



“A horror so deep only ritual can contain it”: The art of dying in the theatre of Sarah Kane

by Sara Soncini

Death is an overarching presence in Sarah Kane's theatre work, in terms of both stage action and theme. From her début play, *Blasted* (1995), through to *Phaedra's Love* (1996) and *Cleansed* (1998), Kane's dramatic universe is peopled by characters charging towards their death, and usually encountering it in scenes of Grand Guignol excess and grotesque violence featuring spectacular displays of torture, body mutilation and dismemberment. Here, as well as in the later plays, death is ambivalently presented as the only escape from the nightmare of living and, at the same time, as that which makes living a nightmare; as the moment of “complete sanity and humanity” wherein, as Kane herself put it, “everything suddenly connects” (Saunders 2009: 72), and as the ultimate, irrevocable and unredeemable act of self-annihilation. Following Kane's turn towards a more poetic form of drama, in her last two plays this discourse of death is handed over to the words of nameless characters (*Crave*, 1998) or unidentified voices (*4:48 Psychosis*, staged posthumously in 2000), who are likewise engaged in a long, painful quest for selfhood pivoting on the awareness of mortality and the simultaneous dread of and longing for death it engenders – a contradiction sublimely captured in *4:48 Psychosis* through the ironic line “I have become so depressed by the fact of my mortality that I have decided to commit



suicide" (207).¹ This on-stage narrative is of course framed by the off-stage reality of Sarah Kane's struggle with mental illness and self-inflicted death by hanging, at the age of 28, in King's College hospital in London, where she had been admitted following a failed suicide attempt and two earlier stays at the Maudsley psychiatric hospital (*Cleansed* bears the dedication "to the patients and staff of ward ES3"). Perhaps inevitably, the writer's personal history of existential despair and premature death, coupled with the increasingly confessional, introspective tone of her dramatic voice, has tended to validate biographical readings of her posthumous play in particular, but also, retrospectively, of her entire opus. Kane's theatre writing has been accordingly seen as one long, carefully crafted and lucidly planned suicide note – one which, mimicking stage convention, begins with two characters making their entrance through the door of a hotel room (Ian and Cate in *Blasted*) and closes with a dramatic exit (the speaker's parting directions to "watch me vanish" and then "open the curtains" at the end of *4:48 Psychosis*).

While not wishing to downplay the prominence of the writer's persona in the plays and the way it affects reception, this essay aims to foreground both the ritual quality and the sheer theatricality of the death scenes and narratives that crowd Kane's drama. Throughout her work, dying is never an easy, straightforward business, but rather a long, complicated, and at times frustrating *mise en scène* which also entails rehearsing a repertory of traditional rites and, once their shortcomings become apparent, devising and testing new ones. In this perspective, one should be wary of taking literally a line like "I have resigned myself to death this year" (208) in *4:48 Psychosis*, or the countdowns featuring in the same play: as I shall be showing, throughout the whole corpus the autobiographical strain ties in with a self-reflexive probing of the theatre's ability to provide a rite that will be capable of "contain[ing]" life's deepest "horror" (*Crave*: 176) by supplying a formal framework wherein to express, embody and experience death collectively. Similarly, the foregrounding of the writer's self is just one among several discursive strategies through which Sarah Kane's dramatic work engages with, at one and the same time, the paradoxes of death and the paradoxes of theatre, pointing to stage space with its inherent duplicity (real/metaphorical, objective/subjective) as an ideal arena to fathom and challenge the fate of the body.

"SICK MURDER RITUAL[S]": THE THEATRICAL WAY TO DEATH IN *BLASTED*

"I've shat in better places than this" (3): Ian's opening line on entering the "very expensive hotel room in Leeds", complete with mini-bar, champagne in ice bucket and complimentary bouquet of flowers, where he and Cate will spend the night together is

¹ All page numbers refer to the Methuen *Complete Plays* edition (2001). When necessary, the titles of individual plays will also be given in brackets.



a revealing clue to a play that constantly focuses the audience's attention on the corporeal dimension with its most private needs and functions. Ian's following remark, "I stink", his ineffectual ablutions during repeated journeys from bedroom to bathroom, the way his foul odour transfers onto his clothes, pollutes the air (11), and contaminates Cate (33), the woman's disgust at his secretions (31), the cancer gnawing away at his remaining lung after a surgeon has removed what, by his own admission, looked and smelled like a "lump of rotting pork" (11) are just some instances of the play's relentless spotlighting of Ian's putrid and putrefying body. And yet, although Kane's protagonist knows he is doomed ("I'm fucked", 11), and smokes and drinks compulsively with the declared intent of speeding up the end, his too too sullied flesh stubbornly, aggravatingly refuses to melt. Even after the destructive violence of war bursts into the hotel room, subjecting Ian to a heinous nemesis at the hands of an unnamed Soldier, his mutilated, tortured, brutalized body continues to show an appalling resilience. Significantly, moreover, as *Blasted* progresses Ian's failure to terminate is hardly ascribable to Hamlet-like hesitation deriving from the simultaneous craving for and fear of death exhibited in the initial scenes, but is rather presented as the consequence of a flaw in performance. In this respect, Ian's struggle to part with his life involves, at one and the same time, a parody of the commonplace formulae and traditional symbols surrounding death, and a quest for the appropriate ritual to accomplish it on stage.

Rehearsals for Ian's death begin as early as the second scene, set on the morning after the tense confrontation which, we now learn, has culminated in Cate's rape. Awakened by Ian's violent fit of coughing, the young woman watches her abuser – perhaps not to her utter displeasure – drop down to his knees as the pain extending from lung to chest to his whole body becomes extreme. Kane's stage direction at this point, "[i]t looks very much as if he is dying" (24), characterises Ian's death scene as a false alarm, or indeed as a simulation: just as the fit reaches its climax, the pain begins to wane, and a few moments later he is definitely alive and, if not exactly kicking, well enough to curse his onlooker and light "the first cigarette of the day" (25). Ian's apparent death is framed by Cate's stress-induced fainting fits, in which she begins to falter and tremble and then, to her partner's great dismay, collapses and lies still, her catatonic state interrupted only by sudden bursts of hysterical laughter. After the first episode, Ian confesses that he had taken Cate's passing away to be for real ("Thought you were dead", 10), while she, for her part, equates her recurrent moments of unconsciousness, in which "[i]t feels like I'm away for minutes or months sometimes, then I come back just where I was", to the actual experience of death and the afterlife ("You fall asleep and then you wake up", 10). At the second fainting, provoked by Ian's simulation of the physical and psychological violence she has just undergone ("He puts the gun to her head, lies between her legs, and simulates sex", 27), Cate's coming round is rendered as a biting parody of the prince's kiss of life in fairy tales, again underscoring the degree of role playing involved in these sham deaths:



Ian puts the gun away.

He kisses her and she comes round.

She stares at him.

Ian You back?

Cate Liar.

Ian doesn't know if this means yes or no, so he just waits.

Cate closes her eyes for a few seconds, then opens them.

Ian Cate?

Cate Want to go home now. (27)

Death is likewise filtered through a conventional narrative framework, and thereby distanced, in the first scene, when Ian, who is a tabloid journalist, calls his office to dictate a ghastly murder story:

A serial killer slaughtered British tourist Samantha Scrace, S – C – R – A – C – E, in a sick murder ritual comma, police revealed yesterday point new par. The bubbly nineteen year old from Leeds was among seven victims found buried in identical triangular tombs in an isolated New Zealand forest point new par. Each had been stabbed more than twenty times and placed faced down comma, hands bound behind their backs point new par. Caps up, ashes at the site showed the maniac had stayed to cook a meal, caps down point new par. [...] (12)

Ian's amusing inclusion of the technicalities of spelling and punctuation in his account of Samantha's tragedy works as an estranging device that brings out the packaging of violence as a commodity, the translation of death into the hackneyed formulae of media sensationalism.² On the other hand, the stale journalistic phrase

² Both this story and the one Ian reads to the Soldier in Scene Three were taken "straight from *The Sun*" (Sarah Kane qtd. in Saunders 2009: 54.)



"sick murder ritual", used to fictionalise Samantha's story, also unwittingly anticipates Ian's actual brutalisation at the hands of the Soldier, as well as his own subsequent suicide attempts. In Scene Three, after a mortar bomb has blasted apart the hotel room, the Soldier inflicts upon Ian the same atrocities perpetrated by another soldier, in the past, upon his girlfriend: he rapes him, pushes a revolver up his anus, and finally "*grips Ian's head in his hands [...] puts his mouth over one of Ian's eyes, sucks it out, bites it off and eats it*", then proceeds to do the same to the other eye (50). Through the Soldier's insane retributive logic, Kane connects the spiralling global violence of armed conflict with the mechanisms of violence inside the couple: the "*large hole in one of the walls*" (39) left by the explosion acts as a powerful visual symbol of Cate's violated body, marking out Ian's primal and private act of violence as the seed of the full-scale destruction of war.³ In a more metaphorical sense Ian is also being punished for his refusal to report the Soldier's eyewitness account of the horrors of war, dismissed by the hack as an unmarketable news item and one at any rate lying outside the province of "a home journalist, for Yorkshire" (48). On yet another level, though, the Soldier's torture can be seen as a practical demonstration of the exact ritual required by killing, following his allegations that Ian – who carries a gun, apparently works in intelligence for the regime (30), wishes for a new Holocaust targeting "the queers [...] wogs and fucking football fans" (19), introduces himself to the Soldier as a colleague "of sorts" (40), and claims to have killed people and disposed of bodies – is actually totally unskilled in the art of death ("You haven't got a clue", 47). The fact that the Soldier shoots himself after completing his ferocious routine, whereas he refrains from pulling the trigger on Ian, is also significant: having ascertained the latter's unpreparedness, he denies him the privilege of dying. It should also be noted that the Soldier is simply discovered dead, revolver in hand and brain splattered, at the beginning of the following scene: the only death (and, for that matter, the only rape) shown on stage in *Blasted* is Ian's with its attendant simulacra.

After the Soldier's demise, Ian's ordeal becomes very much a lonesome affair. His efforts to persuade Cate to stay in the room take on a far greater urgency now that he is blinded and totally dependent upon her for his survival. In the closing scene, after burying the baby she has brought back from her previous journey across the ravages of war, Cate goes out again to hunt for food. The final stage of Ian's punishment takes the form of a prolonged sequence of prevalently mute actions in which he is shown masturbating, defecating, crying – "get[ing] as low as he can get", to put it in Sarah Kane's own words (Saunders 2009: 57). Utterly isolated and powerless, stripped down of all but the stark reality of the body with its most basic needs and drives, Ian seems at last ready to perform his parting rite. The play's finale, however, presents Ian's death as

³ Kane has commented on her desire to make her story about "two people in a room" connect and resonate with the bloodshed in Bosnia at the time of the play's composition. See Saunders 2002: 39.



all but final. He tears from the ground the rudimentary cross planted there by Cate, rips up the floorboards, exhumes the baby's corpse and eats it. He then wraps the remains in the baby's blanket and places the bundle back in its makeshift tomb. After a beat, "he climbs in after it and lies down, head poking out of the floor", and eventually "dies with relief" (60). A few more moments, and the rain coming through the roof begins to pour over his head; Ian greets this twist of fate with one of his customary curses; Cate returns from the outside world with the food she has bartered for sex, comments on Ian's foolish perseverance in sitting under the leak, wraps herself in a bed sheet, eats her meal of bread, sausage and gin and then shares the leftovers with Ian, who thanks her in return.

Blasted closes on a radical ambiguity concerning the status of its protagonist. One possible interpretation is that Ian thinks he is dead until the rain comes to spoil – in such a very English manner – his moment of bliss. This would then appear to be the last and most glaring in a series of mock deaths (including his attempted suicide in Scene Four, which will be discussed later). If, on the contrary, Kane's stage direction is to be taken at its face value, Ian actually dies but only to find out that even after death he is still trapped in the same hell as before, with the aggravating nuisance of the rain.⁴ At any rate, the uncertainty surrounding his fate seems deliberately devised to deconstruct the clear-cut opposition between life and death, being and not being, that Ian himself had earlier pitted against Cate's fuzzier categories: his firm belief that one "[c]an't die and come back. That's not dying, it's fainting. When you die, it's the end" (56) is now made to sound as desperate wishful thinking.

Equally twofold is the meaning of Ian's anthropophagous identification with the dead baby. On the one hand, his ripping of the cross and occupation of the baby's tomb can be seen as the climax of Kane's parodic inversion of the Christian way to death. The seven mute fragments preceding and preparing Ian's death come across as a blatant reversal of the seven days of creation, aptly culminating in a regression into the womb with which the middle-aged man tries to undo the fact of his own birth.⁵ Ian's Christ-like traits have been acknowledged by Sarah Kane, particularly with regard to the image of the cleansing rain washing away the blood, which was developed during rehearsals (see Saunders 2009: 55), and stands in marked contrast to the character's vain attempts at purification in the first two scenes of the play. The

⁴ Sarah Kane's feelings about the scene seem to support the second interpretation: "[Ian] dies, and he finds that the thing he's ridiculed – life after death – really does exist. And that life is worse than where he was before. It really is hell" (qtd in Saunders 2009: 55). On the undecidability of the moment in performance, though, see Urban 2008.

⁵ A similar wish to oppose the curse of birth and individuation is expressed in C's invocation, in *Crave*, to "[l]et the day perish in which I was born / Let the blackness of the night terrify it / Let the stars of its dawn be dark / May it not see the eyelids of the morning / Because it did not shut the door of my mothers womb" (189; see also 193 for a reiteration in choral form).



orchestration of Ian's lengthy punishment as a progression through a series of tableaux of suffering calls to mind the Stations of the Cross, just as his death and subsequent return to life ironically hint at Christ's burial on Good Friday, descent to the underworld on the Saturday, and resurrection on Easter morning. Ian's cannibalistic assimilation of the baby and his endeavour to take her place in the comfort of the tomb/womb are also related to the envy for the prayer that Cate had devised for her, and resolutely denied him, at the scene's opening (58). With the final image of Cate nourishing Ian after she has failed to save from starvation the baby in her trust, the identification with the dead innocent appears to be complete and accepted by both: more than acknowledging his companion's generous sharing of her meal, Ian's "thank you", uttered when Cate has already finished feeding him and is sitting apart, "huddled for warmth" (61), could refer to her new willingness to join in the effort to work out an alternative, and this time adequate, death rite.

The importance of a concerted approach to the art of dying, and the crucial function of self-devised formulae to aid and bring about the ritual process, becomes a key feature of Kane's later verbal plays, the most striking instances in this respect being the shared litany as the characters collectively embrace the solace of death at the end of *Crave*, and the mantra-like repetition of the couplet "Remember the light and believe in the light / An instant of clarity before eternal night" punctuating the speaker's (or the speakers') journey towards annihilation in *4:48 Psychosis*. In *Blasted*, instead, Ian's endeavours to find a viable and shareable death rite takes on a specifically theatrical nuance. With its unspecified addressee, Ian's final "thank you" might as well be aimed at the audience and therefore read (and play) as a performer's parting courtesy before the final curtain, a counterpart to Ian's expletive when the rain wrecks his dying act through what looks very much like an annoying technical fault (60). The impression that the alternative rituals explored in *Blasted* are also, to a great extent, theatrical rituals is further enhanced by the strong ties established with other dramatic representations of the art of dying, most notably those memorably offered by Shakespeare and Beckett.⁶ The reliance of *Blasted* on Shakespeare's *King Lear* is easy to ascertain: Ian's journey from reality to nightmare, from sanity to madness, his joint embodiment of Gloucester's physical and Lear's mental blindness, the shocking on-stage representation of the eye-gouging, Kane's expressionistic version of Ian's storm scene on the 'blasted heath' are only some of the more obvious points of contact between the two plays. As Graham Saunders has noted, the stage action of Ian lowering himself into the infant's grave is a literal rendition of Lear's opening speech, where the ancient king declares that the rest of his life is but a (babyish) "crawl toward

⁶ Sarah Kane has pointed to *King Lear* and *Waiting for Godot* as the two main influences on the composition of *Blasted* (see Saunders 2009: 39). For an overview of Kane's use of dramatic and literary sources in *Blasted* see Saunders 2002: 54-60 and, specifically on the presence of *King Lear* in the play, Saunders 2004. Shakespeare's ghost haunts the whole of Kane's production: particularly *Cleansed*, which derives plot motifs and the central concern with travesty and shifting gender identities from *Twelfth Night*, and in *Crave*, which contains echoes of Hamlet's suicidal musings.



death" (I.1.40)⁷, and announces his related decision to unburden himself of the load of sovereignty by dividing the reign. Ian's ambiguous resurrection likewise resonates with Lear's belief, on awakening from a long sleep after the torment of the storm and the heart-rendering encounter with the blinded Gloucester, that he has died and is now in hell (or perhaps purgatory). The Shakespearean king's rebuke when a concerned Cordelia inquires after his health, "You do me wrong to take me out of the grave" (IV.vii.45), is far more urbane and articulate than Ian's monosyllabic "shit" (60), but expresses the very same annoyance at an untimely interference coming from the world of the living. At the same time, however, the image of an interred Ian who goes on speaking and eating notwithstanding the fact (or fiction) of his death is an unmistakable visual quotation of Winnie's resilience in the second act of *Happy Days*, and Kane's insistence on the impossibility of dying for Ian is just as Beckettian, reminding one of Hamm and Clov's terminal condition and concomitant failure to terminate in *Endgame*.

The same conflation of Beckettian and Shakespearean echoes is apparent in Ian's grotesque suicide attempt in Scene Four, which Sarah Kane herself has described as a "blatant rewrite" (Saunders 2004: 75) of Gloucester's Dover scene in *King Lear*. Ian, blind and helpless after the Soldier's vengeance has fallen upon him, entreats Cate to help him die. She complies and hands him the gun used by the Soldier to rape him and then shoot himself, but only after she has removed the munitions and engaged in an apparently well-meaning dispute against self-inflicted death, even naively touching upon divine prohibition ("God wouldn't like it", 55). When Ian finally sticks the gun into his mouth and fires, the gun clicks empty; he pulls the trigger again and again until, dejected, he gives up and swears. Right on cue, Cate sensibly retorts that fate, or God, have obviously ordained him to live. While confirming Ian's – and the audience's – suspicion that her real motivation is the desire to punish her abuser by prolonging his agony, Cate's specious arguments are an almost exact repeat of Edgar's attribution of his father's failed suicide to the hand of divine intervention (*King Lear*, IV.v.72-4). However, while Edgar's masterly pretence succeeds in duping Gloucester, who actually believes he is miraculously unhurt after falling off the non-existent "dread summit of this chalky bourn" (IV.v.57), Ian's patent fiasco bears a closer resemblance to Vladimir and Estragon's lame plans to hang themselves in *Waiting for Godot* – an echo further enhanced by Kane's overall modelling of Ian and Cate's love/hate relationship on the paradoxical bond locking together Beckett's tramps.

The specific method of self-slaughter adopted by Ian even seems to gesture towards the first major critical study of the Shakespeare/Beckett connection, namely Jan Kott's groundbreaking essay on "*King Lear*, or Endgame" in *Shakespeare our Contemporary* (Kott 1967: 100-133). As is well known, the Polish scholar drew on the similarities between Gloucester's suicide in *Lear* and the tramps' botched attempts in

⁷ Quotations from *King Lear* are taken from the 1990 Arden edition (see Works Cited).



Godot in order to argue for Shakespeare's contemporariness. According to Kott, *King Lear* speaks directly to Beckett, and to us, because this play marks the definitive transition from tragedy to the grotesque, a genre whose distinctive feature he then locates in the sheer theatricality of the situations and characters. By reducing Gloucester's suicide to "a circus somersault on an empty stage" (118), he argues, Shakespeare is laying bare the "paradox of pure theatre" (115), wherein "there is no difference between a revolver and a toy pistol: in fact neither exists. Like death, the shot is only a parable, a symbol" (116).

Kott is here referring to the non-illusory, symbolic quality of Shakespeare's mime, as opposed to the realistic stage effects of naturalistic theatre. Kane's updating of the Dover scene in *Blasted*, however, seems deliberately designed to alert us to the fact that the same "paradox" extends to all modes of theatrical presentation. Each time he pulls the trigger, Ian's 'suicide' moves away from realism and veers towards the self-conscious performance of an act that is *always* impossible on stage – where the characters can never really die because they are actors playing a character, and all guns are, by the same token, only toy guns.

Whether or not Ian's Dover scene looks back not only to *King Lear* and *Waiting for Godot* but also to Kott's critical appraisal of their common metatheatrical quality (as the slapstick gun act and, perhaps, even the first name of Kane's protagonist would seem to indicate), through this mock suicide and the equally fictitious deaths that precede and follow it *Blasted* exposes, and explores, the specifics of theatrical presentation, namely the environmental nature of stage space and the corporeal presence of the characters who inhabit it. As already emphasised by Kott, Edgar's "parable" can only work in the here and now of the theatre with its single, shared and fixed space: a space which the audience, by convention, agrees to see as many different places, just like Gloucester believes in the landscape conjured up by his son's words, and thinks he has leapt from the height of a cliff when in reality he has but knelt and fallen over on a flat, level stage. Commenting on the uncertainty surrounding Ian's death in Scene Five, Ken Urban remarks that in the 2001 Royal Court revival of the play, "Ian let out a final groan, as if he was finally passing on, but nothing in the physical reality of the space – the lighting, sound or set – connoted a transition from one world to another" (2008: 160). Similarly, Ian can only die as a character in the play, but not as an actor in performance: his inconclusive stage deaths, as well as all stage deaths, present at one and the same time the body's demise and its persistent physical irreducibility. By challenging the stability (and separability) of ontological levels, the art of dying in Sarah Kane's *Blasted* brings out the "bifurcated mode-of-presence" (Garner 1994: 39) that is unique to stage space, pointing to the representational dichotomy of sign and substance, showing and being, play and performance as that which forms the ritual basis of the art of the theatre.



"DEAD REAL": BODY AND NARRATIVE IN KANE'S LATER PLAYS

Sarah Kane's last two plays mark a radical formal departure in her production. *Crave* has four characters, named only A, B, C and M, no stage directions, and no stage action apart from the actors speaking lines made up of fragmentary impressions, dislocated memories, snatches of conversation, and quotations from a variety of literary and non-literary sources.⁸ Although they intersect and resonate with each other, ultimately building up a shared discourse pivoting on the common topic of death, the ensuing narrative bears little resemblance to traditional dialogue and is rather orchestrated according to poetic patterns of sound and rhythm. The performance text of *4:48 Psychosis* is even more open in that Kane gives no indication as to the number of speakers and the attribution of lines: the play could be performed (as has often been the case) as a monologue inhabited by different voices and containing sections of internalised dialogue, or, at the other extreme, as a choral piece potentially involving as many actors as the lines to be spoken.⁹ Whereas in the earlier plays the representation of death and dying, of pain inflicted on or felt through the body, had been mainly and increasingly visual, in Kane's later work these images and concerns persist but they are totally subsumed in language. Consequently, the connected ambiguities of death and theatre transfer from the scenic dimension onto the body of the text and of the language, taking on an even more explicit self-reflexive quality.

Whether expressed physically or verbally, Kane's dramatic and postdramatic works¹⁰ share the same aesthetics of extreme, excessive violence, and the same tendency towards self-conscious acknowledgement of its implications. To get an idea of the diversity of approach and underlying consonance of intents one can compare the staging of Hippolytus' death at the end of *Phaedra's Love* with an instance of narrated suicide in *4:48 Psychosis*. Kane, for whom one of the main attractions about rewriting Seneca's tragedy was the possibility of subverting the classical convention of bloody deeds happening off-stage (see Saunders 2009: 68), presents the Athenian prince's killing at the hands of an angry mob as a scene of Grand Guignol verging on the grotesque. The actions prescribed by her stage directions include the cutting off of Hippolytus' genitals, which are grilled on a barbecue and then thrown to a dog; the protagonist's disembowelment, with kindred culinary fate of his entrails; and, finally, a more orthodox stoning seasoned with savage kicking and spitting (99-100). One instant before his much coveted demise, on spotting the vultures circling above his head and about to feast on his corpse, Hippolytus cracks a smile and observes: "If there could have been more moments like this" (103). Kane's protagonist – a radical

⁸ On the heterogeneity of intertextual references in Kane's work see Saunders 2002: 54 and, specifically on the web of citations in *Crave*, Pankratz 2004: 70-1.

⁹ In James Macdonald's first production at the Royal Court, the narrative task was divided between three performers (two female and one male).

¹⁰ For a penetrating analysis of *4:48 Psychosis* in the light of Hans-Thies Lehmann's concept of postdramatic theatre, see Barnett 2008.



incarnation of the typical puritan mistrust of all figures of authority with their empty formulae to cure body and soul – expresses satisfaction at the spectacularly non-canonical death rite that has just been performed, and which stands in stark opposition to the conventional funeral pyre lit by Theseus at Phaedra's burial. His line, however, also sounds as a tongue-in-cheek metatheatrical commentary on Kane's dogged determination to confront her audience with an overdose of violence in order to push theatrical representation to its limits and thereby make its conventions transparent.

The suicides prefigured or described in *4:48 Psychosis* display the same hyperbolic fury against the body and the same ironical overtones, almost a self-mockery of the "in-ye-face" sensibility that had become the trademark of Kane's work:

- Have you made any plans?

- Take an overdose, slash my wrists then hang myself.

- All those things together?

- It couldn't possibly be misconstrued as a cry for help.

(Silence.)

- It wouldn't work.

- Of course it would.

- It wouldn't work. You'd start to feel sleepy from the overdose and wouldn't have the energy to cut your wrists.

(Silence.)



- I'd be standing on a chair with a noose around my neck.

(*Silence.*) (210-11)

While hinting retrospectively at the problems of staging acts of extreme physical violence in the theatre – the more (hyper)real they are, the less believable to the audience who is aware that no real harm is being done to the performer's flesh – Kane's verbal attack on the body in *4:48 Psychosis* also reflects the progressive erosion of character marking her production: from the destabilization of individual identities in *Blasted*, to the tearing apart and reassemblage of body parts and personality fragments in *Cleansed*, up to the last two plays' "painfully obsessive focus upon the subjects in crisis, making and unmaking multiple and contradictory selves through language" (Wallace 2004: 126). More in general, the translation of physical violence into words functions as a correlative objective to Kane's radical dismemberment of dramatic form, with the demise of its mainstays of plot, character, action turning her texts into "constellations of language, devoid of individuated perspective" (Barnett 2008: 23).

In this context, Kane's death rites become closely connected to the act of playwriting and to issues of authorship. In *Crave*, the characters long to flee from this world but they are painfully aware of being nailed to language:

C: I hate these words that keep me alive

I hate these words that won't let me die (184)

In *4:48 Psychosis*, the question of "How do I stop?" (226), reiterated eight times by the suicidal 'I' of the play, resonates with the text's frustrating obstinacy to go on and, indeed, begin anew. On the page, the first suicide narrative, closing with a declaration of failure, is followed by a break signalled through five centred dashes, and by the beginning a new narrative sequence starting with the lines "Hatch opens / Stark light" (225). This pattern is repeated three more times (230, 239, 240) and is only seemingly discontinued towards the ending, when the speaker(s) sets out to "tell you how I died" (241) and proceeds to describe the mechanics of the final, and apparently successful, suicide attempt. The "hatch" of the formulaic (re-)opening – a kind of spoken stage direction reminiscent of the intermittent "sudden flash" prompting Mouth to continue in her grievous narrative effort in Beckett's *Not I* – hints with its polysemy both at a situation of physical confinement in some kind of cell (the hospitalisation of the



'psychiatric patient' consciousness), and at the curse of being trapped in an endless cycle of death and rebirth/restart.

Because the stories keeping the characters in the grip of the text are, to a considerable extent, made up of fragments or facets of Kane's biography, it is easy to associate the writer's persona with the plight of her speaking selves – a reading corroborated, to some degree, by the writer's own appearance in *Crave* in the role of C, who has been diagnosed with depression and seems to be or to have been in treatment in an institution ("They switch on my light every hour to check I'm still breathing", 188).¹¹ The speakers' perception of their textual existence as a form of punishment, however, also pinpoints the author as a figure of oppression. On expounding the multiple identifications behind the nameless characters in *Crave*, Kane has described A as "the author and abuser, because they're the same thing; Aleister as in Aleister Crowley, [...] and the Anti-Christ" (Saunders 2009: 79). The older male character with the one long speech in the play, A offers advice on the rules of poetry while simultaneously embracing Crowley's alleged satanism and quoting the fundamental tenet of his occultist philosophy, "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law" (199) – a rule of conduct that could well apply to the author's tyranny over the text. C's subsequent plea to "kill me", followed by a beat and by the conclusive litany announcing a collective "free-falling / into the light" (200), seems to acknowledge precisely the writer's arbitrary power of life and death over his characters. Cast in the split role of victim and victimiser, the author's persona in *Crave* and *4:48 Psychosis* comes across as a verbal reincarnation of earlier figures of authority and authorship, such as Ian wielding his pen and penis on the abused female body (Samantha's and Cate's) and, most importantly, Tinker with his cruel experiments in bodily modification and soul engineering throughout *Cleansed*.¹²

The identification of the author in the text with the author of the text is made manifest in *4:48 Psychosis*, most notably in the section (231-14) where the subject of enunciation not only presents him/herself as a writer, but goes on to mention some of the formal features of the play s/he inhabits – such as the breakdown of textual boundaries as a way of embodying the psychotic condition, the practice of borrowing from other sources, the predominantly verbal quality¹³ –, and even quotes

¹¹ Sarah Kane played the role of C for five performances during the play's tour to Maastricht, in September 1998. Earlier that year, Kane had appeared on stage as Grace in the final three performances of *Cleansed* at the Royal Court, following an injury of the original actress, Suzan Sylvester.

¹² As is well known, the doctor/torturer in *Cleansed* owes his name to the *Daily Mail* drama critic, Jack Tinker, who penned the most venomous critical onslaught against *Blasted*, dubbing the play a "disgusting feast of filth". This again creates an association with the writing profession, as well as evoking the character's ruthless and rather clumsy experiments in moulding and remoulding "tinkering with" his patients/characters.

¹³ "How can I return to form now my formal thought has gone?"; "Last in a long line of literary kleptomaniacs / (a time honoured tradition)"; "Just a word on the page and there is the drama" (213).



unfavourable criticism of Kane's own previous theatre work (the speaker calls him/herself an "expressionist nag", a phrase taken from Alastair Macaulay's review of *Cleansed* in the *Financial Times*). The play's ending, staging both the death of its speaking 'I' and the death of its author, is apparently a typical instance of Kane's terminal epiphanies in which "everything suddenly connects" (see above) and the subject experiences an instant of wholeness in the face of permanent obliteration. In the script, the page is increasingly taken up by the blank space of non-being as the printed words invite the reader to

watch me vanish

watch me

vanish

watch me

watch me

watch (244)

The final page contains only two lines floating, as it were, in the void of self-extinction. The last words of the Kane corpus, placed at the bottom of an almost totally white sheet, are an instruction to "please open the curtains" (245), followed by the customary five centred dashes indicating the end of a section (and, so far, the beginning of a new one).

In performance, this textual open-endedness does not come across, but other kinds of ambiguity become apparent instead. In the original Royal Court production in June 2000, the closing line functioned as a spoken stage direction, prompting the three actors to open the shutters inside the cramped Theatre Upstairs to let in the evening sunlight and the noise of people and traffic on the London street outside – a relieving, redeeming gesture that Graham Saunders likens to "the closing off of a funeral ritual [...] a laying to rest of the dead person's spirit" (2009: 36). The scenic



counterpart to the speaker's progressive disappearance from the page is a concrete physical action that, once more, undercuts the narrative of death and extinction by underscoring the permanence of the performer's living body. Once it becomes realized as a vanishing *act*, the death of the author is effectively exposed as a magician's trick, a feat of stage illusionism – an irony that is savagely accentuated by the off-stage reality of Sarah Kane's self-inflicted death.

"It's real, it's real, dead real, dead real" (183): *Crave* abounds in lines similarly playing on the metaphorical sense of death and dying.¹⁴ As one of the voices in *4:48 Psychosis* warns us, though, "the defining feature of a metaphor is that it's real" (211). The most referential death in the whole Kane canon – the author's ceremonial exit from her body of work after parting with her actual living body – is also the most blatantly stagy. By collapsing the literal and the metaphorical while simultaneously signalling their irreducible difference, the ending of Sarah Kane's last play offers a final embodiment of the paradoxical nature of theatrical art – and, arguably, a definitive profession of faith in its ritual power to accommodate life's ultimate "horror".

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¹⁴ Other examples, all of them mouthed by C, include: "I write the truth and it kills me" (184); "If I die here I was murdered by daytime television" (188); "Fat and shiny and dead dead dead serene" (198).



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