wish for nothing."⁹⁸ (That Beckett could not "contain" his passion for knowledge was often a torment to him; his passion for creating art was a different matter, as discussed below.)

If for Beckett all finite being is intrinsically worthless, and if the suffering of finite beings is evil (as for Beckett it certainly is), and if the origin of finite being is (apparently) unmerciful, then might not Beckett's attitude be fairly described as Gnostic or Manichaeian—with the origin of finite reality a "Satan," or something like Descartes's (experimental notion of a) supremely powerful deceiver? This is the conclusion of the eminent Beckett scholar John Pilling.⁹⁹ But it fails to be convincing for an important reason: Beckett's continually avowed agnosticism. Beckett would never claim to be able to know (as the ancient Gnostics claimed to be able to

⁹⁸ In 1937, at age thirty-one, Beckett "immersed himself deeply in Schopenhauer, who continued to influence his outlook, providing a clear justification for his view that suffering is the norm in human life, that will represents an unwelcome intrusion, and that real consciousness lies beyond human understanding." Knowlson, *Samuel Beckett*, 248-49.

⁹⁹ Pilling, *Samuel Beckett*, 119.

know) the nature of the divine creator. “Perhaps,” Beckett said, is the key word in his plays; and it is the key word in all of his writings.¹⁰⁰ Perhaps—despite appearances—there is a divine creator who is good, and existence in time is meaningful and redeemable. *It cannot be ruled out.* The same agnosticism is incompatible with Manichaeism (which Beckett so carefully worked into the symbolism and action of *Krapp’s Last Tape* when he directed the play), because the Manichaean attitude is based on a presumption of knowledge about the divine origins of good and evil, as well as about the ultimate meaning of the battle—within the universe and the human soul—between forces of “darkness” and “light.” No such presumptions would ever be acceptable to Beckett, in whose view the ultimate meaning of the existence of worldly things, including humans, and of the struggles within human consciousness, always remain beyond human understanding.

So for Beckett, any transcendent reality that might exist is totally hidden. But still human consciousness longs for it, and this longing derives from awareness of the *givenness* of existence. Furthermore, awareness of this givenness brings with it a *duty*, an obligation, to persevere in the act of existing. Conscious existence as finite is in itself of no value, is nothing; and yet it has an obligation to “go on.” Suicide, morally acceptable to the Stoics, is not acceptable to Beckett. One has been given one’s existence and must struggle to one’s natural end, because the gift is *obliged* to the giver, even if the meaning of the giving cannot be humanly understood. The tension between, on the one hand, recognizing one’s finite existence as intrinsically nothing (and the rightness of reducing one’s desires to nothing), and, on the other, recognition of and submission to the “command” to go on, to endeavor, to endure, is the fundamental existential tension in Beckett’s mature work. That tension has never been better expressed than in Beckett’s famous

¹⁰⁰ Reid, *All I Can Manage*, 11.

answer (not spontaneous, but rather crafted for publication) to Georges Duthuit when asked what the nature of his envisioned art could possibly be, once “the plane of the feasible” has been rejected (i.e., viewing the artwork as a successful “creation,” rather than as “nothing”). Beckett’s reply: “The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express.”¹⁰¹ Everything in reality is intrinsically nothing; but one must “go on,” which, *for the artist*, means one must continue to “express.” And this Beckett did until the end of his long life, struggling constantly with the task of making his stories, his dramas, his language, his words both express the true human condition and cancel themselves out in the very process of being expressed, in order to reveal the paradox of existence and its nothingness, as well as the author’s permanent uncertainty about the meaningfulness of his enterprise.

Our analysis has marshaled enough evidence, now, to offer a provisional answer as to why Beckett can’t get out of what Voegelin calls the “mess” of agnosticism, despite Beckett’s authentic and eloquent portrayal, in *Waiting for Godot* and elsewhere, of the metaxic structure of conscious longing, and his sense of obligation to the unknown ground of existence. The central clue is Beckett’s embrace of two dualisms: a radical mind/body dualism; and that of an absolute gulf between human being and its origin. What is missing is the sense or apprehension, in Beckett, of *participation* among the structural components of “being”: first, the unifying participation of all the levels of finite being within human existence; and second, consciousness as a participation in the ground from which it derives. Nothing in Beckett’s artistic visions or philosophical interests indicates an awareness that the Greek foundational experiences that introduced the very *possibility* of interpreting reality in terms of distinct types of “being”—

¹⁰¹ Samuel Beckett, *Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit*, in *Proust; and Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit* (London: John Calder, 1965), 103.

bodily, mental, divine—were achieved by differentiating relations of order and partnership *within a unified wholeness of reality*. The Greek philosophical experiences that allowed for the distinctively human operations of human consciousness (*nous*) to be recognized as spiritual, non-material, and for the finite world to be disambiguated from transcendent divine reality, revealed the distinctive nature and characteristics of each of these types of “being” only in their *relative* autonomy, since it is a primordial ontological *consubstantiality* that allows for the “common denominator of being” to be applied to each of them in the first place.¹⁰² And we notice that thinkers who emphasize and articulate a *participatory metaphysics* (e.g., Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Scheler, Jaspers) are missing from the list of those who drew Beckett’s sustained philosophical attention.

This does not answer the question as to *why* Beckett was attracted, early and late, to “dualistic” philosophers who emphasize either a matter/mind dualism, or an unbridgeable human/divine “gulf,” or both. The answer to this lies, of course, in details of biographical development that must remain (as Voegelin would agree) primarily mysterious; but it is safe to assert that Beckett’s *felt sense* of his own existence and his situation in the cosmos, from early in life, attracted him to an imaginative and conceptual alienation of both mind from body and of finite existence from any transcendent reality. One may assume that Beckett’s acute awareness of mind as “spirit,” as a type of being non-reducible to materiality, drew him to the first of these dualisms; and that his hyper-sensitivity to pain and suffering led him to the second through a focus on the ontological chasm between finite beings that suffer and their transcendent ground. At any rate, in thrall to an affective, imaginal, and conceptual occlusion of the *participatory*

¹⁰² Eric Voegelin, “What Is Nature?,” in Voegelin, *Anamnesis: On the Theory of History and Politics*, vol. 6 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, trans. M. J. Hanak based upon the abbreviated version originally translated by Gerhart Niemeyer, ed. David Walsh (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 163, 164.

interrelationships among the “partners in being,” Beckett’s artistic powers developed in service to a vision of existence that, on the one hand, presented mind as ontologically severed from the physical world, and on the other, presented mind (together with the world) as ontologically severed from its metaphysical ground or origin.

The antidote to such a vision and artistic development would necessarily have involved a felt and imaginative apprehension of two facts.

The first of these facts is that, in humans, the levels of finite being—physical, chemical, biological, sensitive-psychic, and intellectual—constitute a metaphysical *unity* through the relationships of foundation and integration, each “lower” level providing the ontological and functional foundation for the presence of each “higher” level up to and including intellect (mind). What this means, as Voegelin writes, is that “the strata of reality *participate* in one another,” and that human consciousness should therefore be regarded, not as a type of being ontologically divorced from material reality, but rather as the highest organizing level of a *continuum* of lower strata of finite being whose *acts and meanings are all implicated* in the acts and meanings of self-reflective and self-determinative minds.¹⁰³

The second fact is that the “being” of human consciousness, along with the meanings of lower strata implicated in its existence, *participates* in the “being” of its origin—or, to put it in the terms of Plato and Aristotle, that human *nous* is a participation in divine *Nous*.¹⁰⁴ As Voegelin explains repeatedly in his own somewhat recondite philosophical terminology, an unimaginable gulf there is indeed between human intellect and divine “intellect,” between man and the profound mystery of God; but it is not a *complete* ontological separation; they share the

¹⁰³ Eric Voegelin, *Order and History: The Ecumenic Age*, vol. 17 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, ed. Michael Franz (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 409; see 408-409.

¹⁰⁴ See Eric Voegelin, “What Is Political Reality?,” in Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, 347-50.

common denominator of “being” (even if “being” must be applied analogically to divine reality); and more than that, divine *transcendence* could only have been *revealed* in human consciousness in the first place through the human mind’s *sharing in the type of transcendent being* (free, rational, moral) that the divine mind enjoys absolutely.

But these facts of metaphysical participation are not assumed by Beckett, and as a result, he seems unable to recognize 1) that the meanings of the world of cosmic “things” (and body) are metaphysically *implicated* in the meaning of the mind’s concerns, purposiveness, and destiny, and 2) more importantly, that the human longing for transcendence is not a longing for an *absolutely hidden* “object” but a longing for *further* revelation of (and communion with) what has *already* been revealed by way of the mind’s *participation* in the presence of transcendent mystery. Beckett, in other words, lacks the imaginative and conceptual disposition and apparatus for appreciating that his constant longing for transcendent reality—as represented, for example, in *Waiting for Godot*—is founded in *experiences of transcendence*, of participation in transcendent being. As T. S. Eliot would say: he has had the experience, but missed its meaning. And the result, as Voegelin would diagnose it, is that the experience by Beckett of his “questioning unrest,” of his basic desire to know and to love, has no “direction.” Instead of it being “experienced as the beginning of the theophanic event in which [transcendence] reveals itself as the divine ordering force in the psyche of the questioner and the cosmos at large,” it is felt and interpreted to be a *pointless* desire; the “tonality” of his questioning and desire “has shifted from joyful participation in a theophany to . . . the hostile alienation from a reality that hides rather than reveals itself.”¹⁰⁵ And since therefore for Beckett human *desire* can never recognize its essential identity with the transcendent ground of being from which it originates—

¹⁰⁵ Eric Voegelin, “Reason: The Classic Experience,” in Voegelin, *Published Essays, 1966-1985*, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 277.

as the desire is felt to be alien to, not a participation in, the transcendent ground for which it longs—he can embrace neither the image of human desire’s origin in divine love, nor the image of human desire, suffering, and love as potentially having a mysterious fulfillment in communion with divine meaning and being. As a consequence, the love experienced by Krapp in *Krapp’s Last Tape* as his existence’s most precious meaning is a *tragic* love—which Krapp is finally “done with” in the last moments of the play, as he manifests complete resignation toward his existence.

And yet: Beckett’s reputation for exhibiting the personal virtue of compassion, of lovingness, is unparalleled among modern literary figures, to the extent that he has often been described as a “secular saint.” Regarded in Christian theological terms, his “heart of stone” was manifestly transformed into a “heart of flesh,” and he saw with unusual sensitivity the world and its suffering creatures through “the eyes of love.” Would it not be appropriate to conclude that, again in terms of Christian theology, Beckett shows evidence of having suffered both operative and cooperative grace? What category of religious “authenticity” applies to a man whose existence manifests to a rare degree the habit of *agape*, self-sacrificing love, and yet who firmly abjures any posture of “faith”? At least in *Krapp’s Last Tape*, uniquely among his works, Beckett allows the question of the *possibility* of love’s transtemporal meaningfulness to be raised—even if Krapp himself answers it in the negative.

At any rate, Beckett’s “failure of transcendence” is not a garden-variety failure: it is not materialist, immanentist, reductionist, or atheist, as are many such failures among notable modern literary figures. Beckett recognizes the *inescapability* of the longing for transcendent reality in consciousness, reflected in “the dream of absolute being which constantly haunts

Beckettian man.”¹⁰⁶ The longing for transcendent reality is always affirmed as normal, native, ineluctable, as is the human obligation to the unknowable ground of existence to “carry on.” Beckett’s is rather the failure to emotionally, intellectually, and artistically negotiate the *participatory* ontological relationship between immanent and transcendent realities; and this failure precludes his longing for transcendence developing into *faith*—the “knowledge born of religious love.”¹⁰⁷

Voegelin would still insist, however that a “man like Beckett,” with his intelligence, erudition, and existential acuity, “knows perfectly well” that his agnostic outlook is “blooming nonsense”—in other words, that deep inside Beckett simply *knows better*; and that his art, to be a fully responsible art, should somehow reflect this better knowledge. In my view, Voegelin’s insistence here is misguided, and would seem to derive from a misapprehension of the nature and purposes of *being an artist*. Beckett is an artist, which means that the uses of his intellect will always serve the vision of his art; and his artistic vision will always, appropriately, be under the guidance of his *most convincing emotional and imaginative experiences*. Beckett’s misleading statement that he never read philosophers may be judged—and then, perhaps, forgiven—in the context of his deep, decades-long frustration with critics, readers, and admirers who responded to the “existential” character of his novels, plays, and short stories with the supposition that he intended these works to represent a *philosophical* worldview. But as he kept repeating in response to questions along these lines, his works were not to be taken as a “philosophy,” nor as the articulation of systematic *thinking* at all. As Beckett once stated regarding his art and its vision: “There is no key to them, there is no problem [in them to be solved by thought]. If the

¹⁰⁶ James Knowlson and John Pilling, *Frescoes of the Skull: The Later Prose and Drama of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove Press, 1980), 85.

¹⁰⁷ The formulation is Bernard Lonergan’s; see Lonergan, *Method In Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 115.

subject of my [works] could be expressed in philosophical terms, I wouldn't have had any reason to write them. I am not an intellectual. All I am is *feeling*.”¹⁰⁸ The artist's responsibility, Beckett would say, is to the imaginative truth of his emotional experiences; and Beckett's art expresses, with great power, those experiences. One might conclude, then, that Beckett in fact *doesn't* “know better”; because his heart—his emotions, his nervous system, and his psychic imagination—do not “know better”; and as an artist, he will only be interested in philosophy to the extent that it rings true to what his imaginative apprehensions of his most significant experiences tell him, even if they involve or induce extremes of alienation. Voegelin seems to imply that an artist's first duty is to get his philosophy straight. But that is not the first duty of an artist.

The “failure of transcendence” in Beckett's art may indeed, therefore, reveal a spiritual and intellectual “deformation of existence” in its author. But Voegelin's conclusion that Beckett “knows” that his agnostic orientation in existence is “blooming nonsense” sounds a false note among his many pronouncements on literary figures and their works. As does, I would argue, his conclusion that a formally excellent literary artwork that does *not* manifest a “failure of transcendence” is necessarily a “higher form of art” than that which does.¹⁰⁹ This seems to me a very dubious proposition. It presumes that the “highest forms of art” in literature can never, however brilliantly they express the complexities of existences, be those that *that fall short of embracing transcendence through some type of faith*. To suggest that *Waiting for Godot* or Beckett's other masterworks, like *Krapp's Last Tape*, or his great trilogy of novels—or Remarque's *All Quiet On the Western Front*, or George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, or Joyce's

¹⁰⁸ Quoted in John Fletcher, *About Beckett: The Playwright and the Work*, 71 (emphasis added).

¹⁰⁹ Voegelin, *Selected Correspondence, 1950-1984*, 666; Letter of September 15, 1970, to Donald E. Stanford.

Ulysses—are wanting in artistic value is, it seems to me, an atypical display on Voegelin's part of philosophical confusion.