

## 4.48 *Psychosis*: Sarah Kane’s “bewildered fragments”

Carolina Sánchez-Palencia Carazo  
Universidad de Sevilla  
csanchez@us.es

### Abstract

Sarah Kane’s *4.48 Psychosis* was completed a few months before she killed herself in 1999 and was performed posthumously a year after. Although it is almost impossible not to view her last play as a suicide note, yet a more attentive reading invites us to liberate her from the so-called ‘Sylvia Plath’s syndrome’ which, prioritizing the biographical, distorts and impoverishes any other textual meaning. Among those meanings that are usually cancelled down by the mythologizing of the author (the dead author, in this case), this article focuses on Abjection, that which, according to Kristeva, remains outside the signifiable and threatens the integrity of the ego border. In the psychotic subject (enacted by the anonymous voice/s of the play) the notion of a stable and coherent identity (one that would keep the abject under control) is seriously compromised and the boundaries between the “me” and the “not-me” get blurred. The resulting scenario is that of the dissipation of a definable subject, an evocative metaphor for the postmodern self. Either if Kane is to be related to Artaud (in her articulation of explicit violence and pain with a cathartic purpose) or if *4.48 Psychosis* is regarded as ‘experiential’, it must be noticed that the provocative, confrontational and brutal language provided by the ‘in-yer-face’ theatre seems the best medium to express the disturbing aspects of the abject self.

The title of Sarah Kane’s last play refers to this specific time before dawn when the playwright (victim of chronic insomnia and depression) used to wake up. Statistically these early morning hours are supposed to be the time in which a larger number of suicides are committed; a time recorded as an instant of extreme clear-sightedness—“At 4.48 the happy hour when clarity visits” (Kane 2001: 242)<sup>1</sup>—although, paradoxically, to those observing from outside, it may be considered as a moment of radical madness.<sup>2</sup>

From the perspective of Kane’s death, it is almost impossible not to see this chronicle of depression, unsuccessful therapy and endless medication as a suicide note. A similar case that is already quite familiar is that of Sylvia Plath, whose late work is often read as a deliberation of a suicide, that is, as part of a process in which her biography becomes inseparable from her canon, a totality, as Cynthia Sugars argues, “which retroactively, through suicide, is accorded narrative force and teleology” (1999: 1). Consequently, both the narrative of her life and the narrative of her work are provided with an illusion of closure and finality that legitimizes all meaning. Plath’s well-known fascination with death is made explicit in “Lady Lazarus” (1962) and more

specifically in her last poem, “Edge” (1963), which shows the feeling of accomplishment from the perspective of a postsuicidal subject whose dead body provides “the illusion of a Greek necessity” (l.4).<sup>3</sup>

There is no doubt that suicide is an overwhelming presence in all the plays by Kane, and specially in *4.48 Psychosis* this fictional closure (that, unfortunately, can also be read as an existential one) is constantly anticipated, from the very laconic “I would like to kill myself” (206) or “I have resigned myself to death this year” (208), to the blatantly aggressive “Take and overdose, slash my wrists then hang myself” (210).

Apart from suicide and mental illness, another point that calls for biographical interpretation is the reading material that, according to Sarah Kane’s brother, was found at her bedside and that supposedly informs the play. Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), Camus’s *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), Plath’s *The Bell Jar* (1966), Wurtzel’s *Prozac Nation* (1994) and Shneidman’s *The Suicidal Mind* (1996) would be among those books, a selected bibliography that in the end would be reinforcing the thesis of her emplotted self-destruction (Saunders 2002: 178).

Yet, suicide embraces both aspects of Kane’s split self: death-hating and death-loving. The protagonist’s confession “I have no desire for death, no suicide ever had” (244) reflects the ambivalent status of death-drive as is formulated by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, an ambivalence that explains the traditional association between Eros and Thanatos: “Death is the ‘true result’ and to that extent, the purpose of all life, while the sexual instinct is the embodiment of the will to live” (1990 (1920): 322). Although death drive is primarily turned not towards outside (as aggressivity) but towards the subject, that is, it is radically not a drive to “murder”, but a drive to “kill oneself”, yet, it is interesting to notice, as Laplanche does, that sadism (as outward aggression) is far more culturally accepted and palatable than masochism (in Williams 1995: 175). As the protagonist of the play constantly denounces, depression patients have to fight not only the disease but also the social stigma associated to it: “Watching me, judging me, smelling the crippling failure oozing from my skin, my desperation clawing and all consuming panic drenching me as I gape in horror at the world and wonder why everyone is smiling and looking at me with secret knowledge of my aching shame” (209). At this point, it should not be ignored that suicides have been historically stigmatized (to the point of, for instance, being denied, until very recently, a sacred burial by the Christian church).

Undeniably, masochism and self-inflicted pain resonate along the entire play: when the doctor asks “Why did you cut your arm?” she answers, “Because it feels fucking great” (217). This would be only one of the many occasions in which we encounter self-loathing and self-discrimination, two pivotal elements of abjection, if we agree with Julia Kristeva, in its being a sort of purge of the most troubling aspects of the self (1982: 3).

Another characteristic feature of abjection, the blurring of the boundaries between the “me” and the “not me”, can be also perceived in Kane’s attempt at depicting the fragmentariness of psychotic consciousness (and by extension of every consciousness), a process that culminates in what critics consider her most experimental play, the one in which form and content are made one. One must agree with Judith Ryan when, referring to the formal challenges posited by the new conceptions of consciousness and subjectivity in modern literature, she maintains that “if there is no subject in the conventional sense, there can be no conventional language; similarly, if

there is no self, there can be no traditional plot, no familiar character development” (1991: 3). Under such premises, it is easy to understand why in this text there are neither characters nor indications for actors or setting, but only three unidentified voices that might correspond, according to David Greig, to the division of the person in the three elements constituting the anatomy of human pain: victim, perpetrator and bystander (2001: xvii). Consequently, the play is organized around a multiplicity of discourses that try to convey the boundaries between reality, fantasy and the different states of consciousness. Such discourses adopt different forms—doctor/patient interviews, medical reports, fragments from the Bible and self-help psychology—competing, in a sort of *semiotic guerrilla warfare*, to give unsuccessful account of the subject’s experience. An initial claim such as the one suggested in the statement that I chose for the title of this paper—“My mind is the subject of these bewildered fragments” (210)—will be reinforced at the end of the play, when, after that extreme immersion in the depths of the self has been completed, a tragically split, almost disembodied subject declares: “It is myself I have never met, whose face is pasted on the underside of my mind” (245).

James Macdonald, who directed the productions of *4.48 Psychosis* in 2000 and 2001 for the Royal Court Theatre, had three actors sharing the responsibility for one character, while the apocalyptic section (a very choric and ironic part where the voices quote from the Book of Revelations) was kept unassigned, that is, free each night for any one of the three actors to speak those lines (Saunders 2002: 124). Both in the text and in the productions the emphasis seems to be on the fragmentariness and provisionality of identity and in the blurring of boundaries between the Self and the Other.

The use of mirrors in the performances contributed also to this idea of disassociation mind/body and to the double (specular) perspective that many psychotics mention in their testimonies, as if they felt detached observers of their own acts and gestures. According to Macdonald, mirrors were also a useful device to solve the problem of how to talk to the audience without addressing them directly (Saunders 2002: 125). Furthermore, it has been suggested that the mirror projections (observed by the audience from different angles) might have the effect of the Rorschach test, in that the images could be interpreted in different ways. Ironically, by submitting the spectators to these perception tests, Kane turned them into psychotic patients too.

By reading or viewing *4.48 Psychosis* we can affirm that her very young author seems to have ventured further and further within a minimalist tendency that became progressively more abstract. This process began with *Blasted* (1995), with the reduction of the main character, Ian, to his basest essence at the end of the play; it continued in *Cleansed* (1998), where Kane plays radically with the performative and precarious status of identity by making characters wear fragments of someone else’s identity; and it was pushed further in *Crave* (1998) a lyrical piece about the needs and memories of love recited by four voices identified only as A, B, C, and M.<sup>4</sup> Although Sarah Kane was very reluctant to being ascribed to any particular movement, most of us will be tempted to read this increasing lack of objective reference from a poststructuralist perspective. The Beckettian dissipation of the character implicit in her final “watch me vanish” (244) might be evoking the all-too-quoted *death of the subject* as a locus of meaning and the subsequent *crisis of representation*. But this reading that focuses on Kane’s removal of all the signposts of any recognizable sociohistorical context is only partially accurate. It seems to me that this little sense of external reality is noticeably counterbalanced by a concern with internal reality and psychological landscapes, and that, despite her attempts at distancing her work from realistic and naturalistic drama,

this play constitutes a very honest and verosimile account of mental illness. Actually, the protagonist's voice offers a comprehensive repertoire of all the clinical symptoms of depression: persistent sad or anxious mood, feelings of hopelessness, pessimism and worthlessness, decreased energy, fatigue, difficulty in concentrating, remembering or making decisions, insomnia, appetite loss or overeating, suicide attempts, irritability, persistent physical symptoms that do not respond to treatment, such as headaches, digestive disorders, and chronic pain, and above all, an extremely disproportioned feeling of guilt, which is sarcastically displayed in some passages: "I gassed the Jews, I killed the Kurds, I bombed the Arabs, I fucked small children while they begged for mercy, the killing fields are mine, everyone left the party because of me" (227).

When dealing with the play's articulation of suffering one of the most noticing aspects is the confluence of different languages trying to convey irreconcilable realities. To the dispassionate clinical discourse of symptoms, diagnoses and anxiolytic milligrams, Kane opposes the protagonist's litany of pain as the most intimate and inexcusable possession, one that (this is the paradox inherent to the communication of pain) disappears in the very act of public revelation, and especially if the confession is made by a woman.<sup>5</sup> At this point, Kane is not oblivious to the fact that the obscurity and inscrutability of psychotic discourse gets complicated by the linguistic opacity that psychoanalysis often attributes to women (as traditionally excluded from the Symbolic order). Judith Butler, discussing Luce Irigaray, reminds us that:

Women constitute a paradox, if not a contradiction, within the discourse of identity itself. Women are the 'sex' which is not 'one'. Within a language pervasively masculinist, a phallogocentric language, women constitute the 'unrepresentable'. In other words, women represent the sex that cannot be thought, a linguistic absence [as the penis is absent] and opacity. Within a language that rests on univocal signification, the female sex constitutes the unconstrainable and undesignatable. In this sense, women are the sex which is not 'one' but multiple". (1990: 9)

Very much in line with these feminist theories, but also with the dramatic findings of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter, Sarah Kane stresses the limitations of language to communicate and to demarcate the boundaries between desire and reality, between the self and the world. The result is a frustrating *boomerang* language, instances of which can be perceived in the long silences, repetitions, suspended or unanswered questions as the only response to the speaker's desperate claims. This would evidence the outside world's indifference to her problems and would lead to her demands for help and answer in the ironically polite "RSVP ASAP" (214) or in the more vehement "Fuck you for rejecting me by never being there" (215). The persistent lack of response reinforces her feelings of social exclusion, as when she professes "We are anathema, the pariah of reason" (228) or "We are the abjects who depose our leaders and burn incense unto Baal" (229).

And it is precisely from the position of the abject that Kane tries to articulate the painful experience of social and psychological inadequacy. That is why, before going any further, it would be helpful to define abjection within the parameters of psychoanalysis. For Kristeva, it is basically a somatic and symbolic feeling of repulsion against a threat that one considers external, and thus tries to keep at a distance, but that may also menace us from the inside (1982: 135). By remaining out of the signifiable, the thinkable, the containable, the abject threatens the integrity of the ego border and compromises the notion of a coherent identity, an anxiety that is recurrent along the

whole play. If we understand that abjection is part of what Butler calls an “exclusionary matrix” in which subjects are defined by being “inside” or “outside”, then we can realize why *4.48 Psychosis* enacts exclusion as a major strategy.<sup>6</sup> Like other female characters in Kane’s drama, the psychotic protagonist of this play has an “abject body”, that is, a sick female anatomy that serves as the “outside” which provides the patriarchal norm with its coherent boundaries, its privileged “inside”. Much of the protagonist’s anguish is related to the awareness (paradoxical as this word may sound when speaking about mental illness) of her standing at the wrong side of the demarcation (between pure and impure, accepted and prohibited, order and disorder), and of her having thus exceeded the limits of the Symbolic. The aesthetics of negativity that she displays in the passage below illustrates this feeling:

abstraction to the point of  
 unpleasant/unacceptable/uninspiring/impenetrable/  
 irrelevant/irreverent/irreligious/unrepentant  
 dislike/dislocate/disembody/deconstruct  
 ....irrational/irreducible/irredeemable/unrecognizable  
 derailed/deranged/deform. (221-23)

As I have mentioned above, the abject is also and foremost perceived at the level of the body, and in the case of the play’s protagonist, it is interesting to highlight that, by expressing an evident disgust at her corporeality (and ultimately at her physical mortality), she is “incarnating” the ghost, that is, projecting this element of crisis into the somatic. When she says “I can’t eat, I can’t sleep . . . I am fat . . . I cannot fuck . . . My hips are too big, I dislike my genitals” (206-207), or when the doctor (probably ventriloquized by the patient) reports “100 aspirin and one bottle of Bulgarian Cabernet Sauvignon, 1986. Patient woke in a pool of vomit and said ‘sleep with the dog and rise full of fleas’. Severe stomach pain. No other reaction” (225), we can infer that, through these bodily reactions, the subject might be expelling the most visceral aspects of her abject self.<sup>7</sup> As Kristeva points out, in most cultures, the abject (via bodily excreta) functions as a reminder of our precarious status, disturbing our identity, system and order:

No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit—*cadere*, cadaver. (1982: 3)

The constant flow of references to the Book of Revelations can be also interpreted from the perspective of abjection. Actually, Kristeva associates the abject with the sacred when she maintains that most monotheistic religions are organized around taboo or exclusion, and their history is made up by the multiple ways of purifying the abject—the sin, in the Christian Imaginary—(1982: 17). The Book of Revelations, dealing with the wrath of God being poured out upon the world and the exuberant vision of all the suffering people go through—disease, famine, war, earthquakes, plagues—might thus function here as the backdrop against which the experience of individual pain and isolation is projected. As the tormented Seer of the Apocalypse, Kane’s character is

trapped within a hermeneutic dilemma and it is interesting to notice that both are engaged in a process of translation from an unintelligible discourse (the language of God for the former, and the language of trauma for the latter) to an intelligible one. Finding an appropriate language to articulate suffering is a problem that Sarah Kane has solved quite successfully—though unconventionally, too—as she seems to contradict the verbosity of traditional literary approaches to pain with a very laconic speech. It is precisely to compensate this austere verbal economy that Kane occasionally resorts to the extravagant imagery of the Biblical intertext, thus generating a very powerful and ironic contrast with the dominant severity of the play. For instance, through this well-chosen quote from the Book of Revelations, the psychotic woman suggests that madness is entirely a question of perspective:

Come now, let us reason together  
Sanity is found in the mountain of the Lord's house on the  
horizon of the soul that eternally recedes  
The head is sick, the heart's caul torn  
Tread the ground on which wisdom walks  
Embrace beautiful lies—  
the chronic insanity of the sane  
the wrenching begins. (229)

At this point, it must be added, and thus concluded, that, if body language is an alternative to articulate abjection, another interesting medium to express “that which stands outside the signifiable” (Kristeva 1982: 4) is that provided by the specific dramatic language chosen by Kane: the provocative, confrontational and brutal discourse of the ‘in-yer-face’ theatre. This dramatic style, upsurging in Britain during the 1990s, shocked audiences with the extremism of its language and images and radically questioned their moral conventions. Through their use of a filthy language, their exhibition of explicit sex and violence in front of the audience and their breaking of social taboos and conventional dramatic structures, a considerable number of young authors seemed to liberate themselves from the political correctness of mainstream theatre.<sup>8</sup> Although Sarah Kane persistently vindicated her lack of ascription to any alternative movements and fashions, most critics agree that *Blasted*, with its scenes of masturbation, fellatio, defecation, homosexual rape and cannibalism brought British theatre out of its hibernation, and turned her into an unwilling emblem of a contemptuous response to the disillusion and despair of a generation.<sup>9</sup> When critics search for the origins of Kane’s dramatic sensibility, they usually relate her to Antonin Artaud, not only because both are fatally linked by their experience of deviance and insanity leading to suicide, but also because, like the French author, she tried to cope with the essence of the pure self by phenomenological reduction (presenting the human body as the only ontological reality), and to articulate explicit violence and pain with a cathartic purpose. In forcing an extreme emotional response from both the performers and the audience, Sarah Kane seems to be inspired by Artaud’s radical conception of theatre as “a superior disease, because it is an absolute crisis after which there is nothing left except death or drastic purification” (1999 (1938): 22). Moreover, *4.48 Psychosis* is often regarded as *experiential*, that is, the author did ‘experience’ mental illness and social exclusion, and therefore many of the stories or the traumatic scenarios she acts out might have taken place; which does not allow spectators to just sit back and contemplate the play self-indulgently, but forces them to confront the reality of the feelings shown to them. Inspired by either one (Artaud) or the other (‘experiential’

theatre), there is little doubt that the shocking sensibility of ‘in-yer-face’ theatre—one that, as its very name suggests, forces us to see something close up, having our personal space invaded—offers itself as the best site to display this chronicle of human fragility.

Nevertheless, one should not ignore the positive tone implicit in the final line “Please, open the curtains” (245), which invites the actors to open the window shutters and let the light and sounds of the street in; an ending that suggests the possibility of a reconciliation with the outside world and turns the whole play into a complex meditation on mortality. Seen in this light, *4.48 Psychosis* is reminiscent of Philip Larkin’s “Aubade” (1977), where the poet wakes up early, watches the curtain edges grow light, and thinks somberly about death—“a whole day nearer now” (1.5)—while outside the bedroom the world moves on, uncaring, indifferent.<sup>10</sup> Like Sarah Kane, Larkin suggests that the “only thing that will survive us is love” (“An Arundel Tomb” (1964): 1.42) but the frustrating paradox in both cases is that the lover remains unreciprocating, unknowable, even unexisting.

The poetic image of light which opens and closes Kane’s work can be taken as a redemptive metaphor, one that would explain why, after all the display of destructive feelings about herself and the emotional chaos brought about by depression, the woman culminates her elegy by asserting her need for affection and self-recognition: “the vital need for which I would die, to be loved” (242-43). Because, in the end, beneath so much rage and brutality, beneath the crack of “these bewildered fragments” (210) there lies a lyrical crave for love, one in which most of us will recognize ourselves.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> All further references to *4.48 Psychosis* will be to this edition and the page numbers will be cited in parentheses following the quotations.

<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Susan Sontag opens her well-known essay *Illness as Metaphor* (2001) by connecting illness with night and with social exclusion: “Illness is the dark side of life, a type of more expensive citizenship. All living people have this double citizenship, one within the realm of health and the other within the realm of illness. Although we all prefer to only use the good passport, sooner or later each of us will be forced, at least for a short time, to identify as a citizen of the other country...” (4).

<sup>3</sup> See Plath’s “Lady Lazarus” and “Edge” in Gilbert and Gubar 1996 (1985): 2097-2100.

<sup>4</sup> David Greig describes this degradation in terms of a “move from civil war, into family, into the couple, into the individual and finally into the theatre of psychosis: the mind itself” (2001: xvi).

<sup>5</sup> This dispute between scientific and sentimental language for the definition of a specific body is the structural and thematic motif of Jeanette Winterson’s *Written on the Body*, where both the lover and the scientist, with their respective discourses, claim the possession of the protagonist’s cancer-stricken body. Winterson seems to agree with Kane in presenting clinical language, with its cold objectivity and its obsession with labels and data, as unable to convey the real suffering of any particular subject, because it does not address an identifiable individual, but a model, a universal representation.

<sup>6</sup> In *Bodies that Matter* (1993), Butler draws special attention to the “outside”, the non-signifying realm against which the intelligible subject is established:

This exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed thus requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet “subjects”, but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject.

The object designates here precisely those “unlivable” and “uninhabitable” zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the “unlivable” is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject. (3)

<sup>7</sup> The notion of “speaking bodies” (bodies that express symbolically what cannot be made otherwise explicit) was analysed by Freud in his studies about hysteria, a phenomenon that is usually referred to as a “malady through representation” (Laplanche and Pontalis 1983: 195).

<sup>8</sup> Philip Ridley (*Pitchfork Disney*, 1991); Anthony Neilson (*Penetrator*, 1993); Phyllis Nagy (*Butterfly Kiss*, 1994); Jez Butterworth (*Mojo*, 1995); David Greig (*The Architect*, 1996); Mark Ravenhill (*Shopping and Fucking*, 1996); Patrick Marber (*Closer*, 1997); Nick Grosso (*Real Classy Affair*, 1998); and Joe Penhall (*Blue/Orange*, 2000) are among the new dramatists practicing this provocative and visceral intimacy and are thus included in Aleks Sierz’s anthology *In-yer-face-Theatre: British Drama Today* (2001).

<sup>9</sup> Despite the difficulty of including Kane’s production in any dramatic genre or style, her use of explicit violence on stage connects her to the Theatre of “Urban Ennui” or to the drama of the so-called “New Brutalists”. This exhibition of brutality and extreme human pain also connects her with Jacobean drama and with Quentin Tarantino’s films (Sierz 2001: 10-12)

<sup>10</sup> Larkin’s title and use of tradition is ironic since “Aubade” is a poem announcing dawn, and one would expect a more cheerful tone. Instead, the text displays a very mournful atmosphere, where the poet fears parting from what he loves most: not his beloved, as in, for instance, John Donne’s “The Sunne Rising”, but his own life. Larkin suffered from “death dread”, a disabling obsessive fear, not just of dying, but of being dead.

### Works cited

- Artaud, A. 1999 (1938): *The Theatre and Its Double*. London: Calder.
- Butler, J. 1990: *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- 1993: *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Freud, S. 1990 (1920): *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Ed. and Trans. by J. Strachey. New York: Norton.
- Gilbert, S.M. and S. Gubar, eds. 1996 (1985): *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*. London and New York: Norton.
- Greig, D. 2001: “Introduction”. *Complete Plays*. By Sarah Kane. London: Methuen: ix-xviii.
- Laplanche, J. and J.B. Pontalis. 1983: *The Language of Psychoanalysis*. London: Hogarth P.
- Kane, S. 2001: *Complete Plays*. London: Methuen.
- Kristeva, J. 1982: *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. New York: Columbia UP.
- Larkin, P. 1988: *Collected Poems*. Ed. by A.Thwaite. London: Faber and Faber.
- Ryan, J. 1991: *The Vanishing Subject: Early Psychology and Literary Modernism*. Chicago: Chicago UP.
- Saunders, G. 2002: “*Love Me or Kill Me*”: *Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes*. Manchester: Manchester UP.
- Sierz, A. 2001: *In-yer-face Theatre: British Drama Today*. London: Faber and Faber.



- Sontag, S. 2001: *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*. New York: Picador.
- Sugars, C. 1999: "Sylvia Plath as Fantasy Space; or the Return of the Living Dead".  
*Literature and Psychology* 45.3: 1-28.
- Williams, L. R. 1995: *Critical Desire: Psychoanalysis and the Literary Subject*.  
London: Edward Arnold.
- Winterson. J. 1993: *Written on the Body*. London: Vintage.