

Samuel Beckett

KRAPP'S LAST TAPE

The Other Place, Stratford-upon-Avon

Krapp (Edward Petherbridge) carries his tape recorder and boxes of tape to the brightly lit desk of his dark “den”, holding the load tightly to his bosom in a gesture repeated at the end of play. These minor emendations of Beckett’s stage directions are warranted, because the machine is the surrogate for the lover Krapp rejected in favour of “the fire in me now” – a giant literary ego. Petherbridge’s Irish accent, and the playing down of Krapp’s clownishness (no purple nose), hint at a “Portrait of the Artist as an Old Man”.

The large ledger that serves as an index to the reels gives tantalizing titles to the recordings: “the black ball”, “memorable equinox”. When he plays the tape, a much younger Krapp describes as “unforgettable” these moments which, alas, the “wearish old man” has forgotten. One sequence sticks in his mind and Krapp repeats its index numbers: “box 3 spool 5.” Krapp winds impatiently past his youthful literary revelations (“The vision at last”) to a peaceful afternoon in a punt with Bianca, who agreed “it was hopeless”. The younger Krapp declares himself “Well out of that, Jesus yes!”, but, for his septuagenarian self, this is the highpoint of all the recordings; recollections of his mother’s death and his expanding literary consciousness are secondary.

Krapp steps away from the desk to eat bananas (despite the younger man’s advice to “cut ’em out!”) and to drink excessively. Younger Krapps drank “on licensed premises” but now, increasingly housebound, he hides bad habits in dark corners away from the machine. Beckett’s precise stage directions assume proscenium arch conditions; for the RSC’s studio venue, however, minor liberties have been taken. In an effort to avoid the unavoidable, Krapp tries to dispose of the banana skins by casting them “into the pit”, as Beckett wanted, but unwittingly throws them behind him. Beckett also dressed the stage with tape recorder and microphone in place, but here, significantly, Krapp retreats to the darkness to fetch the single ear of his only companion. Petherbridge’s engagement with the machine brings to light the dynamics of Krapp’s last relationship, which Beckett buried beneath the surface of the text.

Two pieces of invented business concerning the difficulty of mating electrical plugs with sockets so appropriately symbolize Krapp’s

diminished connectedness that they deserve to become part of the accepted text. Making the latest recording, Krapp gazes first at the machine’s spools (a word he relishes as the younger Krapp relished Bianca’s eyes) and addresses himself to them before realizing his mistake and moving to the microphone.

Writing in 1958, when tape recorders were still relatively new, Beckett was careful enough to set his play “in the future”, so that Krapp might own a magnetic record of his life. The materiality of the written and spoken word is one of Beckett’s major themes, and disjunctions between the handwritten index and the sonorous recording are properly highlighted. Reading an index entry, Petherbridge pauses deliciously between the words at the foot of one page, “Farewell to . . .”, and their completion at the top of the next: “. . . love”. The recordings are not artificially punctuated but are subject to other constraints, and much of the “clowning” concerns the difficulty of finding the desired segments. The moment rediscovered, the last image of Petherbridge enfolding the machine is more affecting than Beckett’s “Krapp motionless staring before him”, and adds the tiniest moment of warmth to this cold work.

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