

## “How Can I Return to Form, Now My Formal Thought Has Gone?”: Meandering Thought, Contested Subjectivity, and the Struggle for Form in Sarah Kane’s 4.48 Psychosis

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*Instead of the outmoded conventions of dialogue and so-called characters*

*lumbering towards the embarrassing dénouements of the theatre,*

*[...] [she’s] offering us no less than the spectacle of [...] existence.*

### **Martin Crimp—*Attempts on Her Life* (254-255)**

4.48 *Psychosis* is Sarah Kane’s last play. When the play was first produced at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Upstairs in 2000, the young playwright had already taken her own life following repeated bouts of severe depression. Kane’s personal tragedy might account, in part, for the prevalent tendency amongst critics to read her play autobiographically, i.e. as an elaborate and poetic “declaration of suicide” (Clapp). *Guardian* theatre critic Michael Billington, for example, has famously called it a “75-minute suicide note” (Billington). In his introduction to the Methuen edition of Sarah Kane’s *Complete Plays*, fellow playwright David Greig rejects this reductionist trend: “4.48 *Psychosis* is not a letter from one person to another but a play, intended to be voiced by at least one and probably more actors. The mind that is the subject of the play’s fragments is the psychotic mind. A mind which is the author, and which is also *more than the author*” (Greig, “Introduction,” xvi). Fully agreeing with Greig’s objection, I contend that the dominance of autobiography in much of the play’s reception is not merely due to its often depressive and, at times, suicidal content, but also due to its radical flouting of theatrical conventions. Kane’s eradication of both character and plot, in their traditional sense, has led some critics to overlook the play’s powerful performative potential and reduce it to the alleged solipsism of the private (and privative) ruminations of inner speech. The absence of clearly delineated characters and of an overt, easily identifiable political narrative also places the play in opposition to what Greig calls a tradition of “English realism”: “English realism prides itself on having no ‘style’ or ‘aesthetic’ that might get in the way of the truth. It works with a kind of shorthand naturalism which says, ‘This is basically the way I see it.’ Distrustful of metaphor, it is a theatre founded on mimicry” (Greig, “A Tyrant”). 4.48 *Psychosis*, on the contrary, abounds in metaphor and all but offers a clear and comprehensive vision of the world, let alone “the truth.” Rather, the play’s form meticulously mirrors its content, for, as Laurens De Vos states, “[a] psychotic state demands a free form [...] language does not merely serve as a support, a bearer of a representation or meaning, but it becomes the message itself” (133). Kane’s move

towards the volatility of performance, her insistence to *present* and (both linguistically and structurally) *evoke* schizophrenia and depression rather than *re-present* them—mimetic representation being the defining feature of realist theatre—have made her later work the target of the very criticism habitually directed against postmodernism at large: in such a reading, the play's investment in form and the liberties it takes with regard to character and plot are considered detrimental to the viability of its politics. This kind of criticism is voiced, for example, by fellow playwright Phyllis Nagy, who deplores that,

[a]s we move through [Kane's] work [...] we begin to find an absence of character, and sometimes characters are stripped of their identities—literally—and given 'letters' instead of names, for instance. These characters begin to speak into a void. This is what I find somewhat problematic. Because the technique tends to render an audience morally passive. One either cannot or is not required to respond to characters who float in a void. (in Saunders, 158)

Kane was well aware of the unsettling effects of innovative form: "All good art is subversive, either in form or content. And the best art is subversive in form *and* content. And often, the element that most outrages those who seek to impose censorship is form" (Kane, quoted in Stephenson and Langridge, 130). To call *4.48 Psychosis* an apolitical play, to read it as a mere suicide note that fails to transcend autobiography, does not do Kane's work justice: the play is politically viable *precisely because* its fragmented form refuses to incorporate and own the Other through a teleological mimesis based on the Aristotelian "imitation of [allegedly] inherent ends or entelechies" (Redner). The play thereby allows (and encourages) inconsistencies, contingencies, and intensities and ultimately supports a perpetual re-imagining of the concept of subjectivity in general.

The aim of this article is to take a closer look at Kane's subversion of theatrical conventions and discuss the cognitive dynamics of what I will call, drawing and expanding on Spinoza's notion of *conatus*, striving or meandering thought and (inner) speech in the playwright's final play. I will come to define meandering thought as, at times, conflicted and disorganised, equivocal speech which includes frequent derailment and circumstantiality, i.e. non-linear thought patterns. Referencing neuroscientific theories of neural plasticity, inner speech, and mind wandering, and then engaging them in a dialogue with philosophy of mind, I will show that meandering thought deterritorialises speech, makes it stutter and stumble, and constantly weaves and un-weaves the subject and its understanding of the world. I will further argue that striving thought shares a number of characteristics with what has been described, in psychiatric textbooks, as schizophrenic language: a language that eschews the boundaries between internal and external, between self and other—a language, in short, that in many cultures is 'unthinkable' (Séguin). As cognitive scholars invested in Darwinian epistemology have convincingly argued, however, it is culture that restricts nature and thereby defines the limits (and the form) of thought—and not, as has often been maintained, vice versa. The feminist theorist Elizabeth Grosz, for example, suggests that a specific culture only ever actualises a minute subset of potentialities latent in nature, binding it according to the needs of a specific human moment:

[...] culture diminishes, selects, reduces nature rather than making nature over, or adding to it social relevance, significance, and the capacity for variation. Nature itself may be understood as perpetual variation [...] culture rather than nature is what impoverishes nature's capacity for self-variation and becoming, by tying the natural to what culture can render controllable and what it sees as desirable. (48)

Following Grosz, I will argue that the kind of conative thought presented by Kane in *4.48 Psychosis*—her undoing of traditional dramatic form—can be understood as a character's attempt to open up that culture-specific actualisation of nature so as to express innovative and, often, culturally subversive ideas. Kane's meandering thought attests to new (cognitive) needs, new "lines of flight" (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 3) that cast light on both the expediencies and the limitations of the Cartesian notion of an ontologically bounded and clearly delineated subjectivity—situated, first and foremost, in the safely detached realm of the cogito—and its pervasive consequences for how we perceive the relationship between body, world, and mind-brain. Approaching a text like *4.48 Psychosis*—a text so deeply invested in problematising the post-Cartesian dilemma that "[b]ody and soul can never be married" (Kane, *Psychosis*, 212)—from a perspective of mental autonomy and "Cartesian isolationism" (Pouivet, 83) is cumbersome at best, and counterproductive at worst. Such a take on the play will inadvertently divorce the play's formal innovation from its epistemic impact and consider the lack of "ontological security" (Laing, 42) it stages as a hindrance to its politics: a view expressed, for example, in Nagy's aforementioned critique that the play "speak[s] into a void," and all too often legitimised by evoking Kane's troubled biography. To avoid this critical fallacy, I propose a different "lecture machine" (McKenzie, 19[1]) to make sense of the continuous striving, in the plays of Sarah Kane, to "feel physically like [one] feel[s] emotionally" (Kane, *Crave*, 179): a lecture machine based on the Spinozist thesis—increasingly corroborated by contemporary neuroscience—of the affective parallelism of mind and body, of mental events and physical events, of mental striving and bodily striving. In developing my argument, I will draw equally on scholars invested in the cognitive sciences and on poststructuralist theorists, pointing to productive interfaces between proponents of the respective schools. For, as Ellen Spolsky points out in an essay on "Darwin and Derrida," it is precisely the cognitive flexibility of the human mind-brain that makes change inevitable—a neurological assertion, she claims, of the poststructuralist instability of meaning.

### **Striving to Persevere: Minding the Human Body**

In proposition 7 of part 3 of his *Ethics*, Spinoza describes the conatus principle by stating that "[t]he striving [conatus] by which each thing strives to persevere in its being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing" (159). According to Spinoza, striving is not only the basis of our desire to increase our power of acting, and thus the basis of all our affects and emotions, but constitutes our very, porous selves: the human subject is indistinguishable from its striving. Unlike Descartes, Spinoza thus envisions a form of subjectivity that does not pre-exist its unqualified and unstructured bodily affects but is, rather, constituted by them (Malabou, 7). For Spinoza, the human mind is a complex idea of the body that "cannot exist without an object whose existence it

affirms through its judgements [...]. For the mind the striving to exist is the striving to affirm" (Koistinen, 183). The body—and thus the mind—never perceives an external thing *itself* but always the way it is *affected* and, ultimately, *constituted* by it. For the mind to think is to have ideas; and ideas are coextensive with the things they represent: "The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things" (Spinoza, E2p7, 119). Catherine Malabou emphasises that the conatus implies that both the body *and* the mind endeavour to persist in their own being, but that the conatus must not be understood as a third term: just like the affects of which it is the basis, it is a striving in intensity only; it is never subjectivated (Malabou, 38). In striving, desire and ontology cannot be differentiated. The striving of perseverance can therefore be understood as "a consistent, insistent and resistant dynamic affirmation" (Bove, 187). Not unlike Deleuze and Guattari's much later concept of the "desiring-machine," which we could also call the striving-machine, the conatus embodies an immanent ethic, an immanent production, which is "not the production of something by someone—but production for the sake of production itself, an ungrounded time and becoming" (Colebrook, 55). It is, in short, neither entirely in the mind-brain nor in the body, but in nature. The striving or machinic subject comes into being *precisely because* it is unstable and, like a machine, perpetually engages in a myriad of connections and assemblages. It is the sum total of its ever-expanding, deterritorialising associations:

[...] the subject [is] produced as a residuum alongside the machine [i.e. the connections and assemblages of human interaction with the world, other human beings, animals, inanimate things, technology, ideas, etc.] This subject itself is not at the center, which is occupied by the machine, but on the periphery, with no fixed identity, forever decentered, *defined* by the states through which it passes. (Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 20)

Spinoza's early modern philosophy as well as Deleuze and Guattari's poststructuralist, posthumanist ideas about the self strongly resonate with contemporary cognitive theories and insights. Spinoza, whom acclaimed neuroscientist Antonio Damasio depicts as a pioneer in neurobiology (*Looking for Spinoza*, see also Malabou, 50), insists upon the importance of affects and feeling in the very process of reasoning. As Catherine Malabou explains, "Spinoza's nondualistic conception of the relationship between mind and body implies a definition of the conatus in which the ontological and the biological are intertwined" (50). In a similar vein, reverberating both Spinozian and Deleuzian claims, contemporary neurosciences refrain from thinking of subjectivity as a biologically determined, nativist, monolithic entity. Rather, the neural self is considered as an ever-evolving, ever-adapting, plastic structure in whose development experiences, memories, and affects are of central importance. Studies continue to show that the nervous system is neither centralised nor autonomous, but constituted by highly modifiable neural connections which are receptive to external phenomena (Malabou, 26-28)—or, as I will argue in a later section of this article, to misattributed, *externalised* instances of *internal* speech. Not unlike the Deleuzian *body without organs*, this anti-nativist view of neural plasticity allows for an almost incomprehensible array of potential linkages—"figurative cognitive [inner] space[s] [that are] physically embodied in the very real space of the possible collective activities of some proprietary population of appropriately devoted neurons within the human [...] brain" (Churchland 25-26).

These linkages are then ‘mapped’ by experience into more or less durable conceptual frameworks and structural, representational spaces but, at the same time, remain flexible and dynamic enough to (at least temporarily) realign and respond to external influence and change. This plasticity exposes the nervous system to both external and, as in the case of neurological disorders, internal danger: damage to our brain entails damage to our sense of self (Malabou, 28; Solms and Turnbull, 4). Many cognitive philosophers such as Daniel Dennett or Thomas Metzinger thus conclude that, contrary to popular belief, the view of the stable, centred self is an illusion:

No such thing as selves exist in the world: Nobody ever *was* or *had* a self. All that ever existed were conscious self-models that could not be recognized *as* models. The phenomenological self is not a being, but a process—and the subjective experience of *being someone* emerges if a conscious information-processing system operates under a transparent self-model. (Metzinger, 1)

### **Striving to Connect: Voicing the Conatus**

What are the consequences for the way we produce and receive literature, if “nobody ever was or had a self”? How can a playwright depict the immanently porous interiority of a striving human mind-brain, let alone one on the verge of psychotic disintegration? Most conspicuously, Sarah Kane chose to do away with conventional notions of dramatic character: in *4.48 Psychosis* individual enunciations are no longer attributed to distinct individuals. In a radical move towards depersonalisation, dialogical turn-taking is marked by the mere use of dashes, making it impossible, at least for the reader of the play text, to identify a definite number of discrete characters. The play thus depends to a large degree upon the reader’s creative participation, for what one reader may understand as an interaction of multiple *characters*, another might construe as an interchange of interior *voices*. The same openness holds true for the play’s race and gender distributions. Many, but by no means all, directors have opted to cast three actors for their staging of *4.48 Psychosis*, following the suggestion within the play text that alludes to a threefold configuration of “Victim. Perpetrator. Bystander” (Kane, *Psychosis*, 231).

Even though a scenic production of the play will eventually have to rely upon a decision as to the number of actors that appear on stage, one cannot speak of unitary characters, of *dramatis personae* in the traditional sense of the concept. Ehren Fordyce argues that Kane’s work, from her debut *Blasted* up to *4.48 Psychosis*, shows a pronounced tendency to substitute the dramatic technique of character for that of (dis)embodied voice (107). Just as the schizophrenic’s sense of self, his or her ontological security is threatened by the presence of commenting inner voices, the adoption, by Kane, of bare voice, of juxtaposed “language surfaces” (Lehmann, 18[2]) facilitates what Elinor Fuchs calls “the Death of Character”: the eschewal of any pretence to unity in a postmodern age marked by “a dispersed idea of self” (9). Voices, both in the theatre and in the lived experience of clinical schizophrenia, have a pronouncedly destabilising quality that forces us to question our received, Cartesian assumptions about selfhood. As Fordyce explains,

[t]he ability to situate the self, to establish a secure ground for the *ethos* of character, disintegrates as voices crowd in; as they speak simultaneously with other characters; as they whisper instructions in the ear to harm oneself. Voice has this odd, de-situating power: to be embodied and disembodied at the same time; to trouble the boundary between inner and outer, local and remote, phantasmatic and real. [...] Voice creates a world that is *radically immanent*, where no form guides one to know how to be stable and secure. (108)

(Inner) voice thus has a pronouncedly striving quality: due to its indeterminate ontological status (*whence* does it originate?) as well as its often contradictory content (*what* does it mean?), voice renegotiates the territories and boundaries of the self. Being simultaneously embodied and disembodied, the pondering and imaginative nature of voice in *4.48 Psychosis* evokes the Spinozist notion of unqualified conatus, for it engages with the environment without any preconceived judgement: striving, in the words of Zadie Smith, does not have “a fixed point, no specific moral system, not, properly speaking, a morality at all. It cannot be found in the pursuit of transcendental reward [...]” (33). Instead, as exemplified by the voice(s) Kane conjures, its sole movement in the world is to persevere in its own being: “to communicate, to converse / to laugh and make jokes / to win affection of desired Other / [...] to form mutually enjoyable, enduring, cooperating and reciprocating relationship with Other, with an equal / to be forgiven / to be loved / to be free” (*Psychosis*, 235). In striving, the desire to increase one’s power of acting is always directed towards the world, towards the ‘socius’: both the satisfactions *and* frustrations it affords—for striving is a serious matter: the willingness to engage can just as easily lead to a diminishment of one’s power to act—are “not transcendental, but of the earth” (Smith, 38).

The radical openness of the conatus can be overwhelming because it exposes the fictitious boundedness of Cartesian subjectivity: “Hatch opens / Stark light / the television talks / full of eyes / the spirits of sight / [...] Where do I start? / Where do I stop? / [...] perhaps it will save me / perhaps it will kill me” (*Psychosis*, 225-227). In striving, life and ideas, life and desire, conflate. This is why true striving always entails hope: the good we strive for is nothing other than “what we [...] know to be useful to us” (Spinoza, E4d1, 200). Arriving at this knowledge may take some time; it will entail both the satisfaction and the frustration of our desire, but, according to Gilles Deleuze, this indeterminate nature of striving is precisely “why Spinoza calls out to us in the way he does: you do not know beforehand what good or bad you are capable of; you do not know beforehand what a body or a mind can do, in a given encounter, a given arrangement, a given combination” (quoted in Smith, 36). The voice(s) in *4.48 Psychosis* seem to agree: despite the omnipresent feeling of loss, frustration, and desperation, virtually no other word is repeated as tenaciously as “light” and its evocation of an (as yet unattainable) mental peace and cognitive clarity: it occurs fourteen times throughout the short play. Moreover, the play famously ends with the request to “please open the curtains” (245), presumably to let in further light and open the enclosed space of the theatre—metonymically standing in for the bounded and enclosed subject—to the bustle of the city (which, given that the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Upstairs, for which the play was intended and where it ultimately premiered, does have windows, was a viable dramaturgical option). In his fascinating Spinozist

reading of Walt Whitman's poetry, Ibon Zubiaur argues that a poem is "the verbal register of an affective process" (375): the conatus captured in Whitman's poetry locates both body and mind in a causal relationship with their environment. Kane's use of voice achieves a similar effect: it verbalises the human processes of desire, the intensities of conative flows, that ultimately constitute the subject as an entanglement of mind, body, and world.

What is more, the radically immanent world of voice-hearing evoked in 4.48 *Psychosis* is closely related to the linguo-cognitive phenomenon called inner speech. Equally referred to as inner voice, inner speech is a quotidian human experience that plays a crucial part in human consciousness. Operating at the interplay of thought and language (Perrone-Bertolotti *et al.*, 221), inner speech has been defined as "the subjective experience of language in the absence of overt and audible articulation" (Alderson-Day and Fernyhough, 931). A "mental stimulation of speech" (Perrone-Bertolotti *et al.*, 221), inner voice serves various cognitive, epistemological, and ontological functions: it plays an important role in the self-regulation of cognition, is said to interact with working memory, enhances executive functions and cognitive flexibility, facilitates the planning and rehearsing of (future) actions, and balances emotions, for example, by increasing self-confidence or assisting self-relaxation (Alderson-Day and Fernyhough, 931, 937-8; Perrone-Bertolotti *et al.*, 221; Huebner). Structurally speaking, inner voice, though often highly idiosyncratic, has a number of features that guarantee its inherent logic and heuristic efficiency. As first theorised by Lev Vygotsky, inner speech is (a) "predicative," i.e. it condenses syntactic elements and only uses the minimal amount of information required by the thinking subject; (b) it relies on "semantic embeddedness," meaning that words are attributed idiosyncratic meanings and connotations; (c) the meanings of its words are thus "egocentric;" and (d) it employs sense imagery (Huebner, 1587. Cf. Vygotsky). Drawing on Vygotsky's theory of inner speech as the result of a process of internalisation in the cognitive development of the child, Charles Fernyhough distinguishes between overt "external dialogue;" gradually subvocalised "private speech;" "expanded inner speech"—fully internalised speech that still retains its dialogic quality; and "condensed inner speech"—abbreviated, highly individualised dialogic fragments presenting "alternate perspectives on reality," (55) corresponding to the kind of "thinking in pure meanings" described by Vygotsky (249).

Inner speech is further associated with Dialogical Self Theory (DST) which, drawing on the psychology of William James, the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, and the literary scholarship of Mikhail Bakhtin, considers the self as an assemblage of / as an interplay between, a multitude of internal and external self-positions wherein the self, often via the deliberations of inner speech, serves as the dialogical narrator (de Sousa *et al.*, 885; cf. Hermans). Internal self-positions refer to our different representations of who we are or take ourselves to be as well as of the social roles we play; external self-positions refer to the affective relationships we maintain with other people. According to DST, a coherent, albeit fleeting and processual, sense of self "is dependent on the communication or dialogue between the different self-positions that can be either complementary or contradictory. Internal coherence is achieved and sustained through the dynamic generated by this inner dialogue and by outer dialogue with others" (de

Sousa *et al.*, 885). A collapse of the dialogical self-system, however, may lead to the disturbances and disruptions of self-experience typically identified with schizophrenia. Concomitantly, dysfunctions of inner speech—insistent imperative voices, uncontrolled mind wandering, and excessive negative ruminations—have been linked to the emergence of depressive states, anxiety, as well as auditory-verbal hallucinations (Alderson-Day and Fernyhough, 944-48). According to these hypotheses, a deficit in inner speech source-monitoring can cause internal thoughts to be misattributed to external voices (Perrone-Bertolotti *et al.*, 236).

Applying the insights of inner speech theory to a discussion of Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* may prove fruitful on several levels. First, it accounts for the variability and differing accessibility of the "language surfaces" we encounter throughout the play, which alternate between (a) (potentially) "external dialogue" [e.g. the voice's (imagined?) interaction with a doctor figure]; (b) "expanded inner speech," i.e. increasingly opaque internal ruminations that do, however, retain dialogic overtones [e.g. "Come now, let us reason together / Sanity is found in the mountains of the Lord's house on the horizon of the soul that eternally recedes / The head is sick, the heart's caul torn" (229)]; and (c) "condensed inner speech" whose "telegraphic style captures the speed with which clusters of thoughts emerge" (John-Steiner, 141-42), yet remains positively obscure to the reader/spectator even when read against the play's context and cotext [cf., for example, the following list of verbs which is preceded by the blank ascertainment that "Nothing's forever / (but Nothing)": "slash wring punch burn flicker dab float dab / flicker burn punch burn flash dab press dab / wring flicker float slash burn slash punch slash / press slash float slash flicker burn dab" (231)]. Second, the intricate web of contesting voices also accounts for the play's performative plasticity and helps to explain why different readers/directors have, as mentioned above, identified varying numbers of characters within the play. Moreover, the reader's cognitive challenge of attributing individual statements to either internal, external, or externalised sources replicates the aforementioned deficits in inner speech monitoring that have been said to prompt auditory-verbal hallucinations in schizophrenic patients. The effect of experiencing the radical immanence of somebody else's inner speech—somebody else whose dialogic self-system is potentially perturbed—is simultaneously liberating and disconcerting.

The expansive cognitive instability of auditory-verbal hallucinations and the mental striving it entails is exactly what Kane was aiming at with *4.48 Psychosis*. In a conversation with Dan Rebellato about the ambitions in writing her play, Kane explained:

It's about a psychotic breakdown and what happens to a person's mind when the barriers which distinguish between reality and different forms of imagination completely disappear, so that you no longer know the difference between your waking life and your dream life. And also you no longer know where you stop, and the world starts. So, for example, if I were psychotic I would literally not know the difference between myself, this table and Dan. They would all somehow be part of a continuum, and various boundaries begin to collapse. Formally I'm trying to collapse a few boundaries as well; to carry on with *making form and content one*.



(Kane in a public interview with Dan Rebellato, quoted in Saunders, *“Love Me or Kill Me,”* 111-12)

Kane’s use of an abundance of unidentified and polyvalent voices rather than unitary characters marks a decisive step in her endeavour towards making schizophrenic “form and content one.” The voices are a constant reminder/remainder of the Real that comes to subvert the fictitious pretence of symbolic integrity. Throughout the play, the protagonist’s pain stems from the Cartesian separation of mind and body, of subject and object—a separation that also informs much of contemporary medical and psychiatric praxis. Kane was deeply critical of this tradition. In the spirit of Spinozist monism, she claimed that *4.48 Psychosis* is a play “about the split between one’s consciousness and one’s physical being. [...] The only way back to any kind of sanity is to connect physically with who you are emotionally, spiritually and mentally” (quoted in Saunders, *“Love Me or Kill Me,”* 113). Ruminating on the alleged incongruity of body and mind/soul—“Body and soul can never be married” (*Psychosis*, 212)—the voice expresses her/his deep dissatisfaction with this fundamental dichotomy and ponders over ways to transcend it:

I will drown in dysphoria  
in the cold black pond of my self  
the pit of my immaterial mind  
How can I return to form  
now my formal thought has gone? (*Psychosis*, 213)

This passage implies the lingering Spinozist possibility of a “return to form” even as the cogito, the “formal thought,” which is the foundational prerequisite of the Cartesian conception of subjectivity, has been shed: a return to form, as it were, that allows for new (dis)identifications that are, in the words of Julia Kristeva, “anterior to the One” (191) and thus anterior to “Man.” At the same time, the passage speaks to the difficulty of *expressing* this posthumanist (prehumanist?) anteriority through language which, as Lacan has claimed, constitutes the very essence of the symbolic order. How can one approximate the fragmented and polyvocal schizology of psychosis, of the excessively striving self, without the “formal thought” of the signifying chain? Is it even possible?

### **Striving to Form: Staging the Conatus**

Evoking Derrida, Neil Badmington argues that Kane’s call for a new poetics of dramatic form can never be absolute, for an incumbent “return to form” is unavoidable:

“Precisely because Western philosophy is steeped in humanist assumptions, [Derrida] observed, the end of Man is bound to be written in the language of Man” (9). Kane was well aware that, writing a dramatic play and not envisaging a silent performance, she could not do away with words altogether—even though the repeated silences and the supremacy of voice over character clearly attest to an increasing mistrust of language<sup>[3]</sup>. Her words are, however, marked by a pronounced tendency toward verbal reduction, lifting their poetic function over their narrative and representational function (Quay, 297). Following a heated debate with the therapist figure, the protagonist agrees to “do the chemical lobotomy” (*Psychosis*, 221) of psychotropic

drugs as her/his thought patterns becomes increasingly abstract:

abstraction to the point of  
unpleasant  
unacceptable  
uninspiring  
impenetrable  
[...]  
No native speaker  
[...]  
derailed  
deranged  
deform  
free form  
[...]  
drowning in a sea of logic  
this monstrous state of palsy. (221-23)

The “sea of logic” in which the voice is “drowning,” a logic to which s/he is “no native speaker,” indicates the inadequacy of the Lacanian name-of-the-father to express a multitude of polyvocal selves, incommensurable with the dominant Western “metaphysics of presence” (Derrida, 60). Kane’s diction here allows for what Lyotard called “the differend” (xii) of speech: those uncanny, “unpleasant,” “unacceptable,” and “impenetrable” (*Psychosis*, 221) associations that constantly weave and un-weave the subject-in-process (*sujet-en-procès*), giving “expression to those parts of our selves, or those voices, which have been marginalized or rendered inexpressible by the demands of unity and stability—demands which violate the heterogeneous nature of language and the self” (Haber, 19). The poetic quality of the following fragment illustrates Kane’s move toward a “free form” (*Psychosis*, 223) that is reminiscent more of Kristeva’s ‘semiotic’ and its pre-linguistic remnants of “alliteration and vocal and gestural rhythmicity” than of the “logical and grammatical structures of the symbolic” (Macey, 348):

a consolidated consciousness resides in a darkened banqueting hall near the ceiling of a mind whose floors shifts as ten thousand cockroaches when a shaft of light enters as all thoughts unite in an instant of accord body no longer expellent as the cockroaches comprise a truth which no one even utters. (205)

The “consolidated consciousness” of this free-floating passage has momentarily overcome the debilitating limitations of Cartesian dualism: in an instance of “light,” “all thoughts unite” and the body accords with the mind. Unlike the “cold black pond” of the Cartesian “immaterial mind” (*Psychosis*, 213), the sanity of the consolidated mind/body is found “where madness is scorched from the bisected soul” (*Psychosis*, 223). Again, Spinozist philosophy can help to elucidate this passage: unlike Descartes, who distinguishes between passive, representational ideas and active, non-representational volitions (i.e. judgements), Spinoza refuses to bifurcate—to “bisect,” as Kane has it—mental states. For Spinoza, affirmation is always internal to an idea,

undergirding its inherent epistemic status. This has important repercussions for our analysis of Kane's play: since affirmation is not external to an idea, and since ideas have epistemic value of their own, mental striving is an act *in and of itself*, consolidating the relation of consciousness and environment, connecting the mind/body with the world (cf. Della Rocca, 134-135). When, in a move towards posthumanist deterritorialisation, the soul/mind/body is no longer bisected, it loses its need to expel: the inside is already part and parcel of the outside, and vice versa. These passages stand in stark contrast to the play's doctor-patient interactions which, partaking of a Cartesian logic of "sensible" (*Psychosis*, 209) and externalised judgement, stifle the voice's ability to strive: "Inscrutable doctors, sensible doctors, way-out doctors [...] ask the same questions, put words in my mouth, offer chemical cures for congenital anguish and cover each other's arses until I want to scream [...]" (209).

Julie Waddington has argued that posthumanism represents a critical re-evaluation rather than a clear-cut discontinuation of humanism (141); similarly, Kane's use of language documents a crisis in symbolic signification rather than a complete break with it. Rather, Kane's poetic use of language answers Deleuze and Guattari's call for a "minor" literature (*Kafka*): the attempt to deterritorialise and transgress linguistic standards and dramatic conventions *from within* by using a major language in a minor way. The poeticisation of dramatic diction is one viable example of "minoring" a discursive standard. It is often achieved through a concentration of metaphors, and, in the context of schizophrenic disintegration, a progressive literalisation of these metaphors. In an interaction with the therapist figure, the voice expresses suicidal thoughts and elaborates on the implications of metaphoric speech. Whereas the therapist expressly distinguishes between metaphors and reality, s/he conflates the two concepts:

- [...] I'm tired of life and my mind wants to die.
- That's a metaphor, not reality.
- It's a simile.
- That's not reality.
- It's not a metaphor, it's a simile, but even if it were, the defining feature of a metaphor is that it's real. (211)

According to Aleks Sierz, the negotiation of "rival realities" is an essential characteristic of the "metaphor-rich" arts of the 2000s (195) which is reflected in the source-monitoring challenges that 4.48 *Psychosis* presents to both its 'character(s)' and the reader. Sierz argues that the dissection of "objective" reality into a multitude of interrelated mind spaces offers "a completely subjective route into the subject" and challenges conventional notions of form (196). The importance of the metaphor in fragmented postmodern writing lies within its transformational potential, its ability, not unlike that of the theatre in general, to create alternative worlds, however fleeting they may be: "Metaphor is analogous to fiction, because it floats a rival reality. It is the entire imaginative process in one move" (Wood, 202). To the schizophrenic protagonist, metaphor is real because it mirrors the "imaginative process" of her/his own existential, her/his own rival reality.

Both the poeticisation of language (robbing language of its expressly representational function) and the aforementioned absence of discrete characters (thereby challenging the notion of the discrete self) do not only entail a “minoring” of major language codes, but also result in a re-structuring of dramatic plot that has little in common with the conventions of English realism. The ‘plot’ of *4.48 Psychosis* is a mere assemblage of ambivalently ordered fragments and polyvalent vignettes, lacking the conventional teleology of narrative closure. Christine Quay thus identifies in the play an overall proclivity for disintegration, engulfing its form (fragmentation, absence of character, etc.), its language (poeticisation, metaphorisation, silences, pauses, etc.), and its content (the disintegration of the unitary and discrete subject) (298). Kane’s formal choices *implicitly* express a socio-political awareness—an awareness not immediately tangible in the play’s seemingly privative content. Kane, at first glance, does not pursue any political purpose. To claim that Kane’s eschewal of genre-specific dialogicity implies a renunciation of political responsibility, however, is to ignore the fact that “minor” literature in the Deleuzian sense does not only attempt to transform *formal* conventions but also seek to breach a major *discourse*.

The discourse on trial in *4.48 Psychosis* is, of course, the belief in a transcendent cogito, in the alleged sanity of a Cartesian body/mind split wherein the mind is indivisible and disembodied, yet ever present to itself. Deciding to follow a “line of flight” and disavow the dualistic logic of what s/he perceives as “the moral majority,” the voice exclaims: “I have reached the end of this dreary and repugnant tale of a sense interned in an alien carcass and lumpen by the malignant spirit of the moral majority [...] I sing without hope on the boundary” (214). The Cartesian notion of subjectivity and the forms of social interaction it enables are described as a “repugnant tale of [...] sense” precisely because they are premised on the exclusion of difference, on the jingoism of a territorial self. Whereas the bounded subject of Cartesian inscription seeks to expel difference in order to foster its own identity, its own distinctiveness, the conative protagonist of Kane’s play embraces and “love[s] the absent” (*Psychosis*, 219). Evoking the neural plasticity and the associated dynamicity of meaning mentioned above, the voices of *4.48 Psychosis* illustrate a wildly Spinozist form of subjectivity, a striving desiring-machine in the Deleuzian sense, that is volatile and performative, avoiding rigid fixation at all costs<sup>[4]</sup>.

What ensues throughout the play is an uncanny and perpetual tension between the requirements of the name-of-the-father—the post-transitional chain of signifiers that, following Lacan, constitute and validate the subject—and the schizophrenic’s “foreclosure of the Father” (Lacan, 156)—the renunciation of the Law which throws the subject back into a pre-linguistic and pre-transitional realm of plenitude and boundlessness. It is a tension between the familiar territorialism of the ‘I’—the “solo symphony” of the symbolically castrated self and his or her “castrated thought” (*Psychosis*, 242)—and the unfamiliar, simultaneously pleasurable and terrifying limitlessness of the deterritorialised desiring-machine: “Where do I start? / Where do I stop? How do I start? / (As I mean to go on) / How do I stop?” (226).

This tension is especially traceable in those fragments of the play that involve therapeutic encounters. Here, the voices’ desire for pre-symbolic plenitude is forcibly

undermined by the dualistic imperative of the 'major' Western discourse and its normalising practices and institutions. The National Health Service is condemned as one such institution. Similar to Joe Penhall's *Blue/Orange*, which was first produced at the Royal Court a mere two months earlier, *4.48 Psychosis* "is an impassioned critique of the hospitalization and treatment of those with mental illness, in which the individual is questioned, diagnosed and treated with powerful combinations of antidepressant and anxiolytics" (Saunders, "Just a Word," 105). The play's protagonist, however, is reluctant to undergo psychiatric treatment: "Please. Don't switch off my mind by attempting to straighten me out" (220). S/he fears that the "attempt to straighten [her/him] out" will rob her/him of her/his "truth" (205): the psychotic moment at 4.48 when "all thoughts unite in an instant of accord body no longer expellent as the cockroaches comprise a truth which no one ever utters / I had a night in which everything was revealed to me" (205). In a reversal of conventional psychiatric logic, the "truth which no one ever utters" is her/his conviction that the monolithic, unitary self is ultimately a fraud, "a fragmented puppet, a grotesque fool" (229). At 4.48, when psychosis breaks, her/his self gradually disintegrates. What is important, however, is that s/he perceives her/his ontological weakening as a moment of "sanity" (229) and "clarity" (242), during which s/he defies Cartesian inscription and refuses to be attuned to the socio-economic demands of what Herbert Marcuse (36) has called the performance principle: "to achieve goals and ambitions / to overcome obstacles and attain a high standard / to increase self-regard by the successful exercise of talent / to overcome opposition / to have control and influence over others [...] to vindicate the ego" (*Psychosis*, 233-34). The play seems to suggest that change is possible precisely "in those moments where comfortable designations break down (woman/man, victim/victimizer, native/foreigner, self/other) and everything must be rethought" (Urban, 69): "at 4.48 / the happy hour / when clarity visits / warm darkness / which soaks my eyes" (42)[\[5\]](#).

At a first glance, Kane's attribution of a metaphysical insight to schizophrenia—an insight that escapes "the chronic insanity of the sane" (*Psychosis*, 229)—is reminiscent of R. D. Laing's distinction between "true" irrationality and "false" rationality (*Divided Self* and *Politics of Experience*). Some have consequently accused her of romanticising madness, of metonymically imposing "subgroups of human existence [...] as a picture of the whole of society" (Nikcevic, 269). The play's identity politics are much more ambiguous than that, however. The moments of psychotic "clarity," in which the protagonist seems to take pleasure in her/his newfound limitlessness ["I know no sin / this is the sickness of becoming great / this vital need for which *I* would die" (242)], are always followed by a nostalgia, a frightful longing for the groundedness of an "essential self" (*Psychosis*, 229), for the Jaspersian "Halt im Begrenzten" (Jaspers, 269). In these moments the name-of-the-father is reinstated, the subject re-stabilised, and the schizophrenic transgression of ontological boundaries is renounced as a "vile delusion of happiness, / the foul magic of this engine of sorcery" (229). The protagonist thus yearns for both the deterritorialisation and the reterritorialisation of the One; s/he simultaneously repels and desires the comforts and restrictions of the discrete self. Throughout the play, s/he repeatedly falters under the terrifying implications of personal dissolution: "and now I am so afraid / I'm seeing things / I'm hearing things / I

don't know who I am / [...] I beg you to save me from this madness that eats me / a sub-intentional death" (225-26). Her/his experience "as the Other" (Fink, 38) consequently leads to harshly conflicting emotions, to the co-occurrence of both excessive pleasure and excessive pain: "beautiful pain / that says I exist" (232). Instead of romanticising or reviling mental illness, depicting it as *either* a breakthrough *or* a breakdown, Kane thus provides an impartial and sympathetic account of the wide array of schizophrenic intensities. There is no dénouement of these conflicting responses at the end of the play: the reader/spectator is left uncertain as to the future effects of the protagonist's disintegration—and is consequently forced to question his or her own subjectivity: "It is myself I have never met, whose face is pasted on the underside of my mind" (245).

Deleuze and Guattari's conception of the subject as desiring-machine—indebted, as it is, to the Spinozist notion of *conatus*—might serve as a possible solution to the perpetual enmity between the ontologies of being and becoming. Since their subject is "produced as a residuum alongside the machine" (*Anti-Oedipus*, 20), alongside the machine's interactions and assemblages—an assertion that is increasingly validated by accounts of the plasticity and dynamicity of the human brain—the dissolution of ontological boundaries does not effect the annihilation of the self, *precisely because* these clear subjective boundaries are a humanist construction to begin with. To posthumanists such as Deleuze and Guattari but also to a cognitive philosopher like Metzinger, the existence of a discrete, monolithic subject, an "essential self" (*Psychosis*, 229), is a myth. The striving, neural self is understood as the source of desire. Desire, in turn, is not an indication of lack but a source of action (Lublin, 118). The voice acknowledges this when s/he realises that, in order to embrace who s/he already is, namely a machinic, deterritorialised 'subject,' s/he must overcome the Cartesian mind/body, subject/object split: "I need to become who I already am and will bellow forever at this incongruity which has committed me to hell" (212).

Furthermore, the striving, machinic self refutes the alleged egotism of madness ["Some will call this self-indulgence" (208)] because, unlike the Cartesian subject who excludes difference to secure its own fixity, the machinic self cannot exist without a 'you.' Mark Seem contends that the dialogicity of the machine—it is inherently *dia*-logical insofar as the 'I' comes to exist only *through* the 'you'—enables "a politics of desire directed against all that is egoic—and heroic—in man" (xix). In stark contrast to many medical handbooks that tend to portray the schizophrenic as an isolationist loner, Kane's protagonist accordingly yearns for social inclusion—the very premise of the desiring-machine and the (neural) dialogical self. Throughout the play the central voice expresses a deep desire for a 'you': "RSVP ASAP" (214); "But now you've touched me somewhere so fucking deep I can't believe [...]" (215); "Sometimes I turn around and catch the smell of you and I cannot go on I cannot go on without expressing this terrible so fucking awful physical aching fucking longing I have for you" (214); "Validate me / Witness me / See me / Love Me" (243).

It is crucial to note, however, that this 'you' is never identified and designates different referents. In the psychoanalytic encounters with a doctor figure quoted above, the 'you' signifies, in Lacanian terms, the imaginary phallus: it is the "original lost object" and "the original object-cause" (Homer, 64) of the central voice's desire. This early 'you'

does not exist; it is a “seeming value” (Rose, 66) that exemplifies the protagonist’s *phallic jouissance*, her/his attempt, as it were, to ascribe to an Other all that s/he has seemingly lost. This ‘you’ thus sustains her/his “belief in the excessive jouissance of the Other” (Homer, 90). The voice eventually comes to acknowledge as much: “[...] most of all, fuck you God for making me love a person who does not exist” (215).

During her/his psychotic break, “at 4.48 / the happy hour / when clarity visits” (242), on the contrary, the ‘you’ is no longer an object of possession but, in an instance of *Other jouissance*, machinically entangled with the ‘I.’ In a schizoanalytic move towards an “enjoyment as the Other” (Fink, 38), the protagonist sheds the territorial distinctions between ‘you’ and ‘I,’ reaching what s/he describes as a “warm darkness / which soaks my eyes [I’s]” (242): “this is the sickness of becoming great / the vital need for which I would die / to be loved [...] watch me vanish” (242-44)[6]. Conceptualising the human condition as a complex interplay of innumerable striving desiring-machines thus allows for a play with transgression “into the abyss of the Unspeakable,” resonating with an identity politics that transcends the Freudian daddy-mommy-me triangle, but never fully renounces the subject (De Vos, 136). Instead, the neural plasticity of the dialogical desiring-machine enables the subject to embrace its status as a subject-in-process.

4.48 *Psychosis* does not suggest that to find oneself in a process of schizophrenic disintegration is easy or (fully) desirable. If anything, the play concurs that the dissolution of the traditional subject is a terrifying experience, often entailing both intense pleasure and intense pain. But the play also points to the inherent deficiencies and the cultural constructedness of the Cartesian self, which, much to the playwright’s displeasure, is all too often portrayed as ideologically neutral. Change, the play seems to suggest, is neither accidental nor fortuitous, but a result of the continuing attempt of the mind to deal with its own limitations, to make hypotheses that might move it beyond those limitations.

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[1] McKenzie defines a "lecture machine" as "any system that processes discourses and practices, any assemblage that binds together words and acts or, alternatively, that works to disintegrate their bonds and erode their forms and functions" (21).

[2] "Language surfaces" is a translation of Elfriede Jelinek's concept of *Sprachflächen*.

[3] See, for example, the voice's (momentary) refusal, midway through the play, to speak again: "After 4.48 I shall not speak again" (213). In his review of the play's original

production, David Chadderton remarks that the evening opened “with probably the longest (deliberate) pause I have ever witnessed on stage” (quoted in Singer, 159). Accordingly, the first line of the play text runs as follows: “(A *very long silence*)” (205).

[4] Christine Quay argues that Kane’s protagonist abandons all forms of what Karl Jaspers once called the self’s “Halt im Begrenzten” (Jaspers, 269).

[5] In this passage the homophony of “eyes” and “I’s” is essential.

[6] Here, the dying of the ‘I’ does not suggest suicide in the traditional meaning of the word. Rather, it evokes the death of the subject as a discrete territoriality, a process that is inevitable once the protagonist acknowledges her/his machinic composition.