

# Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*: Remembering Kant, Forgetting Proust

I wrote recently, in English, a short stage monologue (20 minutes) of which Time is the indubitable villain.

— Samuel Beckett ([Letters 3: 155](#))<sup>1</sup>

I

The first volume of Samuel Beckett's letters from the period 1929–40 provides new insights into Beckett's intricate relationship with the writings of Marcel Proust, a relationship that has commonly been mediated through Beckett's early academic study *Proust*, written in 1930 and published in 1931.<sup>2</sup> Beckett's letters to Thomas McGreevy during the preparation of *Proust* lament both the duration of reading necessitated by Proust's monumental work – “And to think that I have to contemplate him at stool for 16 volumes!” ([Letters 1: 12](#)) – and a subsequent race against time to write the monograph. In July 1930, Beckett reported, “I can't start the Proust. Curse this hurry any how. [. . .] At least I have finished reading the bastard” (1: 26). By September, time is again of the essence: “I am working all day & most of the night to get this fucking Proust finished” (1: 46; emphasis in original).

In preference to working on *Proust* in July 1930, Beckett was “reading Schopenhauer. Everyone laughs at that,” although his motivation was contemplation of an “intellectual justification of unhappiness – the greatest that has ever been attempted” (1: 32–33). Beckett insisted that “I am not reading philosophy, nor caring whether he is right or wrong or a good or worthless metaphysician” (1: 33). Whether they are right or wrong or even qualify as philosophy at all, the prefaces to the first and second editions of Arthur Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* (1818 and 1844, respectively) were certainly read by Beckett. Schopenhauer's preface to the first edition cautions that “my work presupposes an acquaintance with the Kantian philosophy,” that “I start in large measure from what was achieved by the great Kant” (1: xv), and furthermore, that “the principal works of Kant” are “the most important phenomenon which has appeared in philosophy for two thousand years” (1: xv).<sup>3</sup> Schopenhauer's “Appendix: Criticism of the Kantian Philosophy” is itself a serviceable exposition of Kant, as required when his own “line of thought, different as its content is from the Kantian, is completely under its influence, and necessarily presupposes and starts from it” (1: 416–17). Considerably later, in January 1938, an underappreciated philosophical influence on Beckett would be delivered in eleven hefty volumes, when “[t]he entire works of Kant arrived from Munich[,] [. . .] two immense parcels that I could hardly carry from customs to taxi” ([Letters 1: 581](#)). In their analysis of *Samuel Beckett's Library*, Dirk Van Hulle and Mark Nixon find that Volume 11 was left with “traces of a sustained effort to read from cover to cover” (138). That last volume is Ernst Cassirer's *Kant's Life and Thought*, a commentary on the development and details of Kant's philosophy, with marginal pencil marks by Beckett on some fifty pages.

The Beckett-and-philosopher scenario has always been a staple strategy of Beckett criticism; indeed, Kant has featured to a limited extent as a purveyor of the idea of the sublime in relation to Beckett.<sup>4</sup> However, Kant's critique of metaphysics, the First rather than the Third Critique, can hamper the smooth operation of the philosophies of those seen as Beckett's more familiar companions, from Descartes through Sartre and Heidegger to Deleuze, insofar as their thinking involves metaphysical commitments. In Schopenhauer's words, if metaphysics has always been subject to "the rifle-fire of scepticism," Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781, revised 1787) represents the battery of "the heavy artillery" (2: 168). Schopenhauer incorporates many aspects of Kant's First Critique into his own philosophy, including an epistemology that defines metaphysics as "that region beyond all possibility of experience, wholly and for ever shut off from our knowledge by Kant" (1: xxvi). Beckett's own engagement with Kant's philosophy can certainly be dated earlier than 1938 and the delivery of the "entire works." In a letter to McGreevy in November 1930, Beckett reports, "I read a paper to M.L.S. on a nonexistent French poet – Jean du Chas – and wrote his poetry myself and that amused me for a couple of days" (1: 55). In this spoof paper, "Le Concentrisme," Beckett characterizes "Kant's Thing-in-itself" as "perfectly intelligible and perfectly inexplicable," which, as a "noumenon," is indeed the verdict of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (118). Subsequently, Beckett included material from the 1930 edition of Jules de Gaultier's *From Kant to Nietzsche* in the "Dream" Notebook, compiled during 1930–32. From 1932 to 1933, Beckett's engagement with Kant was much more sustained, as evidenced by his notes taken from Wilhelm Windelband's *A History of Philosophy* (1893, revised 1901), which are now held in the Trinity College, Dublin archives (TDC MS 10967: "History of Western Philosophy"). At Matthew Feldman's count, these notes, extracted from "the centripetal neo-Kantian, Wilhelm Windelband" (172), included "13 recto and verso sides to Windelband's 14 pages [. . .] setting out his view of Kant's greatest contribution" to philosophy (170), starting from *The Critique of Pure Reason*. Later in the 1930s, entries in Beckett's "Whoroscope" Notebook provide, as John Pilling records in "From a (W)horoscope to *Murphy*," "unambiguous evidence" of "the importance to Beckett of a distinctively German tradition, especially in regard to philosophy" (14), the "key figures being Kant, Schopenhauer and Fritz Mauthner" (3).

In the "Whoroscope" Notebook, Beckett returns to Gaultier's commentary on space and time as "forms" of sensibility in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*:

Now the great work of Kant, accomplished in the fifty pages of the TRANSCENDENTAL AESTHETIC, consists in his having demonstrated that space and time do not, on the one hand, have substantial reality and that, on the other hand, they are not properties of the object either; that, on the contrary, they belong to the knowing subject and that they are the forms of this subject's sensibility. ([Gaultier 66](#))<sup>5</sup>

As Gaultier continues, space and time are "part of the apparatus through which the object is apprehended" (66), or as Schopenhauer explains, "before Kant we were *in* time; now time is in us" (1: 424; emphasis in original). Our own sensibility imposes the forms of space and time under which all "phenomena" or "appearances" must be subsumed. "Phenomena" are the legitimate

field of inquiry of empiricism; by contrast, metaphysics seeks the thing-in-itself beyond appearances and our own forms of apprehension. Kant's "Transcendental Aesthetic" seeks to prove that "objects in themselves are not known to us at all, and that what we call outer objects are nothing other than mere representations of our sensibility" (*Critique* 162, §A30/B45). No unconditioned "object" can be apprehended to substantiate a metaphysical idea; metaphysics therefore becomes conceptual speculation, which always remains empty of corresponding content. Accordingly, Kant's epistemology has a "negative" design:

The greatest and perhaps only utility of all philosophy of pure reason is thus only negative, namely that it does not serve for expansion, as an organon, but rather, as a discipline, serves for the determination of boundaries, and instead of discovering truth it has only the silent merit of guarding against errors. (672, §A795/B823)

In its most basic terms, *The Critique of Pure Reason* is an exposition of what cannot be known.

By 1938, Beckett's notes were also encompassing lengthy transcriptions from Fritz Mauthner's *Contributions to a Critique of Language* (1901–02); one such passage returns us to Kant's critical philosophy again:

One could on the basis of Kant's works put together an unassailable critical theory of knowledge of "not knowing," and even more liberated one as that of the once famous "docta ignorantia" of Nicolaus Cusanus. In his negative thinking Kant is already the destroyer of everything; we bow before the intellect which in its strongest hours started the gigantic work, which in the form of the de-construction of language or of thought was necessary. (qtd. in [Feldman 174](#))<sup>6</sup>

Van Hulle and Nixon aim "to assess the amount of knowledge Beckett had to acquire before he was able to develop a poetics of unknowing" (xv); Kant's contribution to that poetics is vital. As P.J. Murphy argues in "Beckett and the Philosophers," "Kant's influence on Beckett has been almost totally underestimated [. . .] in part due to the fact that most critics were not aware that Beckett went back to Kant throughout the formative decade of the 1930s" (229). With Kant's retrenchment of possible knowledge taken into account, the relationship between Beckett's writings and other philosophical systems can also be rethought as often critical and parodic. It is not so much a matter of disputing other established philosophical links as reinterpreting the evaluative attitude taken toward them within Beckett's work.

*Immanuel Kants Werke*, which took more than two years to publish in Berlin between 1921 and 1923, is a rival in magnitude to Proust's novel. Beckett's letters on both Kant and Proust banter with McGreevy on the weighty materiality of their volumes, immense in space and epic in the duration of time required to read them. In more conceptual terms, space and time are Kantian tools that might serve to undo some of Proust's metaphysical profundities that *Krapp's Last Tape* invokes from *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Although "critics have long seen Krapp as a

derisory Marcel” ([Henning 144](#)), there is more to say about the play’s antagonistic relationship with Proust’s novel. *Krapp’s Last Tape* repeatedly degrades the ultimately spiritual aspirations of Proust’s Marcel to parodically physical and ludic terms. Proust is recalled, but incorrectly. The insertion of Kant into this intertextual quarrel provides a rationale for the movement between Marcel and Krapp to be toward profanity. One of Beckett’s favoured formulations, “the fruitful bathos of experience,” marked in the margin of Cassirer’s *Kant’s Life and Thought*,<sup>2</sup> points in the direction that *Krapp’s Last Tape* will take in relation to *À la recherche du temps perdu*. There is a debate to continue about the purpose of Beckett’s parody of Proust in *Krapp’s Last Tape* and also about Kant’s influence on a larger critique of metaphysical thought within Beckett’s work.

## II

In Proustian involuntary memory, transcendence of time and space is a vital element. In *À la recherche du temps perdu*, outside the miracle of involuntary memory, Marcel is “not situated somewhere outside Time, but was subject to its laws” ([Proust 1: 520](#)). For Proust, the “communication of our present self [. . .] with the past” is mediated only via chance meetings with an empirical object wherein “the essence of the past” is stored (3: 921). The first such object is a madeleine infused with tea which, in its interaction with the senses of the narrator, inaugurates transcendence of the spatio-temporal frame. In Beckett’s encapsulation in *Proust*, “The whole of Proust’s world comes out of a teacup” (34).

The sensory experience of the madeleine is focused, in Julia Kristeva’s words, on “a pure form of oral sensuousness,” a contact “which is the most infantile and archaic that a living being can possibly experience with an object or a person” (43–44). In *Krapp’s Last Tape*, Krapp duplicates only the form of this experience in his opening routine. A blank tape reel is first rejected from a drawer in Krapp’s table; a second exploration provides better material for oral stimulation, “a large banana” (215). The authentically Proustian experience is one of inner tumult, a “palpitating in the depths of my being,” a “confused and chaotic” struggle within a consciousness assailed by a “whirling medley of stirred-up colours” ([Proust 1: 49](#)). Krapp, banana in mouth and under close scrutiny downstage, remains “staring vacuously before him,” evidently unassailed (216). Involuntary memory does not permit second attempts at stimulation; as Beckett observes in *Proust*, the madeleine’s powers of invocation are conditional upon it reactivating a “long-forgotten taste” (34). Marcel finds that “a second mouthful” yields “nothing more than in the first,” “a third [. . .] gives me rather less than the second” – “It is time to stop; the potion is losing its magic” (1: 48). Krapp, however, desires, after many mouthfuls of the first, a second banana. Krapp converts the chance encounter with a sensory stimulus described by Proust into a ritual to be repeated. Krapp returns to his starting position in order to repeat his own parodic duplication of the essential Proustian incident. The motions of time just past are mechanically recreated in time present as Krapp unlocks a second drawer to retrieve a second banana; again he “puts end of banana in his mouth and remains motionless, staring vacuously before him” (216). Inverting Proustian rules, Krapp’s revelation is attendant upon this repetition of the stimulus: “Finally he has

*an idea, puts banana in his waistcoat pocket, the end emerging, and goes with all the speed he can muster backstage into darkness*" (216). A page in Beckett's production notebook for the 1969 Schiller Theater—Werkstatt production of *Das letzte Band* details the nature of Krapp's idea; the page is headed "*CHOICE CHANCE*" with the Proustian stipulation "*CHANCE*" crossed out (but left fully legible):

At curtain up he is thinking of the story of the boat and trying to remember which year it was (how old he was). Doesn't succeed. Tries again during banana 1. (Re seated at table still tries to remember.) Remembers all of a sudden as he starts banana 2 (thanks to  $39 = 13 \times 3$ , which had struck him at the time) and hastens away to fetch the ledger that will allow him to identify box and tape. ([Beckett, \*Theatrical Notebooks\* 49](#); emphasis in original)

Krapp remembers the correct reference to his tape-recording about an experience, not the experience itself. Krapp's power of recall is what Beckett calls in *Proust* "an instrument of reference instead of an instrument of discovery" (30), the very opposite of involuntary memory. Marcel's consciousness has the capacity to "miraculously" transverse "enormous distances," invoking an experience that will "come rushing upon us with almost the speed of light" ([Proust 3: 950](#)). This instantaneous mental retrieval is degraded into Krapp's "[*]aborious walk*" (215) to collect together his cumbersome externalized memory machinery from the darkness of his closet.

The interval between the consumption of his first and second bananas is marked by Krapp's mishap with a portion of discarded peel. For James Knowlson, the incident maintains a low reputation as "clownish stage business," a "pratfall" ("[Introduction](#)" xv), or as for actor Amiel Schotz, "a tired piece of slapstick" (48). Such an event has portentous meaning in a Proustian context, however. The precise phrasing of Beckett's stage directions redoubles the allusion. Krapp has ceased to wait for the revelations of involuntary memory to attend the first banana: "*Finally he bites off the end, turns aside and begins pacing to and fro at edge of stage, in the light, [ . . . ] meditatively eating banana. He treads on skin, slips, nearly falls, recovers himself, stoops and peers at skin*" (216). As Beckett argues in *Proust*, one of the primary powers of involuntary memory is that which enables Marcel also to "recover himself," to recover "the lost reality of himself, the reality of his lost self" (41). Krapp's recovery of himself is again a physical manifestation of the psychic action of Proust's narrator. Krapp's slip has its own peculiar counterpart, the "chance reduplication of a precarious equilibrium" (70), as Beckett puts it in *Proust*, experienced by Marcel in the Guermantes' courtyard. This decisive instance of involuntary memory at last reveals to the narrator his literary vocation. This slip, with the "imperious suddenness" of "a chance happening" ([Proust 3: 900](#)), restores to Marcel all the sensations experienced simultaneously with its earlier occurrence in the baptistry of St. Mark's and thus delivers to consciousness the "radiant essence" of Venice as experienced then ([Beckett, \*Proust\* 70](#)). Beckett has reactivated this particular Proustian incident before: in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, Belacqua reports that "[t]he wattmen tittered as I tottered on purpose for radiant Venice to solve my life" (82). When Thomas McGreevy visited Venice in 1930, Beckett

answered his card with a similar enquiry: “Did you stumble in Saint Marks?” (*Letters* 1: 54). The slip is a favoured Proustian device for Beckett, chiefly for its comic value. In his usage, the slip is relieved of all ability to disturb its victims by any invasion of visions or vocations. The process of diminution is sustained: in Proust, Marcel’s stumble is enacted to “the evident amusement of the great crowd of chauffeurs” (3: 899); Belacqua performs to the titters of mere wattmen; McGreevy is subject only to a tease. Krapp has the cause of his slip reduced to the banana skin of slapstick comedy and relinquishes his balance in return only for acknowledgement of his buffoonery by Beckett’s audience.

### III

In a play concerned with memory, time, aging, literary ambitions, and the replaying of time past, one would not expect Beckett to be careless about allusions to Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu*. The minor idiosyncrasies shared by Krapp and Marcel are perhaps too numerous to be the result of fortuitous echoes. Where Marcel reports “inhuman emptiness” (1: 462), Krapp concludes that “[t]he earth might be uninhabited” (223). Marcel’s admission that, in regard to selected women, he “provided each of them with a legend” (1: 462) precisely describes Krapp’s enigmatic references to a “girl in a shabby green coat,” the mysterious “Bianca in Kedar Street” (218), and the girl in the punt distinguished by a scratch on her thigh sustained while, of all things, “[p]icking gooseberries” (221). Krapp and Marcel share a *cagibi* or den, a “place of refuge,” especially useful as a retreat ensuring the “inviolable solitude” necessary for “sensual gratification” (*Proust* 1:13). Set by the “shore of that lake in the Bois,” Marcel, like Krapp, relates an episode involving a rejected lover and a detail concerning the “the fusion of our shadows” (3: 172–73). Marcel’s asthmatic breathlessness has in Krapp’s constipation a less ethereal counterpart for the suggestion of internal blockage and narcissistic self-enclosure. The death of Krapp’s mother is relayed “when [. . .] the blind went down” (220); for Marcel, as described in Beckett’s *Proust*, “the vision of his grandmother begins to fade” following her death, until “[i]t is redeemed for a moment [. . .] by the drawing of a blind in a railway carriage” (43). While “mother lay a-dying” (219), Krapp, literally and parodically, doubles Marcel’s “rule of the three adjectives” (2: 977). Krapp, for the benefit of the tape, instigates the rule of six adjectives: “A small, old, black, hard, solid rubber ball” (220). The “unerring dexterity” of Mme de Cambremer in achieving a diminishment through her three adjectives (“delicious – charming – nice”) guides Marcel into recognizing their purposeful employment as a disguised insult (2:1123).

Krapp shares two more notable linguistic peculiarities with Marcel. The magic of names for Marcel is attendant on “Swann,” “that name which, at the moment when I heard it, seemed to me fuller, more portentous than any other, because it was heavy with the weight of all the occasions on which I had secretly uttered it in my mind” (1: 157). Krapp’s revelry in sound swaps portentousness for vacancy: “Spooooo! (*Happy smile* [. . .])” (216). But Marcel also experiences “that law of change which made these loved words unintelligible to us” (3: 941). Krapp shares this linguistic disability too:

TAPE:[. . .] where mother lay a-dying, in the late autumn, after her long viduity (*Krapp gives a start*) and the –  
(*Krapp switches off, winds back tape a little, bends his ear closer to machine, switches on*) – a-dying,  
after her long viduity, and the –  
(*Krapp switches off, raises his head, stares blankly before him. His lips move in the syllables of “viduity.”*  
*No sound. He gets up, goes backstage into darkness, comes back with an enormous dictionary, lays it*  
*on table, sits down and looks up the word.*) (219)

As Marcel discovers, “even our strongest feelings [. . .] at the end of a few years have vanished from our hearts and become for us merely a word which we do not understand” (3: 940). Marcel’s attempts to reactivate such feelings through the rigours of involuntary memory and artistic exploration are reduced, for Krapp, to the scanning of another reference book, his “enormous dictionary,” wherein meanings erased from consciousness may be more prosaically rediscovered.

These Proustian moments, shared images, episodes, and peculiarities are not simply reproduced; *Krapp’s Last Tape’s* remembrance of Proust, the master of fiction concerning memory, is faulty, distorted, and parodic. To “forget” Proust in such a fashion is the best designed of literary insults. Krapp’s unerring impulse is to degrade any moments of Proustian allusion. According to Marcel, had Mme de Cambremer stretched her powers of diminutive description to a fourth adjective, “nothing would have remained of the initial amiability” (2: 978); Krapp’s assessment of “moments” is permitted that fourth entry: “Moments. Her moments, my moments. (*Pause.*) The dog’s moments” (220). In Krapp’s flawed reproduction of Proust, nothing remains of the initial portentousness. The accent is exclusively upon diminuendo.

The grandeur of Krapp’s past vision of his own “opus . . . magnum” (218) is dissipated by the dismal commercial results of his labours: “Seventeen copies sold, of which eleven at trade price to free circulating libraries beyond the seas” (222). Marcel’s vision of his literary vocation, commencing with the stumble on the cobbles in the Guermantes’ courtyard, is, by contrast, consolidated as “[h]e is ushered into the library” (*Proust 70*). In this location, Marcel finds “suddenly illuminated [. . .] the whole purpose of my life and perhaps of art itself (3: 923). Krapp and Marcel are brought to the same position: each has at his disposal a library where the volumes or tapes contain “the history of my own life” (3: 922). Each has deferred the commencement of the prospective magnum opus in favour of sensual pleasures; each perceives that it is his own “darkness” that is to constitute the material of his art. Marcel, sharing the tropology of light and darkness of Krapp’s “vision” on the jetty, realizes “that this life that we live in half-darkness can be illumined [. . .] within the confines of a book!” (3: 1088). The raw materials of art are to be found in the artist’s own past experience:

And then a new light [. . .] shone suddenly within me. And I understood that all these materials for a work of literature were simply my past life; I understood that they had come to me, in frivolous

pleasures, in indolence, in tenderness, in unhappiness, and that I had stored them up without divining the purpose for which they were destined [...]. (3: 935)

The end of Proust's work thus leaves us at the point where Marcel's is ready to begin.

Krapp's storage system of fragmented pieces of past empirical experience is exemplary up to the point of the stage time of the play. At its end, Krapp's ledger and tapes are scattered on the floor, to be kicked aside if they should impede his path to the closet for a drink to dull the very senses that are charged with the collection of material for the artist. Marcel reaches toward the transcendence and synthesis of empirical experience; Krapp merely consolidates the havoc and disorder of undigested moments of experiential material stored on the trampled tapes. Marcel as artist "remembers only things that are general" (3: 937); sensory experience, the individual and particular, can be processed by conceptual understanding into an artistic expression of universal significance. Marcel has a precise plan that could deal with the "mere rough draft" of the punt passage on Krapp's tape:

if [...] we set ourselves to work, [...] literature, recommencing the ruined work of amorous illusion, will give a sort of second life to sentiments which have ceased to exist. And certainly we are obliged to re-live our individual suffering, with the courage of the doctor who over and over again practises on his own person some dangerous injection. But at the same time we have to conceptualise it in a general form which will in some measure enable us to escape from its embrace, which will turn all mankind into sharers in our pain, and which is even able to yield us a certain joy. (3: 942–43)

Krapp replays the punt passage in accordance with the experiment Marcel advocates but cannot reach the "disinterested" state of the artist (3: 946), where his particular experience is transformed into a general abstraction, fit for use in an art dealing in essences and universality. Krapp's experience remains undigested and unsynthesized, fragmentary and inchoate in its sensuous origins. Where Marcel achieves an intellectual and imaginative transcendence of particular experiences, Krapp is equipped merely to replay the same raw material over again.

For Marcel, the empirical, sensory impression is the ground from which the conceptual abstraction arises; that which is located in time and space is the material from which a timeless and universal essence might be drawn. While Marcel avoids the unanchored speculations of metaphysics entirely disconnected from empirical evidence, the difficulty remains that no empirical evidence is fully sufficient to substantiate his desired abstractions and generalities. Indeed, intellectual insight must surpass its constitutive sensory experiences if empirical fragmentation is to be transcended. In Beckett's analysis in *Proust*, however, it is the preconceptual sensory impression that offers "enchantment" and becomes the privileged element:

when the object is perceived as particular and unique and not merely the member of a family, when it appears independent of any general notion and detached from the sanity of a cause, isolated and inexplicable in the light of ignorance, then and then only may it be a source of enchantment. (22–23)

Here the particular impression, which is sensory and unique, would be subsumed in and thus eliminated by conceptual abstraction. The “work of the intelligence” (3: 914) recommended by Proust is elided by Beckett to “the prejudices of the intelligence,” prejudices which abstract “from any given sensation [. . .] whatever word or gesture, sound or perfume, cannot be fitted into the puzzle of a concept” (71–72).

In the double form of apprehension required for secure knowledge in Kant’s epistemology, sensory intuition, privileged by Beckett’s *Proust*, and intellectual conceptualization, privileged by Proust himself, are both equally necessary:

Neither of these properties is to be preferred to the other. Without sensibility no object would be given to us, and without understanding none would be thought. Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind. It is thus just as necessary to make the mind’s concepts sensible (i.e., to add an object to them in intuition) as it is to make its intuitions understandable (i.e., to bring them under concepts). [. . .] The understanding is not capable of intuiting anything, and the senses are not capable of thinking anything. Only from their unification can cognition arise. ([Kant, Critique 193–94, §A51/B75–76](#))

Insofar as Proust offends against the first stricture, via transcendence and abstraction toward empty concepts, Beckett’s corrective analysis in *Proust* pushes against the blindness of preconceptual intuition.<sup>8</sup> Krapp’s intellectual failure to assimilate the fragments of autobiography stored externally on his tapes is the reverse image of Marcel’s ability to transcend and conceptualize his own sensory experience. Where Krapp wanders blindly among material remnants, Marcel risks evaporation among concepts emptied of empirical content. The emphasis upon sensory experience in *Krapp’s Last Tape* retains as its corollary an insistence upon the conditions of intuition, the Kantian frames of time and space. In Kant’s account, it is an a priori deduction that time and space constitute the irreducible “form” of empirical sensibility. In Kant’s epistemology, “all objects of the senses [. . .] are in time, and necessarily stand in relations of time” (181, §A34/B51). Metaphysical exploration, the search for the essential, “elevates itself entirely above all instruction from experience” (109, §Bxiv), becoming instead “a groping among mere concepts” (110, §Bxiii) that are necessarily empty. As Beckett had noted from Windelband’s *A History of Philosophy*, in Kant “the only object of human knowledge is experience, i.e. phenomenal experience,” with the consequence that “[k]nowledge of things in themselves through ‘sheer reason,’ extension beyond experience, is a chimera” (qtd. in [Feldman 170](#); emphasis in original). Marcel violates the boundaries laid down in Kant’s epistemology in pursuit of his essential, and therefore timeless, self. It is this excursion, beyond all possible knowledge as defined by Kant, that Krapp cannot follow.

## IV

When Proust’s Marcel attempts to reunite a concept drawn from the past with a present empirical intuition, both sides of the requisite apprehension are fulfilled, for “the actual shock to my senses

[. . .] had added to the dreams of the imagination the concept of 'existence' which they usually lack" (3: 905). The greater claim made explicit in Proust's final volume *Le temps retrouvé*, however, is an escape from the frame of space and time itself. Here, according to Beckett's *Proust*, "Time is not recovered, it is obliterated" (75). Marcel, in Beckett's account, is granted access to "the total past sensation, not its echo nor its copy, but the sensation itself," its return "annihilating every spatial and temporal restriction" (72). The subject under the influence of involuntary memory is simultaneously located both in the present and the past. To reconcile this temporal division, Marcel concludes that some essential core of the subject must also transcend time:

the past was made to encroach upon the present and I was made to doubt whether I was in the one or the other. The truth surely was that the being within me which had enjoyed these impressions had enjoyed them because they had in them something that was common to a day long past and to the present, because in some way they were extra-temporal, and this being made its appearance only when, through one of these identifications of the present with the past, it was likely to find itself in the one and only medium in which it could exist and enjoy the essence of things, that is to say: outside time. (3: 904)

The interdependence of empirical contingency and the frames of time and space ensure that "the essence of things" is indeed only available "outside time." As we have seen, such also is the realm of metaphysics and empty ideas defined by Kant.

In Beckett's analysis in *Proust*, too, given that this "mystical experience" delivers "an extratemporal essence," "it follows that the communicant is for the moment an extratemporal being" (75). That involuntary memory can excavate past experience demonstrates the fundamental continuity of the subject, an unchanging kernel of the self that must persist through time. Marcel can celebrate this discovery of his own essential and unified extra-temporal self, or what Beckett calls "the Proustian solution," for "Death is dead because Time is dead" (75). In Beckett's own reworking of this scenario in *Krapp's Last Tape*, the "Proustian solution" is void. Any continuous identity for Krapp is intimated only through repeated attempts at self-repudiation. The taped representation of Krapp-at-39 is driven to cancel the authenticity of an earlier incarnation:

TAPE: Hard to believe I was ever that young whelp. The voice! Jesus! And the aspirations! (*Brief laugh in which Krapp joins.*) And the resolutions! (*Brief laugh in which Krapp joins.*) To drink less, in particular. (*Brief laugh of Krapp alone.*) [. . .] Sneers at what he calls his youth and thanks to God that it's over. (*Pause.*) False ring there. (218)

Despite his present perplexity concerning the condition of "Being – or remaining?" (219), the discontinuity of identity that Krapp wishes to emphasize on his last tape is thwarted by the repetition of contempt phrased in the present of the play in parallel with Krapp-at-39: "Just been listening to that stupid bastard I took myself for thirty years ago, hard to believe I was ever as bad as that. Thank God that's all done with anyway. (*Pause.*) The eyes she had!" (222).

An insert in the performance text, as worked out in Beckett's Schiller Theater production notebook, revises the record of Krapp's last tape at this point. Again Krapp repeats rather than transcends: "that stupid bastard I took myself for thirty years ago, hard to believe I was ever as bad as that. [The voice! Jesus!]" (Beckett, *Theatrical Notebooks* 9). The square brackets mark an addition to the text to repeat more of the phraseology of Krapp-at-39. In the San Quentin Theatre Workshop production in 1977, Beckett's direction of Rick Cluchey as Krapp explicitly calls for an "echo-effect," as the live actor "should use here tone and voice of the tape voice" when making the new recording (Cluchey and Haerdter 140). The mystical Proustian being exempted from the flux of time is supplemented by the extra-temporal Krapp, constituted by a consistent self-loathing, a persistent desire for bananas, a continued preference for jottings on the backs of envelopes rather than any sustained engagement with the autobiographical magnum opus, a steady isolation, and chronic constipation. The nature of the self, as retained through time into old age, is such that Krapp is driven to repeated and self-defeating attempts to disown it. Krapp's characteristic propensity for failure and humiliation enables him to recognize, in both Beckettian and Proustian terms, "that stranger whose contempt would cause one most pain – oneself (Proust 64).

Marcel's existence as "an extra-temporal being," a being that is outside time, begins at a certain moment in time. The escape from time has its own temporal date: "my anxiety on the subject of my death had ceased at the moment when I had unconsciously recognized the taste of the little madeleine, since the being which at that moment I had been was an extra-temporal being and therefore unalarmed by the vicissitudes of the future" (3: 904). Marcel's extra-temporal experience, "though it was of eternity, had been fugitive" (3: 908); that is, its existence is restricted in time, the very limit that it is supposed to escape. Moreover, involuntary memory, the process responsible for this "extra-temporal joy" (3: 911), is dependent upon particular sensory experiences that also can be experienced only in time. Experience within time apparently leads to its opposite, experience outside time. In Kantian terms, as the extra-temporal violates the very possibility of empirical intuition, any account of it is necessarily empty. The freedom granted to Marcel to surpass the frames of time and space matches that assumed by the metaphysician; both, in their dissatisfaction with temporal succession and mere appearances, are betrayed into the production of concepts that, in principle, cannot be made substantial.

Lacking any independent existence, the objects of empty ideas can never be possessed by the subject. The impossibility of such possession is the conclusion of Beckett's *Proust*. Marcel, in relation to Albertine, transforms this negative entailment into its optimistic opposite:

When I had realized [. . .] that my love was not so much a love for her as a love in myself, I might have drawn various conclusions from this subjective nature of my love and in particular deduced that, being a mental state, it might survive the person for some time, but also that, having no real connexion with that person, it must, like every mental state, even the most lasting, find itself one day obsolete, be

“replaced,” and that when that day came everything that seemed to attach me so sweetly, indissolubly, to the memory of Albertine would no longer exist for me. (3: 568)

Marcel’s idea of Albertine is disconnected from any existing physical being. Where Beckett’s *Proust* maintains that this idea or dream cannot be fulfilled, Marcel admits the fictional nature of the idea to gain reassurance that, as a mental state, its demand for fulfillment is merely transient. A steady turnover of such “unreal enchantment[s]” (3: 381) is sufficient to emphasize their “enchantment” rather than their “unreality” and maintain at least the self-possession of the narrator. Yet the elevated procession of Marcel’s mental states retains a perilous proximity to Krapp’s habit of “*staring vacuously before him*” (216). Mental vacancy is only problematically filled by intense concentration upon empty ideas.

The metaphysical and artistic ambitions of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, predicated upon “the light of the understanding” (Beckett, *Krapp* 220), lose their prominence in *Krapp’s Last Tape* to a mimed imbecility gratified by minor sensual comforts. The artist now “*puts end of banana in his mouth and remains motionless, staring vacuously before him*” (215–16) because the very absence of thought must be portrayed in physical terms on stage. The opening mime goes to considerable trouble to raise doubts as to whether Krapp, like Willie in *Happy Days*, is “conceivably on the qui vive” (148). Even if they were somehow considered to occur, the transports of involuntary memory are certainly not presented to the audience of *Krapp’s Last Tape*. The external setting of the play does not transform itself in accordance with the mental state of its protagonist, whereas this transformation is precisely effected by the narrative mode of *À la recherche du temps perdu*. For Marcel, given a stimulus to involuntary memory, the internal arena is able to superimpose a past empirical context upon that of the present. As Beckett writes in *Proust*:

just as the Piazza di San Marco burst its way into the courtyard and there asserted its luminous and fleeting domination, so now the library is successively invaded by a forest, the high tide breaking on the shore at Balbec, the vast dining-room of the Grand Hotel flooded, like an aquarium, with the sunset and the evening sea, and lastly Combray and its “ways” and the deferential transmission of a sour and distinguished prose, shaped and stated by his mother’s voice, muted and sweetened almost to a lullaby, unwinding all night long its reassuring foil of sound before a child’s insomnia. (71)

Krapp’s “unwinding [. . .] foil of sound” does not shift his physical location, which is proofed against the returning flood of the lake and its punt. Even for Marcel, the effort to “re-create the former scene” is still opposed by the “actual scene [. . .] with all the resistance of material inertia” (3: 907). Eventually, the mental exertions of Marcel and the modulations of scene possible in narrative fiction cooperate to overcome the restriction of the present empirical context and allow the incursion of the past to inform the sensory data of the narrator completely. It is “material inertia,” however, that entraps and defines Krapp externally and internally. The stage set is fixed. It will not transform itself into the manifestation of Krapp’s past merely upon the word of a taped memory.

## V

Sufficient family resemblance is maintained between the behaviour of Krapp's stage props and their more respectable Proustian ancestors to mark their present degradation. *À la recherche du temps perdu* details the importance of metallic rings for Marcel and concludes with a meditation upon the chiming of a bell. Krapp is supplied with the means to produce a series of metallic clatters. Marcel's involuntary memory is provoked when "[a] servant, trying unsuccessfully not to make a noise, chanced to knock a spoon against a plate" (3: 900). This sound recalls for him "the noise of the hammer with which a railwayman had remedied some defect on a wheel of the train while we stopped near the little wood" (3: 901). Among Beckett's modifications in the San Quentin Theatre Workshop production was the injunction that the curtain of Krapp's closet was to be "hung on a rod with heavy metal rings to make a clattering noise when opened" ([Cluchey and Haerdter 133](#)). Krapp's tapes were also reassigned from their original cardboard boxes to "seven biscuit tins" (133). The clattering of the tins and tapes as Krapp scatters them on the floor is precisely timed to pre-empt a "bell" as the tape plays back:

TAPE: *Strong voice, rather pompous, clearly Krapp's at a much earlier time.*) Thirty-nine today, sound as a –  
(*Settling himself more comfortably he knocks one of the boxes off the table, curses, switches off, sweeps boxes and ledger violently to the ground, winds tape back to beginning, switches on, resumes posture.*)  
Thirty-nine today, sound as a bell [. . .]. (217)

Ultimately, in *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Marcel's winding back to his beginning, to his childhood, is achieved as "the peal – resilient, ferruginous, interminable, fresh and shrill – of the bell on the garden gate" sounds "again in my ears" (3: 1105). This resurgence of memory proves to Marcel the fundamental continuity of his consciousness, the "unbroken series" of its moments:

When the bell of the garden gate had pealed, I already existed and from that moment onwards, for me still to be able to hear that peal, there must have been no break in continuity, no single second at which I had ceased or rested from existing, from thinking, from being conscious of myself, since that moment from long ago still adhered to me and I could still find it again, could retrace my steps to it merely by descending to a greater depth within myself. (3: 1105–6)

On his last tape, Krapp records a supplementary account of this impulse to "retrace [his] steps" toward the bells:

Lie propped up in the dark – and wander. Be again in the dingle on a Christmas Eve, gathering holly, the red-berried. (*Pause.*) Be again on Croghan on a Sunday morning, in the haze, with the bitch, stop and listen to the bells. (*Pause.*) And so on. (*Pause.*) Be again, be again. (*Pause.*) All that old misery. (*Pause.*) Once wasn't enough for you. (223)

Krapp issues what could be a summary of the Proustian autobiographical magnum opus, “Be again, be again,” infiltrated by the weary impertinence of “And so on.” Beckett’s Schiller Theater notebook provides additional directions for the delivery and emphases of this section:

Leg dich ins Dunkel [Lie propped up in the dark] to Sei wieder, sei wieder [Be again, be again] uniformly quiet and simple, [erasure] with body still. This frozen body & voice, on All die salte Elend [All that old misery]. But not anticipate extreme violence of Ein Mal war [Once wasn’t enough for you] etc, with bowed head. (*Theatrical Notebooks* 233; emphasis in original)

This “extreme violence” attacks the basis of the Proustian epic. Contingent circumstances make a difference to the desirability of an escape from linear time to “[b]e again.” For Marcel, “[o]nce wasn’t enough,” but for Krapp, the desire for repetition is finally limited to the playback of the punt scene. It is the fault of the serial medium, whether the tape or a life lived in linear time, that other unwanted episodes must be dragged back with it. Searching for an invocation of the sensuality of the punt episode, Krapp happens instead upon his spiritual “vision” revelation, recorded on the same tape. This vision has decayed through time; what was once life and art’s inspiration has been forgotten and its chance replay is included in the play only to be angrily cut off. Three times Krapp “switches off impatiently, winds tape forward, switches on again” (220). In his production notes for the Schiller Theater, Beckett revises his direction to have Krapp “winding feverishly forward without cutting sound” (*Theatrical Notebooks* 105), producing a “crescendo” of “unintelligible gabble” (229). In this notebook, Krapp “[l]ooks angrily at the tape-recorder” (104); hearing “[s]piritually,” Krapp “[s]trikes table with right hand” (225). As in the San Quentin Theatre Workshop production, “[w]hat he cannot bear [. . .] is the reminder of his [. . .] spiritual adventures, ‘all that business of the vision’” (Beckett; qtd. in [Cluchey and Haerdter 139](#)). Krapp is determined not to listen to the replay, and so no full statement of Krapp’s vision is given, despite its supposed existence in verbal terms on spool five from box three.

The vision seemed to take the form of a moment of metaphysical insight at age thirty-nine; now, at sixty-nine, Krapp follows Kant’s dismissal of such supposed revelations. As the tape is wound on, we are given only fragments of exalted language, with the reminder of the vision diminished to “gabble.” For Kant, the determinate content of such “visions” is always absent:

[E]ach of these questions concerns an object that can be given nowhere but in our thoughts, namely the absolutely unconditioned totality of the synthesis of appearances. If we cannot say or settle anything certain about these questions on the basis of our own concepts, then we must not pass the blame on to the subject matter, as hiding itself from us; for such a subject matter (because it is encountered nowhere outside our idea) cannot be given to us at all [. . .]. (*Critique* 506, §A481–82/B509–10)

Krapp’s missing metaphysical moment, “when suddenly I saw the whole thing” (220), presumes apprehension of what Kant disallows above, “the absolutely unconditioned totality of the synthesis of appearances.” For Kant, “an absolute whole [. . .] is not itself any perception” (507,

§A484/B512; emphasis removed). In such cases, “your object is merely in your brain and cannot be given at all outside it; hence all you have to worry about is agreeing with yourself (507, §A484/B512). For Krapp, it is this reminder of the spiritual aspirations of a past self that marks a decisive break in his continuous identity. Krapp’s present impulses repudiate the former “miracle” of wholesale spiritual insight (220); he winds the tape on until he finds an instance of extreme physical specificity instead: “my face in her breasts and my hand on her” (220). As the “vision” is emptied of significance, the punt episode, itself formally a scene of renunciation, is replayed three times. In time present, the sensuality of this past incident has degenerated into perfunctory transactions with a “[b]ony old ghost of a whore” (222), barely made of live flesh and blood.

Incidents originally found in *À la recherche du temps perdu* suffer this degeneration in their passage to parody in *Krapp’s Last Tape*. Spiritual intoxication is degraded into the presentation of a stage drunk. Instantaneous transportation through mental space is confounded in Krapp’s laborious physical movements. Marcel’s stumble on the cobbles, which proffers his key to life and art, is re-enacted as a slip on a banana skin. The intellectual experience drawn from the taste of the madeleine reappears as the vacuous sucking of the end of a banana. The peal of Marcel’s childhood bell becomes the clattering of Krapp’s tin boxes as they are swept to the floor. Involuntary memory can evoke past items and experiences in their original and integral form; *Krapp’s Last Tape* does not collude with this delusive reproduction, which seems to offer an exception from the differences attendant on the action of space and time. What is produced in *Krapp’s Last Tape* is a parodic relationship between itself and Proust founded on difference and similarity simultaneously.

For Pierre Chabert in the Théâtre d’Orsay production in 1975, the preparation of Krapp’s tapes constituted “one of the most disturbing aspects of the acting,” for the tapes require a problematic “relationship between two voices, different yet similar [. . .] a voice that is a strange echo of itself (90). Marcel, as “[s]omeone offered to re-introduce me to a friend of my youth,” suffers a dislocation between the aural and the visual of the same order:

The familiar voice seemed to be emitted by a gramophone more perfect than any I had ever heard, for, though it was the voice of my friend, it issued from the mouth of a corpulent gentleman with greying hair whom I did not know, and I could only suppose that somehow artificially, by a mechanical device, the voice of my old comrade had been lodged in the frame of this stout elderly man who might have been anybody. (3: 984–85)

Such distressing physical distortion, entwined with intimations of shared identity, figures Marcel’s own relationship with Krapp. As Marcel’s degenerate double, Krapp shares the role of “hoary clown” with Marcel’s “personal enemy,” M. d’Argencourt, now an “old dotard” whose “limbs were all of a tremble and the features of what had once been a haughty countenance [. . .] permanently relaxed in an expression of smiling idiocy” (3: 961–62). In *Le temps retrouvé*, this reception of aged characters imposes upon Marcel “a spectacular and dramatic effect which threatened to

raise against my enterprise the gravest of all objections” (3: 959–60). That objection is physical decline and decay that mark simply the passing of time.

*Krapp's Last Tape* elaborates substantially upon Beckett's final annotation in his edition of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, which he used in the composition of *Proust* in 1930. As reproduced in facsimile by Van Hulle and Nixon, the marginal comment “Balls” indicates that all was not well in Beckett's estimation of Proust's epic project even at this point (18).<sup>9</sup> *Krapp's Last Tape* restores the inexorable Kantian frames of time and space to the experiences of its protagonist, an act that knocks Proustian ideas from their unsteady “stilts” to fall down into parodic physicality (3: 1107). From Wilhelm Windelband's *A History of Philosophy*, Jules de Gaultier's *From Kant to Nietzsche*, and the delivery of *Immanuel Kants Werke*, Beckett had available an epistemology to substantiate his succinct intuition in 1930 that Proust's transcendence of time and space tottered precariously over empty foundations.

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### NOTES

1. This comment by Samuel Beckett appears in a letter to Marc Wilkinson dated 28 June 1958. The “short stage monologue” would be published as *Krapp's Last Tape* in the next issue of *Evergreen Review* that year.

2. An important early archival study of this dialogue is John Pilling's “Beckett's *Proust*” of 1976, with its consideration of the marginalia and underscoring within the *Nouvelle Revue Française* edition of *À la recherche du temps perdu* used by Beckett in 1930. See also, for example, [Zurbrugg](#); [Reid](#); and [Bryden and Topping](#).

3. Dirk Van Hulle and Mark Nixon in *Samuel Beckett's Library* provide ample archival evidence for Beckett taking note of Schopenhauer's instructions to read Kant. According to Van Hulle and Nixon,

The second volume of Schopenhauer's works – *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* – only shows reading traces in the prefaces to the first and second edition. In the “Vorrede zur ersten Auflage” Beckett has drawn a pencil line next to the passage where Schopenhauer urges his readers to first read Immanuel Kant's major works.

(150–51)

Additionally, “The only other mark in the subsequent volumes of the complete works is again a reference to the ‘all-shattering Kant’” (151).

4. Bjørn K Myskja's *The Sublime in Kant and Beckett: Aesthetic Judgement, Ethics and Literature* is based on a reading of Beckett's *Molloy* in comparison with Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason* and *Critique of Judgement*. Myskja's priority is thus Kantian aesthetics and ethics, not epistemology. In his essay “Beckett's Critique of Kant,” P.J. Murphy has also left the well-beaten track of Cartesian and existential philosophy to identify Kant as “the seminal modern philosopher who has exercised a decisive vision-shaping influence on Beckett” (205). Murphy's case often focuses on Beckett's prose and reaches toward “the more affirmative dimensions of Beckett's art” (220). My case will turn instead toward what Murphy terms “endarkenment” (218), the inability to know, that can also be drawn from Kant's critiques prior to his own efforts at reconstruction and affirmation. Elsewhere, the relevance of Kant to Beckett is a moot point: Jean-Michel Rabaté ventures that “Kant *can* provide an entry point for a philosophically-inflected reading of Beckett” (707; emphasis in original), while Garin Dowd admits this inflection mainly via the “Kant in which Deleuze is interested [. . .] – in other words Nietzsche” (60–61). However, the scant attention to Kant in Beckett studies is typified by the collection *Beckett and Philosophy* (2002), edited by Richard Lane, where, of three brief references to Kant, just one directly relates his work to Beckett. Recent empirical

scholarship devoted to Beckett's letters, notebooks, and journals may provide enough evidence to begin to redress the balance.

5. Beckett cites this passage from Gaultier in the original French in the "Whoroscope" Notebook (61'). A French transcription is published in Van Hulle and Nixon (248n 56).

6. I am extremely grateful to Matthew Feldman for his generosity in providing me with private sight of his full transcription of Beckett's notes on Mauthner in TCD MS 10971/5/1–4 and also other typescripts of unpublished Beckett notebooks.

7. Beckett's pencil mark in the margin to highlight this phrase appears on page 97 of Cassirer's *Kants Leben und Lehre*, Volume 11 of *Immanuel Kants Werke*. Beckett's copy of Cassirer's study is displayed online in digital facsimile by the Samuel Beckett Digital Archive Project (<http://www.beckettarchive.org>), complete with his marginal marks and comments over another fifty of its pages. The formulation was reproduced in Beckett's "Whoroscope" Notebook, alongside other excerpts from Cassirer. Most famously, it is also interpolated into the addenda of *Watt* (254). The phrase is originally hidden in a note to the appendix to Kant's *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (125). The *Prolegomena* was Volume 4 of Beckett's edition of Kant's works, but the marginal mark in Cassirer indicates that *Kants Leben und Lehre* was Beckett's source.

8. Beckett's position in *Proust* is paradoxical. The entirely uninterpreted sensory intuition must defy any commentary, so even to declare it "particular and unique" (22–23) is to place it illegitimately under pre-established general concepts. Beckett's novel *Watt* sees the experience of sensory data unrestrained by concepts reproduced in its full delirium.

9. Beckett's comment is to be found in his copy of Volume 16 of *À la recherche du temps perdu, Le temps retrouvé* (Paris: Gallimard, 1928) on page 240. In the English translation used here, the equivalent location is found at Proust 3:1033.

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