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Authorial Presence within the Works of Samuel Beckett and Sarah Kane

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"I want to play hide-and-seek and give you my clothes and tell you I like your shoes and sit on the steps while you take a bath."

(Kane 20)

When Samuel Beckett and Sarah Kane rose to prominence the spotlight did not focus only on their works but attempted to shine a light on the authors behind them. Sarah Kane's violent debut *Blasted* shocked critics, leading to attention grabbing headlines and an article by Jack Tinker that questioned whether money would have been 'better spent on a course of remedial therapy' for the author (qtd. in Singer 145). Samuel Beckett's works constructed a new theatrical form, and his tight-lipped approach to providing audiences with any direct meaning only increased interest in his authorial presence. His now public letters are constantly scanned to garner any new perspective on his practices and intentions (Pascale 71). Despite the public interest in both figures, their works themselves raise interesting points to the theoretical debate surrounding Barthes's "The Death of the Author." Kane's suicide has framed much of her work in the context of her death, yet debate continues around how much meaning her plays should derive from this. Beckett's harsh, minimal writing has been read as removing the author's existence in its entirety, with works such as *Lessness* and *Not I* breaking down assumed understanding of the author creating. The problem of the author imposes itself on a reader of Kane and Beckett's work, as this essay will suggest a non-dichotomous, fluid approach to their authorship reveals their work to wider interpretation.

Barthes's seminal "The Death of the Author," was released in 1967 and raised debate on literature's understanding of authorship. Barthes suggested that the prioritisation of the author is not a natural concept and was born out of development of English empiricism, French rationalism and is a culmination of capitalist ideology which hails the 'prestige of the individual' (Barthes 142). This has developed in literature to create an assumed relationship which sees the author communicating their pre-existing, characterised meaning to the reader. When literature has a creator who has lived, breathed, and maybe even died for their text its meaning can be comfortably assigned as the author's ownership. Readings of Sarah Kane's

final work *4:48 Psychosis* is a symptom of this tendency. Performed posthumously, the play was her final piece before she committed suicide. Critics and audience members alike have interpreted the piece as a suicide note, the conscious act of Kane communicating her despair and depression. In some ways, the piece seems to effectively agree with this interpretation with lines such as: "I have become so depressed by the fact of my mortality that I have decided to commit suicide" (Kane 4). The simple insight of Kane's death means that *4:48 Psychosis* and the author exist together. However, this appropriate relationship also seems to limit analysis of the piece. Michael Billington's article on the play when first performed communicates this limitation as he questions: "How do you judge a 75-minute suicide note?" Much of the conversation around the piece seems less concerned with the viewer's own perception, and more worried with how to tread interpretation of a play which encapsulates the finality of the author's life. The violence of suicidal depression within the play is quickly limited by this analysis to an enclosed relationship between the author and text. This creates a barrier between the piece and the viewer, who does not experience the play themselves and rather views it as something explained by the author. However, many have approached *4:48 Psychosis*'s analysis as something which must not be connected to Kane's death (Singer 160). From this view, to meld together the play with Kane's suicide is a minimising act: one that simplifies Kane's artistic vision with the false assumption that her mental illness provides some sense of holiness to the piece. Singer expresses that the piece does exhibit suicidal despair, but not Kane's specifically, and can rather be used by the viewer to experience that state of mind (161). This opens new interpretations to the piece, as the work can be approached without the loaded burden of commenting on Kane's life. Barthes cites our tendency to align with the author in Baudelaire's failure, Van Gogh's Madness, and Tchaikovsky's vice (143); is Sarah Kane's suicide simply another comfortable pairing in the history of interpreting the individual along with their art? If this is the case, how can art be

understood as an isolated being that the reader interprets, rather than something the author creates?

Barthes offers an alternative to the author that may answer this: the Scriptor, whose power lies not in their ability to provide an explained truth but in the ability to utilise text. (145). They exist as language itself; they are the "hand, cut off from any voice" (146). This kind of writing exists only in the reader's understanding of it, and in searching for what this may look like many turn to Beckett's unique form of authorship. Beckett's *The Unnamable* confuses the authorial voice, seeing the unnamed protagonist highlight their failure to communicate any direct authorial meaning stating: "how can I say it, that's all words, they're all I have, and not many of them, the words fail, the voice fails, so be it" (Beckett 134). This emphasis on language's failure to express releases any kind of direct author to meaning relationship, as the reader must themselves go beyond the author's intent to interpret. Beckett deconstructs the concept of self and individual by creating a voice entirely unlocatable (Aryan 109). Beckett's unlocatable, unauthored voices are present throughout much of his work. *Not I* sees Barthes's Scriptor as the mouth which serves no distinguishable meaning throughout most of the text apart from its repeated: "What? … Who? …" a voiceless "I" is interpreted as speaking to the mouth, followed by the mouth's: "No! … She!" (Beckett 217). This serves as an assertion of self-lessness. Beckett's *Lessness* furthers this, as the role of the Author is subverted through the piece's creation. Beckett wrote sixty different sentences in six categories, wrote them all out on paper, mixed them together and then picked them out twice to create the order of the piece (Brienza 245). This inclusion of complete chance allows Beckett to somewhat be 'The Scriptor,' who has no intended meaning and only exists within their ability to guide the textual realm.

Along with creating Scriptor-like roles within his works, Beckett includes elements which act upon the reader's senses to question the concept of authorial intent. The website

"Possible Lessnesses" was created by Elisabeth Drew and Mads Haahr and allows visitors to rearrange *Lessness*'s sentences to create new pieces. This further distances the piece from Beckett, as Drew and Haahr suggest that Beckett's literary works aim to create awareness of reader's innate desire to interpret, therefore revealing art as an interactive process. This interaction alongside the random, abstract images within *Lessness* allows the piece to work less on the intellect and more on the senses of the reader. Non-linear imagery without any clear narrative such as: "Blacked out fallen open true refuge issueless towards which so many false time out of mind. Never but silence such that in imagination this wild laughter these cries" (2) cannot be dissected by the reader, only experienced. Kane also often targets the audience's nerves over their intellect within the theatrical form. The violence used in much of her work seems extreme and random: the sucking of an eyeball in *Blasted,* the violent sodomy, amputations, and various torture methods in *Crave* are among just a few. Despite symbolising the irrational manner of violence, the grotesque bodily violence influences the audience's nerves and not their intellect. This working on the senses that both Kane and Beckett utilise is another means of limiting the communication of authorial intent. Intellect generally aims to answer, to tear apart, and hangs on the idea of the author having created something with a whole, completed core. The senses – however - have no answer, no one way of being experienced, and cannot be created by the author; only the reader. The text does not bring something to the reader/viewer but instead coaxes a sensory experience out of them. By acting upon the senses, both authors limit the infused, direct meaning that can be ascribed to their theatre and instead empower the reader or viewer.

Beckett and Kane themselves also seemed to value and pursue elements of the 'dead author' through blurring the lines of a distinguishable identity. Beckett seemed interested in maintaining an indistinct authorial identity. He wrote on his dual-national identity in his letters stating, "as a writer I have no feeling of any national attachment" (qtd. in Sardin 75).

When living in France as an Irish national he stated, “My nationality complicates things” (75). Beckett did not seem interested in asserting any one sense of distinct identity, and even seemed frustrated when that identity was ascribed to him. When considering his authorless literature, it can be suggested that he found a blurred identity to be a more desirable position to create this kind of work in. However, despite his pursuit of vague identity, he was often highlighted as a character. Beckett pursued a literature of anti-authorship but was hailed himself a distinct author for doing so. Hird labels this as the ‘paradoxical Beckettian authorship’ (290) in which an author pursues anonymity and is frustrated by the attention from doing so. The attention he received as author reveals a failure to entirely ‘kill the author.’ Kane similarly attempted to blur identity lines, the characters within her work often flow between different identities. Within *4:48 Psychosis* the character embraces a loving, victimised identity: “Love keeps me a slave in a cage of tears” (12) but later identifies as the aggressive oppressive: “I bombed the Arabs, I fucked small children while they begged for mercy” (19). Within *Blasted*, the character Ian moves from oppressor of Cate in the Leeds hotel room to oppressed by the Soldier in the indistinct war zone. Kane herself identified the world as having a fluidity of identities “I don’t think of the world as being divided up into men and women, victims and perpetrators” (qtd. in Tycer 32). This emphasis on identity’s fluidity means that Kane’s work does not translate any one authorial identity, characters do not stand for one imposed meaning and are instead left open for the viewer. However, like Beckett, Kane continued to have firm authorial identity imposed on her. Kane withdrew her first series of monologues *Sick* as audiences regarded them as confessional and - despite intending on leaving behind only her work – her life and depression have been under examination since her martyrising death (Hattenstone). Although both Beckett and Kane pursued a fluid and anonymous identity, the struggle to do so reveals a failure to entirely

embody Barthes's "The Death of the Author." But where does this failure lie? In fault within the text? or in the fault of Barthes's theory itself?

Although Beckett experiments with the assumed role of the author, his work does not align entirely with Barthes's concept of the author's death. The English 'The Death of the Author,' was first published in issue 5+6 of Aspen Magazine, an American Avant Garde Journal, and included a series of vinyl records, one of which played a recording of Beckett's *Texts for Nothing 8* (Hird 293). This has birthed comparison between the two from the beginning, as *Texts for Nothing* erases any sense of clear authorial voice, effectively mimicking 'The Scriptor' role (294). Authorless, disembodied voices speak, exist only as language, and then fade. However, Hird points out that these comparisons may only be surface level, whilst Barthes's 'Scriptor' has no future nor past Beckett's voices are aware of their previous and imminent suffering (295). Beckett even includes intertextual elements within his *Texts for Nothing*, referencing 'Waiting for Godot': 'why did Pozzo leave home, he had a castle and retainers' (qtd. in Hird 310). Beckett seems to aim at creating some kind of anti-biographical piece, yet the reference to previous work seems to alter his role as 'The Scriptor.' His text does exist beyond its command of language as it references elements of the author's life, ascribing a sense of particular, individual intent that subverts Barthes's concept of authorless work. Looking at his work through this light, Hird suggests that Beckett and Barthes do not represent the death of the author, but rather the 'still-present author, attempting to create the illusion of his own demise' (297). This perspective opens to wider interpretation, as the death of the author goes from a finality to a constant process. The anti-author lies on a spectrum of authorial identity, text is neither infused with meaning entirely by the author or existent only to the reader. Writing exists as the object of a fluid communication between author and reader, as interpretations can both remove and apply authorship to exert meaning.

A reading of this fluid authorial meaning is present through looking at Kane's work through the lens of "mourning to melancholy" (Tycer 23). Acknowledgement of Kane's last work as a kind of 'suicide note' centres her authorial presence and becomes a process of mourning for the reader. This 'mourning' is identified by Tycer as an experience of the 'lost object' and creates a sense of finality in Kane's plays as she herself becomes the lost object to the viewer as they undergo a grieving process for her (25). Alternatively, a process of 'melancholia' is suggested, which is an unending process in which the viewer has lost something which is unidentifiable (25). In this reading, Kane's authorial presence is distanced, and the focus lies on the constant, abstract anguish within the play. Tycer suggests that the 'precise physical' details often present within Kane's writing can be read this way, as instead of interpreting them as autobiographical the reader can insert themselves into the detailed descriptions to experience the abstruse sadness in the specificity. This can be displayed in *Crave*: "I want to play hide-and-seek and give you my clothes and tell you I like your shoes and sit on the steps while you take a bath" (20). The lifelike, specific details seem at the same time personal yet abstract, opening the audience to experience this concept rather than imposing it on Kane. This aligns with Barthes' concept of placing the reader as the focus, whose experience prioritises the author's direct meaning, but is conversely done not by removing but by including a sense of individual, specific detail. This displays the fluid role authorial presence plays, as Kane does not require an entire authorial removal to create experience for the viewer.

Barthes's "The Death of the Author," provided a new understanding of where authorial presence should lie. Applied to Kane's *4:48 Psychosis* it opens interpretation to go beyond her work communicating her death. Beckett seems to utilise Barthes's 'Scriptor-like' role, forming unlocatable voices that exist alongside the text. Beckett and Kane both valued a distanced authorial presence - in their private lives as well as through their work - by

interacting with the audience's senses and blurring a distinguishable identity. The attempts of both playwrights to prioritise a reader's experience rather than communicating personal meaning aligns with a kind of authorial 'death.' However, both Kane and Beckett's inclusion of personal, individual elements in their work suggests that an entire removal of authorial presence is not the only means of enhancing the reader's experience. The concept of authorial presence is not simply an imposed meaning that must be removed, but a fluid mode which exists between the creator and the reader.

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