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Farewell to the Myth of Unitary Human: The Figurative Cyborg on Stage

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Research Article

Abstract

This study seeks to carry out a boundary-spanning investigation of Samuel Beckett's Krapp's Last Tape (1958), a compelling and boundary-bending play that has been commonly studied as a significant offspring of the Theatre of the Absurd. By keeping its close-knit ties with the Absurd in mind, this paper seeks to go beyond and bring to light a paradigm-shifting dialogic bridge that the play in question builds with the concept of the cyborg, blossoming this norm-defying pieceinto the scope of Cyborg Theatre.Such fertile pollination into brand newavenues proliferates then-new perspectives on the fictitiousness of the long-established, allegedly impenetrable boundaries between the human and the nonhuman, the biological and the technological. In this vein, Krapp, who has been commonly repetitively addressed as an absurd human subject whose life is reigned by inner turmoil coupled with verbal and nonverbal absurd repetitions, exemplifying the absurdity of the human condition and existence in an indifferent universe, is aimed in this study to be examined as a posthuman subject, specifically a cyborg, to bring to light the ways in which Krapp's cyborgization via nonliteral prostheses calls into question what counts as a human and what counts as a nonhuman and calls for the long-dismissed but much-needed reconfiguration of both in the posthuman era of the absurd universe.

Keywords: Posthumanism, Cyborg,Theatre of the Absurd, Cyborg Theatre.

The Theatre of the Absurd, as its name lucidly suggests, is a norm-defying movement in theatre which emerged in the aftermath of the Second World War. Considering its dawn in the wake of unspeakably catastrophic and despair-inducing events across the globe, its radical unsubscription to conventional theatre and its long-established traditions is by no means surprising. To clarify its uniqueness, in *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961), Martin Esslin, who was credited for his coinage of the very term "theatre of the absurd," puts emphasis on the discrepancy between the general usage of the word absurd which is "ridiculous" and the way in which it is employed in drama as follows: "Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose" (37). As opposed to traditional theatre of the pre-war era which can be said to have certain elements in harmony, Esslin's newly-theorized dramatic genre of his time taking over the stage during the post-war years and mirroring the absurdness of life and existence, and frivolousness of humans who lost their hope and faith in any sorts of longstanding values and institutions, including religion, sought to accommodate no harmony, meaning, purpose or rationality in it. As elucidated by Esslin, such plays consist of nonsensical monologues and/or dialogues filled with repetitions and pauses, "have no story or plot . . . are often without recognizable characters . . . have neither a beginning nor an end" (33). As a dramatic genre echoing the absurdity of the human condition and the nonsensicality of existence, it is no surprise at all that the Theatre of the Absurd goes hand in hand with existentialism, a twentieth-century philosophical movement, popularized in the wake of unprecedentedly nightmarish and despair-inducing events of the early and mid-twentieth century by prominent philosophers such as Kierkegaard, Sartre, and Camus.

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On one hand, Sartre predicates his conception of existentialism on freeing the human subject who is "condemned to be free" of predeterminism because "we are left alone" (Kaufmann 1956, 295) and life "is [ours] to make sense of… the sense that [we] choose" (Kaufmann 1956, 309) while stressing that our liberty comes with the responsibility for our free choices and their consequences, which results in a certain anguish that does not "lead to quietism or inaction . . . [contrarily it is] the kind well known to all those who have borne responsibilities" (Kaufmann 1956, 293). On the other hand, Camus (1959) whose point of departure is the human subject's "appetite for the absolute and for unity and the impossibility of reducing this world to a rational and reasonable principle" (51) elaborates his conception of the absurd via the story of Sisyphus and the absurdity of the human condition by pointing out that humans' "exile [in an indifferent universe] is without remedy, since [they are] deprived of memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between [humans] and [their] life, the actor and his setting, is properly known as the feeling of absurdity" (14). Significantly, what makes these forefathers (1) as well as the theatre of the absurd and existential school of thought meet on the common ground is certain emphases put on senselessness of existence, frivolousness and frustration of humans in an apathetic universe devoid of the long-sought ultimate meaning, unfavorableness of language, which can all be drawn on to investigate some of the twentieth-century playwrights such as Jean Genet, Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter to name a few and their plays reflecting these issues while subverting the long-established traditions of the pre-war theatre.Although it is safe to state that many plays of the above-mentioned playwrights can aptly be analyzed under the light of Esslin's discussions, it is also worth highlighting that norm-defying quality of such plays, especially that of Beckett's in question in this study, paves the way for them to be interpreted from a variety of points of view. As Esslin stresses, it is not fruitful to interpret Beckett's standpoint in his considerably experimental plays by confining it to a single school of thought and/or philosophy because "it is the peculiar richness [embedded in his] play[s] . . . opens vistas on so many different perspectives" and his overall out-of-the-box vision "on time, evanescence and mysteriousness of existence, the paradox of change and stability, necessity and absurdity" that leads up to various "philosophical, religious, and psychological interpretations"(81).

In this sense, the main objective of this study is to examine *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), a compelling and boundary-bending play by Samuel Beckett that has been commonly studied as a significant example of the Theatre of the Absurd. By keeping its certain tight-knitties with the Absurd in mind, this paper seeks to argue that this norm-defying piece can also be put under investigation in the light of Cyborg Theatre, elaborated by Jennifer Parker-Starbuck in *Cyborg Theatre: Corporeal/Technological Intersections in Multimedia Performance* (2011). To do so, Krapp, who has been commonly repetitively examined as an absurd human subject exemplifying the absurdity of the human condition and existence in an indifferent universe, is aimed in this study to be examined as a posthuman subject, particularly a cyborg, to bring to light the ways in which Krapp's cyborgization calls into question what counts as a human and what counts as a nonhuman and calls for the long-eclipsedandlong-needed reconfiguration of both in such a posthuman era.

Before delving intothe ways in which Krapp lends himself to be put under investigation as a cyborg, which makes it possible for Beckett's work to align with cyborg theatre, it is worth briefly putting spotlight on posthumanist critical theory, outlined by Donna Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles, Cary Wolfe, Rosi Braidotti to name just a few, transhumanism, and Parker-Starbuck's understanding of cyborg theatre. In this context, rapid advancements in science and technology have been accompanied by public excitement as well as anxieties especially since the second half of the twentieth century and ethical debates regarding what it means to be human

have been reawakened. Thus, the twentieth century, which saw the emergence of the theatre of the absurd and the popularization of existentialism during the post-war years, also saw the theoretical dawn of transhumanism that advocates for technologically-altered and advanced humans free from being prisoners to restrictive human biology and nature, and posthumanism, indicating not the eradication of the human once and for all but "signal[ing] instead the end of a certain conception of the human" (Hayles 286). It is worth noting that "there is no consensus on a single definition of the 'the posthuman condition' [but the term refers to] an understanding of human beings as embedded in information networks rather than independent agents whose minds work in isolation" (Kiryushina et al., 7). Considering the lack of any particularly agreed-upon and consequently limiting definition of the posthuman, it is possible to highlight that it is more inclusive than exclusive in its quest oriented towards reexamining what it means to be human and reconfiguring the entangled relationship between the human and the nonhuman.

What is also quite fundamental in this study—and in the post-war scene in the shadows— is the concept of cyborg, another significant post-war emergent, which "*was created as a technological artifact and cultural icon* in the years following World War II" (Hayles 2, emphasis original) and played a crucial part in the theoretical formulation of posthumanist literary theory. Although the credit of the coinage of the notion of cyborg belongs to M. E. Clynes and N. S. Kline, both of whom pioneered it in "Cyborgs and Space" (1960), Donna Haraway's account on cyborg, elaborated in "A Cyborg Manifesto" in 1985, has played an immense role in not only popularization of the notion of cyborg but also its widely-known configuration, which is still relevant today. According to her renowned manifesto (2016), which was initially "an effort to build an ironic political myth faithful to feminism,"(5) her conception of the cyborg as "a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction"(5) and her claim that in short, "we are . . . [already] cyborgs"(7) simply because of our deep interaction with technology can be viewed as a relatively blasphemous celebration of dethronement of the human constructed by deep-seated humanistic thought. Although Haraway's manifesto does not explicitly feature the term posthuman, her radical perspective can be viewed as a celebration of the posthuman due to celebrating the annihilation of *not* the human but the long-established conception of the human that "is giving way to a different construction called the posthuman" (Hayles 2). Furthermore, Haraway's boundary-transgressing conception of the cyborg and the cyborgization of the human via mutually transformative interactions between the human and the nonhuman – specifically technolog(ies) in the digital age – have been considerably influential and beneficial for a wide range of academic scholars such as Jennifer Parker-Starbuck in their separate but related quests to transgress further boundaries.

In her *Cyborg Theatre: Corporeal/Technological Intersections in Multimedia Performance* (2011), Parker-Starbuck draws significantly on Haraway's conception of cyborg to elaborate her "cyborg theatre" that "emerges as a site for the examination and experimentation of the interconnected relationships between bodies and technologies forming through the cyborg poetics" (xiv).In this regard, it is possible to argue that *Krapp's Last Tape* lends itself to be investigated not only in the light of the Theatre of the Absurd but also in the light of Cyborg Theatre. What adds explicitly flammable fuel to such an argument is the portrayal of Krapp, the natural-born human subject whose life is shaped by not only the lack of any meaningful activities and/or interactions with fellow human beings, coupled with Beckett's meditation on technology via Krapp's deeply developed and radically reliant interaction with the nonhuman, namely the tape recorder. Despite how simple the components of the play may seem, Beckett's tendency to displace the human by means of the nonhuman, particularly the human subject by means of the intervention of the tape recorder, such seemingly simple but intriguing and puzzling components make it possible for the

play to stand out as "the first theatrical play to feature a technological apparatus as a central agent of the performance" (Thobois 59). Therefore, apart from its certain qualities corresponding to the theatre of the absurd such as plotlessness, the lack of a conventional plot structure (2), frivolousness of character(s) considering Krapp's desolate life in his enclosed space seems to be free of any sensible purposes, urges or aspirations but full of verbal/nonverbal repetitions and senseless routines, (3), just like the nonsensicalness of life itself, fragmentariness, (4), and ineffective language-ness, Beckett's play is full of verbal repetitions (5), silences, and pauses, (6) all of which, coupled with even the opening of the play with "A late evening in the future"(Beckett 1),make it possible to argue that the play lends itself for a cyborgian investigation.

At this point, it is worth noting that what makes Parker-Starbuck's approach, which highly focuses on the intersection between technologies and the categories of abject, object, and subject(41-51), quite grounded in this study is that her boundary-blurring cyborg theatre "is processual, 'becoming' through its integrations; it illuminates and projects bodies as [. . .] potential entities that combat and highlight fixed notions of what 'human' can mean in relationship to embodied technology"(39). Thus, it can be said that what situates *Krapp's Last Tape* in parallel with cyborg theatre is the emphasis put by the latter on "becoming [via complex interactions]" since the former's portrayal of Krapp, in a similar fashion, signals "becoming-cyborg"(Parker-Starbuck xv) of the natural-born human as a result of complex and mutually transformative interactions between the human and the nonhuman, so to speak, technolog(ies). In this vein, it is worth underscoring what Jennifer Gonzalez, the author of "Envisioning Cyborg Bodies" stresses: "One can consider anybody a cyborg body that is both its own agent and subject to the power of other agencies" (xii).

In a similar vein, Krapp, the natural-born human with a human body (7) can be argued to come to serve as a cyborg, a hybrid entity composed by both the organic and the inorganic due to his being figuratively glued to the tape recorder through which the sixty-nine-year-old Krapp records and listens to the tapes recorded by his younger selves and his memory being technologically assisted. Thus, it is possible to underscore that the way he behaves in his present is "in a mechanized manner" and the lines between "his live embodiment and the avatars of his past selves created by the tape recorder is blurred [resulting in] a strange proximity, a symbiosis, or, rather, an interoperability between human and machine" (Kiryushina et al., 5).Considering his tight-knit, deep attachment to the advancing technology of his time in the play due to his habitual tendencies for recording and listening to the tapes, it is possible for one to argue that his human existence is not shaped by his radical independency (8) but by his almost vital dependency on the nonhuman, namely the tapes, leading up to a sort of interdependency between the two. To put it differently, it is fair to assume that his entire life – or what is left of it – revolves around the tapes, the tapes seem to have come to serve as figurative prostheses clinging him to life. It is worth noting that the life he pursues ends up not being a fulfilling one because his alienation from everyone who has ever crossed his path in life, including his deceased mother, Effir, and the unnamed woman by the lake, as well as his alienation from his younger selves (9) as if they were separate characters or entities of the play fans the flames of further alienation from all of his desires and aspirations and leads up to a fully alienated, dull, stationary life filled only with meaningless routines and senseless verbal and nonverbal repetitions. However, despite the absurdity of his existence in which he is unable to pursue an independent and fulfilling life "with the fire in [him]" (Beckett 8), considering his alienated state of being, accompanied with his alienation even from his younger selves, coupled with his ongoing dependency on them, it can be argued that the tapes as figurative prostheses seem to

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prevent his overall existence from becoming non-existent in certain ways. He, who seems to have managed to continue his existence and come to realize the senselessness of it all and started living equally senselessly, has ended up not being a revolting "absurd hero" in Camus' terms, but a non-revolting, non-moving, non-speaking,(10) non-well-functioning living creature attached with "a motionless body, glued to the machine from which a voice is speaking" (Hayles 82).

The condition of Krapp, the human, figuratively glued to the tapes, the nonhuman, underscoring some sorts of motionlessness, voicelessness, and even lifelessness can also be viewed as "a descent of subjectivity into a passivity [with] emerging (twentieth-century) media technologies involving electronic transmission" (D'arcy 212).To put it differently, his inability to exist independently from the tapes that house not only his fragmented past but also his present, ends up lending his entire being to become intertwined with the nonhuman. Such a deep intertwinement with the nonhuman, which causes "[his body] and voice [to be] broken apart and put together in new ways" (Hayles 83) makes it possible for Krapp to be rendered a cyborg, a boundary-breaching (literal or metaphorical) creature springing from a figurative (in Krapp's case) and "complex hybridization with other . . . devices" (Haraway 61). However, it is worth noting that Beckett's cyborg is not as hope-inducing and utopian as Haraway's cyborg. Bearing in mind that Krapp uses his voice mostly to address to and cynically comment on the voices on the tapes throughout the play and he is even unable to record his *last* tape because the voices on the tapes seem to have had everything to say while he seems to have nothing left to say and/or recount, it is safe to state that Krapp's not-so-literal and not-so-utopian process of cyborgization via his deep, nearly vital engagement with the nonhuman goes hand in hand with his divorce with his own voice. In this vein, it can be asserted that Krapp's "voice is taken out of the body and displaced into the machine, leaving the body finally without the voice" (Hayles 79). He, in turn, turns into a meaningless, motionless, "voiceless body" with nothing left to add to his fragmented narrative, sitting motionlessly and wordlessly in the end, almost in a way of unforeseen physical disintegration. However, this is not as anti-utopian, or dystopian, as it seems because the answer to the question of what the so-called last tape refers to is open-ended, whether it is "the latest or the final narrative recording produced by Krapp" (D'arcy 212) and the main question can be said to be anchored by Beckett's quizzical attention on the nature of such an intertwinement and what sorts of fruits blossom out of it.

Krapp's cyborgization, which can be argued as conventionally not a literal one considering the non-existence of any biosurgeries operated on his natural-born human body to alter and/or enhance it or any other relevant processes, can be said to reflect the human's intensifying, now mostly daily, interaction with the nonhuman in the digital age, which turns the former into "a contingent production, mediated by a technology that . . . can no longer meaningfully be separated from the human subject" (Hayles xii). Thus, the image of Krapp as a cyborg not only dismantles the deeply-entrenched image of unitary, fully autonomous human by bringing to light that "the human is always already evolving with, constituted by and constitutive of multiple forms of life and machines" (Nayar 4) but also blurs –and breaches– the long-established, allegedly impenetrable boundaries between the human and the nonhuman. Such a boundary-blurring outcome of Krapp's cyborgization serves as a long-dismissed, so, much-needed invitation for reconfiguration of not just the human, whose place in the world and precariousness of existence have been among centuries-old inquiries (Kiryushina et al., 5), but also the nonhuman –specifically, the machine within the context of the play– because the new-media/digital/posthuman era signals that "the machine is not an *it* to be animated, worshipped, and dominated. The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment"(Haraway 65, emphasis original). In this regard, just as Krapp's separation from his younger selves and his

inseparability from the tape recorder that accommodates the voices of his younger selves put emphasis on him being a natural-born human with a body devoid of voice, such an intertwinement between the two indicates that the tape recorder without the human body houses all his voice, perhaps all his consciousness. Thus, it is safe to articulate that Krapp's figurative hybridization followed by his voicelessness and displacement of "the physical location of the voice… into the machine" (Hayles 1997, 79) reflects that "machines can become the repository of human consciousness—that machines can . . . become human beings. You are the cyborg, and the cyborg is you" (Hayles 1999, xii). This way, the image of Krapp as a cyborg deconstructs the long-entrenched conception of the human and reconstructs a posthumanist conception of the human who is always already open to fostering mutually transformative relationships with the nonhuman, particularly with ever-evolving technology within the context of the play, and co-evolving with the nonhuman in a myriad of ways.

In the argumentative light casted so far, it is safe to point out that the deep intertwinement – so to say, indivisibility – of Krapp, the human, with the tape recorder, the nonhuman, resulting in a nonliteral hybridization defying the deep-rooted conceptions of what counts as a human, what counts as a nonhuman and what counts as animate, what counts as inanimate is what aligns Beckett's play with cyborg theatre that is similarly oriented towards breaching above-mentioned boundaries by employing "existing and emerging technology not purely as a frame or aesthetic scenic backdrop for projected images, but as a mutually dependent component of a larger complex of social, political, and theatrical systems" (Parker-Starbuck 21). As she underscores, certain affiliations with traditional theatre are radically untethered in cyborg theatre where "technology as simple as a live video feed can become subject . . . as it gains agency and centrality, becoming an integral component of the work merging with bodies on stage" (Parker-Starbuck 50). Bearing in mind that the tape recorder with which Krapp is almost inseparably intertwined can be said to serve as a figurative prosthesis clinging him to life in a way, it is possible to assert that the alignment of Beckett's work with cyborg theatre is highlighted when "what has previously been considered solely tool [in traditional theatre]" (Parker-Starbuck 40) which is the tape recorder in this case, radically goes beyond serving as an unessential tool and evolves into a vitally "essential element" of the entire story in *Krapp's Last Tape*. Therefore, when Krapp, the natural-born human with a life devoid of any sorts of mobility, affinity, desires, (or any purpose for that matter) and a body devoid of voice, develops a deep interaction and then nonliteral hybridization with the tape recorder, the nonhuman that accommodates his consciousness, voice, so to speak, almost his entire being, not only the deep-seated boundaries between the human and the nonhuman are blurred but also the long-set boundaries and conventions of theatrical genres are challenged and breached. As Hayles puts it: "*Krapp's Last Tape* demonstrates how the shape of a life — and the shape of the genre — can be affected when body and voice no longer imply each other" (Hayles 1997, 85).

To conclude, Beckett in *Krapp's Last Tape* not only puts emphasis on the meaningless of existence as well as human life through the image of Krapp as a purposeless, motionless, wordless, so to say, lifeless, human being whose so-called life is shaped by meaningless routines and verbal/nonverbal repetitions, but also sets a stage for the posthuman to come to light through the image of Krapp as a cyborg whose existence is in direct relation with his mutually effective interaction with the nonhuman. Wordless Krapp's almost vital reliance on the wordful tapes that serve as figurative prostheses clinging him to life in a certain way rather than enhancing his human condition radically challenges longstanding statuses of the human and the nonhuman on stage. This way, Beckett's work, which severs ties with human-centered conventions of the conventional, pre-war theatre, as a cyborg theatre, which also clearly severs

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ties with conventional theatre as elaborated by Parker-Starbuck, can be said to come to partake in a posthumanist agenda, which is to call for the much-needed reconfiguration of the human and the nonhuman, particularly the mutually transformative dialogue between the human and technology in Beckett's case. In sum, Beckett's compelling and thought-provoking piece blurs the deep-drawn lines between not only the human and the nonhuman but also theatrical genres and conventions by shedding light on both the absurdity of the human existence in an absurd/indifferent universe and the vulnerability of the human in an interdependent world. Such seeds unearthed in Beckett's account can be said to bring to light the ways in which *Krapp's Last Tape,* one of the most prominent examples of the theatre of the absurd that held the stage predominantly during the post-war era sheds also experimental light on the human condition and the fictitiousness of independently self-sufficiency of the human that is always already bound to be in reciprocally transformative relationships with the nonhuman, which makes it possible for *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958) to be settled as one of the pioneering offsprings of cyborg theatre — even before the concept of cyborg (1960) and cyborg theatre (2011) for that matter were widely introduced.

NOTES: Quotes/Ref. in brackets (..) are from notes section.

(1) It can be noted that what makes Camus' existential philosophy less despairing than that of Sartre's is Camus' suggestion: "One must imagine Sisyphus [who revolts against the gods] happy" (189).

(2) Considering the elderly Krapp's constant act of listening to the tapes recorded by his younger selves while cynically laughing at them, mercilessly humiliating them, reflecting upon bygone opportunities, cursing, drinking, banana eating and so on is what the story is all about on the surface at least.

(3) A series of meaningless routines and nonverbal repetitions such as switching on and off the tapes, going backstage and coming back, drinking, banana eating, and so on. What is more, his routines are so meaningless that he even gives up on following one of his birthday routines, which is to record a tape on his sixty-ninth birthday. No purpose left.

(4) Considering not only the story is fragmented as a result of Krapp's frequent act of switching on and off the tape recorder, fast-forwarding and rewinding it, going backstage and coming back, etc., but also Krapp's sense of self is fragmented considering his alienation from his younger selves as if what they recount was someone else's past.

(5) e.g.: Krapp's utterance of "spool" twelve times throughout the play is one of his verbal repetitions in addition to the nonverbal repetitions of his.

(6) The emphasis on ineffectiveness of language in the play reveals the limitedness of human-made language to reflect the absurdity of life and the human condition once again.

(7) A human body that is already deteriorating: "very near-sighted," "hard of hearing," "cracked voice," and "laborious walk" (*Krapp's Last Tape*, 1.)

(8) The term "independency" is loosely used here because it is already not possible for humans to fully independently exist simply considering our vital interaction with/dependance on nature to say the least. Thus, within the context of this study, "independency" is used to refer to a way of existing, independent from certain interactions with technology, which Krapp seems unable to do.

(9) He even switches off the tape in confusion to look up the word "viduity" in the dictionary that his younger self utters on one of the tapes, which underscores his alienation even from the way his younger self speaks, even from his choice of words (*Krapp's Last Tape*, 4).

(10) The utterance of "non-speaking" here refers to Hayles' understanding of a voiceless body that is not beset by literal silence but mostly by inner monologues, discussed in "Voices out of Bodies and Bodies out of Voices" (1997).

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