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12 “4.48 Psychosis” as a Suicide Note of Sarah Kane?

IVO ČERMÁK, VLADIMÍR CHRZ, KATEŘINA ZÁBRODSKÁ

Introduction

Sarah Kane, the author of several so-called ‘cool’ dramas, committed suicide. She was 28 years old. It is always a tragedy when a young person dies in this way, but we can say that artists often react more sensitively, and sometimes much too sensitively, to the harsh world that surrounds them, a world which is the inspiration for their work, and which sometimes overwhelms them.¹

In our paper we strived to respond to the question, what might have hastened the suicidal process of Sarah Kane. We focused on her last play, “4.48 Psychosis,” which seems to provide the key answer to the question included in the title.²

I (Ivo) had previously interpreted Psychosis 4.48 in a paper published in Czech, and later I asked Vladimír and Kateřina (Kate) to interpret the play as well. Thus we have three perspectives, from which we can develop an understanding of the suicide of Sarah Kane.

The space for interpretation is limited in this paper so we elaborated two perspectives – “regressive” and “genre” ones – more thoroughly. Kate’s poststructuralistic view is not presented here in detail, but there are many similarities between her interpretation and those presented in this paper.

The Life Story of Sarah Kane

Her autobiographical details have so far not been made available by her relatives for understandable reasons. The biographical notes of friends and colleagues and the interviews, which she gave to the media, are much too fragmentary and cannot provide a reliable source for reconstructing the relationship between the events of Sarah’s life and her suicide. We know

¹ There are some findings on higher risk of suicide among artists in comparison with the statistical expectation (Jamison, 1993). Other studies refer to consistent frequency of depression and self-destruction themes in life of creative women (Piiro, 1998).

² After premiere of 4.48 Psychosis, Sarah Kane relatives declared officially that the play is not a suicide note.

almost nothing about Sarah Kane's parents. We do not know anything about the nature of the relationships within her immediate family. Was her family a source of security to which she could return in her memories when she fought her depressions? Or was it a source by painful traumas which she was unable to cope with even with professional help?

The Style of Sarah Kane's Plays

Sarah Kane's plays contain shocking scenes of bizarre violence and sex (as for example in the play, "Blasted"), which are in reality metaphors which, when staged, can act as neologisms and which evoke repulsion on the part of some critics and the public. The sparse dialogues of Beckettian style portray the characteristic atmosphere of depression and ruin at the end of the century. But these signs do not disguise the poetic construction of her plays – it is apparent that Sarah had to research various layers of themes in confronting her own experiences and emotions. The meaning of her emotional, introspective, but also abstract poetic style is to express not only an original theme, but also to capture those aspects which express her inner-most personal attitude. Artists themselves admit that the therapeutic effect of an expressive style and of poetry is debatable. Often they are only a means of unmasking psychic pathology. It is a *vicious circle* – self-reflection is transformed into a poem or other form with poetic, expressive properties, and instead of finding release, one's depression deepens. In other words, if depression is present, then creating poetry or plays does not bring about catharsis, but only deeper depression. It would seem that in a sense this hypothesis is also applicable to the plays of Sarah Kane, something that is apparent especially in her play "4.48 Psychosis."

Style of 4.48 Psychosis

The play is a confusion of fragments, ie. different voices of the self. The play is not itemized into evidently defined characters, in other words it is not clear who is talking. The play has no apparent dialogues of dramatic personages, the play rather offers an impression of views and the voices gallop. The movement is fragmentary, similar to rotation in a carousel; certain sentences appear again and again in a form of a refrain. If we want to give a true picture of the play configuration through the category of chronotope, then the crucial place would be a *lunatic asylum*, and the crucial moment would be *4.48 hours*, and the crucial movement would be a *rotating carousel*. Which means that after each turn there is one permanently repeating daybreak at 4.48. The play was written for the stage, but the text is very unusual in this sense – it is full of lyrics, inward visionary images and there is almost no plot or explicit story behind.

Regression in the Service of the Ego and Against the Ego

Art can be superficially understood as impersonal and controlled, but for the most part it is the result of painful and regressive creative processes. What must an artist undergo – and what did Sarah Kane undergo – so that from the ill, chaotic, disintegrative, threatening, and traumatizing psychic realities, he/she might create an aesthetically form that communicates. And what risks does she run in doing so? She must find the courage to regress, or to put it more precisely, to regress in the service of the ego. Sometimes this can happen intentionally, but for the most part regression is understood by artists themselves as a phenomenon that appears suddenly which overwhelms thought. The feelings of regression are described as a kind of instability and fragility which take place together with a loosening of the connections between thoughts. This kind of state allows the artist to reach the contents of her unconscious and attach them to very original forms. But the artist taking this road is threatened with psychic disintegration since the boundaries between experiencing one’s self, one’s identity, and outer and inner reality are so fuzzy and inter-penetrating that the emergence of new experiential reality of unpredictable contents and structures are not only inevitable, but for many of them uncontrollable.

Regression is in this way a hybrid containing the potential both for the reorganization and integration of creative but normally inaccessible sources in the psyche, and for psychological deterioration (Kris, 2000/1952; Knafo, 2002).

Regression and Depression in “4.48 Psychosis”³

The heroine of the play, “4.48 Psychosis” leaves no doubts about what kind of depression she suffers from; “*depression is anger ...*” Anger and fury are exceptionally powerful emotions which, under some circumstances, can add strength to one’s actions. With Sarah Kane, it takes the form of depression, which keeps getting deeper and finally paralyzes all action – aesthetic or artistic.

In this state of regression, it is almost impossible for her to maintain a critical distance from the imagery connected with depression. In other words, her depression contaminates the creative process. She cannot work herself out of this trap and progressively loses the ability to use the experience, not only in

³ All quotes comes from S. Kane’s play “4.48 Psychosis” included in the edition of Complete Plays (Sarah Kane, 2001).

artistic creation but above all, in her attempts to create a harmony lost or unknown in her childhood. The depression, anger, and despair pull her down further and impair the boundaries of her ego, which she does not succeed in re-establishing: *"I will drown in my dysphoria/ in the cold black pond of my self/ the pit of my immaterial mind."* She is too deep, and her desperate voice is heard only when not only are her legs tired *"...my legs are empty/ Nothing to say/ And this is the rhythm of madness,"* but also her whole body and thought: *"DON'T LET THIS KILL ME,/THIS WILL KILL ME AND CRUSH ME AND/ SEND ME TO HELL...I beg you to save me from this madness that eats me/ a sub-intentional death.... I thought that I should never speak again/ but now I know that there is something blacker than desire/ perhaps it will save me/ perhaps it will kill me."* But it is now too late for a compassionate listening and understanding. Sarah is horrified by the state she has found herself in. The personage in the play "4.48 Psychosis" understands its seriousness and describes it with clinical precision: *"... and now I am so afraid/ I'm seeing things/ I'm hearing things/ I don't know who I am/ tongue out/ thought stalled/ the piecemeal crumple of my mind..."* or *"Sanity is found at the centre of convulsion, where madness/ is scorched from bisected soul."* At other times it poses questions from which it is apparent that the psychotic symptoms imprison her and keep her from self-knowledge: *"Do you think it's possible for a person to be born in the/ wrong body?"* Psychic illness, in its extreme forms, rather make work impossible because the creative act requires coherent thinking, concentrated attention, and critical detachment, and the ability to act with creative skill. So it is likely that Sarah Kane suffered from a severe psychotic depression which was so intolerable that she could not go on. Perhaps she was afraid that she would not write anything anymore. The play "4.48 Psychosis" is brilliantly written, perhaps peculiar, but not psychotically shattered. It is the expression of a deepening depression, but it is also above all the sign of how the creative, regressive process in connection with depression stops serving the ego and fatally turns against herself.⁴

"4.48 Psychosis" can be read as a poem. It is also a stock-taking play. The character with autobiographical traits cannot act straightforwardly, fights a passionate and cruel battle with herself, balances the boundary between a dream-like, hypnotic world and reality. Progressively she feels how she can no longer depend on the formal mechanisms of cognition, and how it is impossible to maintain the boundary between contents and its expression: *"...the defining*

⁴ Somebody could raise a question, how it is possible, that the play is yet written without "psychotic" traits but still express' a deep depression. In fact, Sarah could not create play in her depression phase but we can suppose that she had a similar experience depicted in Psychosis 4.48 behind herself. Moreover she found a support also in the professional sources which she had read during the process of play creation (Saunders, 2002).

feature of metaphor is that it's real/ How can I return to form/ now my formal thought has gone?"

In the process of creating, which Sarah Kane herself calls an experiential theatre, she opened the encased dangerous sources in her personality and unleashed the irreversible process toward suicide: *"I have become so depressed by the fact of my mortality that I/ have decided to commit suicide./ Despair propels me to suicide/ Anguish for which doctors can find no cure..."* She no longer was able to breathe life into the objects of her creation, the creative act no longer had the power to transform her, and her identification with it was sterile: *"At 4.48/ when sanity visits/ for one hour and twelve minutes I am in my right mind./ When it has passed I shall be gone again,/ a fragmented puppet, a grotesque fool./ Now I am here I can see myself/ but when I am charmed by vile delusion of happiness,/ the foul magic of this engine sorcery,/ I cannot touch my essential self."*

Genre Interpretation

We have already defined genres as culturally shared kinds of experience interpretation (or representation) (Čermák, Chrz, 2005; Chrz, Čermák, 2005). If we take the concept of genres into consideration, we can identify the two tendencies – lyrical and ironic tendencies in the text of the play.

The play – mainly with its specific final – can be seen as a brief linkage between the lyrics and the drama – between the **internalizing and externalizing motion** in other words. According to Frye (1957) the leading principle of the drama is a "theatrical acting out" or the externality, while the principle of lyrics lies in the inwardness. From its beginning to an end, the play can be read as a conflict between the inwardness and the alienating externality that is represented in various forms.

Illustration of Lyric Tendency

The crucial quotation of the first lyrical visionary passage is: *"I had a night in which everything was revealed to me. How can I speak again?"* The message in this quotation refers to a hint about *"(A long silence.)"* mentioned in an introductory dialogue of the play, that is not yet communicable as an internal insight in this dialogue. Also other image referring to *"The broken hermaphrodite who trusted herself alone"* can be seen as a symbol of somehow internal self-reliance, desire to stay in the internal world: *"and begs never to wake from the nightmare."* The need to keep and stay in this world is expressed here: *"remember the light and believe the light ... don't let me forget"*.

Very positively, the “internal truth” is laid against “alienating external reality” in the introductory parts of the play. An internal pain is placed against an external anonymous look of a doctor as we can see in this quote: “*smooth psychiatric voice/ of reason which tells me there is an objective reality in/ which my body and mind are one.*”

“*Smooth psychiatric voice*” as well as “*an objective reality*” are presented at the side of externality. This externality calls into question and invalidates the internal truth, that is also the “truth of the metaphor”: doctor: “*That's a metaphor, not reality*”. Patient: “*the defining feature of a metaphor is that it's real*”. Questioning external voices of “reason” or “objective reality” provoke again and again reactions of “long silence”. In the first part of the play the lyricism can thus be perceived as something positive that needs to be protected from the alienating external world. However, from the beginning, this lyricism, mainly the “most lyrical moment” that comes at 4.48, is perceived ambiguously also as a moment of a despair and suicide. This very moment is understood here as a moment of a complete incompatibility of the internal and external, the inability to externalize the internal: “*After 4.48 I shall not speak again*”. In the course of the play the meaning of the world of internal visions or “internal truth” or “lyrical dimension of an existence” is changing radically. While in the first part of the play the world of the internal visions is seen as some “asylum”, refuge or defense against the alienating external world, the very same internal world becomes the source of a destruction at the end. What served first as an asylum in which the Self is hidden from the *tyranny of the reason* or the *tyranny of the reality* becomes tyranny itself - *the tyranny of the madness*. This way the interior as a counterpart of the alienating externality is unmasked and deconstructed as something that in fact belongs to the same *tyranny*. The term “*unmasking*” leads us to the second motion or a second genre, the genre of irony.

Ironic Tendency

The term unmasking is an expression of the second movement and of the second genre, which is an irony. In accordance with Frye’s ideas, we can label the ironic movement as an antiromantic. While in the context of romance, the life is represented as the overcoming of the limited, the edifying of the earth-bounded or the following the vision or the ideal, irony can be understood as degrading and unmasking, as the perspective where the life is shaped by disillusion, skepticism, and resignation. By understanding the tendency of the play as ironic we can grasp the play as a whole, mainly with respect to its ambiguous ending.

We can perceive the irony also as an “inverting of the inverted“ (Frye, 1957) and in within this perspective also a reevaluation of the relation between “sanity” and “insanity”, between the truth socially constructed and the truth of

internal visions belong to the logics of the ironic motion. At the same time we can perceive this phenomenon as a certain "romanticizing of the madness", that can be seen as the opposite to the ironic motion. Thus we can perceive the "inverting" motion in the course of the play as complicated and manifold.

The ironic code is given to the last "period", "the final full stop" coming in the time of daybreak and epiphany: "*the happy hour/ when clarity visits/ warm darkness/ which soaks my eyes*". You can hardly see these passages in another way than as irony. Similarly, the next passage reveals an ironic approval of the voice of the doctor that had been opposed to in the previous passages of the play: "*I know no sin/ this is the sickness of becoming great/ this vital need for which I would die/ to be loved*".

The ending of the play could be called "the victory of the externality". The ending is "the final full stop" during which the need for external confirmation is re-voiced over and over: *Validate me/ Witness me/ See me/ Love me*". It is also her "*final submission*" and her "*final defeat*" that can be understood as an "ironic revelation" of the ultimate essence of the subject in a "submission", in emptiness that is being filled by external confirmation. Also the following sentence: "*I think that you think of me/ the way I'd have you think of me*" belongs to the ironic code. Here, it is shown, that confirming externality is not externality seen as a counterpart, as meeting up with the genuine "Other", but only as a narcissist illusion.

Words of the heroine: "*...watch me vanish/ watch me/ vanish/ watch me/ watch me/ watch*" that are repeated at the end are closing this ironic motion. The subject is revealed in its emptiness that needs to be filled in from the outside. Nevertheless this subject can only be confirmed at the moment that it is vanishing. In the frame of the ironic motion also the "last but one" message of the play can be seen: "*It is myself I have never met, whose face is pasted on the underside of my mind.*"

The play might resonate as an "ironic travel to the soul" instead of the one that is traditionally "romantic". The statement about the genuine Self hidden at the other side of the soul might sound romantic, if only it did not exist in the context of this ironic motion. Here, the soul is made visible and filtered through the irony at the moment when the unmasked deconstructed subject is vanishing.

The ultimate, deep, "dead point of the irony" (Frye, 1957) is thus the moment of the visionary revelation. This way also last words of the play can be read: "*please open the curtains.*"

What revelation does the author speak about? Not only the unmasking, deconstruction of the alienating externality, but internality as well – the whole way of establishing a subject with its borders that define the inside and the outside. The subject means emptiness and its internal world is the same "entrapment" and "tyranny" as is the external world. We cannot run away from the external world and hide in the internal one and the other way around. In

this sense, the play of Sarah Kane is “desperate”, the subject has no other possibility than to “vanish”. Maybe we might still see through this vanishing – “the death of a subject” or “the death of the author” something else. To do so, we would need the curtain to open.

Conclusion

I can conclude that my (Ivo) reading of the Sarah Kane’s play is about her trial to cope with depression by means of expressive and poetic style, Kate can be interpreted as a “subversive” imaginative language which was a means of breaking Sarah free from the symbolic order dictatorship and from the mode which subjectivity is constituted by this order. Vladimír is trying to understand these issues by means of lyrical tendency (movement) and its contexts. At the moment when there is no way how to come back because the regression started to work against the ego, there Kate reads emptiness without any relationships in the text of play, and there Vladimír has been trying to grasp Sarah’s movement to her suicide by the concept of the ironic tendency.

Sarah Kane’s friends believe that what kept her in depression was “the hopeless perspective of human existence” (Saunders, 2002). Unsuccessfully, she looked for a solution in life and in art. Her depression was also existentially anchored in hopelessly cruel world. Sarah finally saw the creative process as destructive as well. It is possible to think that she found meaning in death, and that therefore even suicide appeared to her as a meaningful exit from the vicious circle.

Our alternative reading of the text *Psychosis 4.48* has provided us with an understanding of Sarah Kane’s motives for her suicide. That is why we can conceive of it as a suicide note. However, her play is also much more than that, and it is also clear that it was not written primarily as a suicide note.

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