

# The Mark of Kane

EDWARD BOND<sup>1</sup>

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RESUMEN. El ensayo del dramaturgo británico constituye una introducción indispensable para el resto de artículos de este volumen, ya que, en todos ellos, se explora alguna de las cuestiones enunciadas por el autor con respecto a los mecanismos de composición y funcionamiento cultural y social actuales. En su reflexión sobre la malograda dramaturga, Sarah Kane, Bond repasa el conjunto de las circunstancias del hecho dramático, lo humano y la imaginación, para dibujar un certero y a la vez controvertido panorama de la sociedad actual, desde la posición del compromiso socio-político. Se abordan, entre otras cuestiones: la naturaleza del ser; los conceptos de lo trágico y lo cómico; el concepto de la inocencia radical; la composición de la sociedad como inherentemente injusta; el imperativo humano de búsqueda de la justicia y su choque histórico y actual con la sociedad. Se examinan tales cuestiones en relación con la función del teatro en la sociedad, para concluir que los parámetros de lo cómico y lo trágico están invertidos en la actual condición posmoderna, con la consiguiente incapacidad para la creatividad dentro de la cultura dominante. El hecho dramático debe recuperar la lógica de lo humano para así trascender una sociedad consumista, cuya lógica consiste en matar de manera cainita (a Sarah Kane), a modo de autodefensa, a los creadores que ella misma encumbra.

*Palabras clave:* drama, sociedad, cultura, lo trágico, lo cómico, posmodernismo, justicia.

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1. Edward Bond es, sin lugar a dudas, uno de los dramaturgos británicos contemporáneos más relevantes y controvertidos desde la década de los años sesenta. Sus obras han estado asociadas a la polémica, así como a los momentos decisivos del panorama teatral británico, tales como la derogación de la censura teatral, a lo que contribuyó el escándalo y prohibición que suscitaron sus primeras obras, *Saved*, *Early Morning*, *Narrow Road to the Deep North*. Su extensa obra dramática se complementa con una amplia colección de escritos en prosa y verso que le sirven de fundamento y apoyo teóricos. En la actualidad, continúa su participación en el proyecto de teatro educacional con sede en Birmingham, Big Brum; y su colaboración con el Théâtre du La Colline, dirigido por Alain Francon. Entre sus últimas obras se encuentran, *Born*, *Chair*, *Existence*, *The Balancing Act*, que serán presentadas en el Festival de Avignon, 2006, dentro de un ciclo dedicado al autor.

Su obra se puede considerar el producto de una voz independiente y original, dedicada a la constante exploración de las relaciones entre la existencia humana, la sociedad y el teatro, desde una perspectiva política de izquierdas, comprometida con el ser humano y la justicia.

**ABSTRACT:** This essay constitutes a necessary introduction to the rest of the articles in the volume, since it tackles the current state of society, providing an accurate and controversial description of the present social and cultural dynamics, from a committed social and political stance. In his analysis of dead playwright Sarah Kane, Bond reflects on imagination; the nature and function of drama; the nature of humanness; the concepts of the Tragic and the Comic; the idea of radical innocence; the description of society as unjust; the human imperative dealing with the search for justice and its historical and contemporary clash with society; among other matters. Such issues are examined in relation to the function of drama in society, to conclude that the parameters of the Comic and the Tragic have been inverted in consumer postmodern society with the resulting incapability for creativity within the dominant culture. Drama, thus, must recover the logic of humanness to transcend the logic of consumer society, whose aim is to kill cainitely (Kane), as a form of self-preservation, those creators it helps to promote.

*Keywords:* drama, society, culture, the Tragic, the Comic, postmodernism, justice.

To understand Sarah Kane you must understand the origin and logic of drama, which is also the logic of imagination and of humanness. The exordium is necessary before her plays can be understood. She is the crisis of modern drama.

Theatre is not drama. There are many sorts of theatre. Kitchen sink, propaganda, «drawing-room» (academically respectable because it may be written about without touching on reality, its signs are existential angst and «silence»), «after-dinner-speaker» (also academically respectable, its object is to exhibit the writer's cleverness), and various forms of junk art-theatre - ritual, rite, performance, happenings, symbolic (all these exploit reductive effects and claim transcendence but are sub-real). Theatre rearranges furniture but there is no house.

Van Gogh wrote of the anxiety of the white canvas. It is without conventional and ideological marks. Not all painters see the white canvas. For these others the dead-hand has already scrawled its graffiti on it. The white canvas is the barrier

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Edward Bond has undoubtedly been one of the major British playwrights since the 1960s. His work has always been associated with the decisive moments in the British scene, such as the abolition of censorship, to which his groundbreaking and polemical plays, *Saved*, *Early Morning*, *Narrow Road to the Deep North*, actively contributed. Besides writing extensively for the theatre, he has produced a significant body of theoretical writings that sustain and complement his dramatic activity. Currently, he continues his involvement with the Birmingham-based Theatre-in-Education project, Big Brum, and his collaboration with Alain Francon's Théâtre du La Colline in France. His newest work, *Born*, *Chair*, *Existence*, *The Balancing Act* will be produced at the Avignon Festival, 2006, as part of a section dedicated to the author. His plays may be described as the work of an original and independent voice, involved in the continual exploration of the relationship between human existence, society and drama, from a left-wing political perspective, committed to the human being and the search for justice.

between plagiarism of the past and creativity of the future. All creativity creates new reality. In drama the barrier may be called «the terror of the white canvas» - *terror* because drama destroys and creates reality. The terror of the white canvas divides theatre from drama. To create drama the actor crosses the barrier to find the Invisible Object. Writers and directors may point to the site of the invisible object. Only the actor may enter the site and make the object visible.

Creativity originates in the new-born, the infant, the neonate. The self is not genetically determined. Genes order the possibility of self but not its creation. The difference between genes and self is close to that between brain and mind. Genes cannot think or experience. The mind knows it has a brain, the brain cannot know it has a mind. The neonate is the pre-self. It creates a self by becoming consciousness: *self*-consciousness is the creation of self. For the neonate, it and the world are one. Nothing is external. The neonate is in - *is* - infinity and eternity. This primordial «infinity-eternity» experiences pain and pleasure. It is aware of them. Repetition leads to awareness not just of experience but of structure. Awareness of structure necessitates a consciousness of it (since structure is not immediately present to awareness). Consciousness must be aware that it is aware. In this way the pre-self creates the self. Structure is conceptual, reasoning not sensing. The self conceives pain and pleasure as the Tragic and the Comic. These are the self's first concepts: they establish the self. The Tragic and the Comic are not sensations of pleasure and pain but concepts of their meaning. The «I» is created by entering the Tragic and the Comic. It is an intellectualisation of imagination. The mind - the self - is a dramatising structure. Drama is the search for a stable but mutable relationship between the Tragic and the Comic. The relationship derives from the self and its site, the world. Drama does not merely search for meaning, it creates it - creates human reality.

Imagination is cause not effect. We are aware not of imagination but of what is imagined. The pre-self receives the world in imagination. When the pre-self conceives the self, and the Tragic and the Comic, imagination finds reason. Thereafter, imagination seeks reason, it is the mode of its existence. It *might* seek the solipsistic imaginary but cannot because it is in site. Creativity is imagination seeking reason in its site - the world, society. Imagination has the two stipulating, structuring values: the Tragic and the Comic. It could almost be said that the self is the site's particular relation between the two. The Comic and the Tragic are the passage into the human. They are the only two existential structural concepts in which reason and imagination cannot be separated. Their logic - on site - is absolute. It is the logic of drama, which is also the logic of humanness. Human meaning is human reality.

Drama's subject is not justice but the *creation* of justice. Self-consciousness is a singularity. An object does not need a «right to be», it just *is* in the natural order. Self-consciousness is not an object but an act. To act it must be able to act,

but as its act is just to *be* this must itself enable its *being*, so that its *is* is its *ought*: self-consciousness must be the self's right to be. If blocked, the mind and consciousness are traumatised and dysfunctional. The self structurally instantiates its right to be in the moment of consciousness. This right to be is the human imperative. The right implicates that its site - place - should be the right place for «the right to be» to be in (but not because consciousness is the site - place - of itself). In sum, that the world should be its home. All and whatever the infant and later the child does is intended to make its world its home - the child is massively dominated by the drama of the Tragic and the Comic, and only later is the domination temporised by the circumstantial and trivial. This is the child's radical innocence. All tragic figures are radically innocent and the logic of tragedy is to display this innocence. When the neonate creates a self it divides itself from the world and enters it. In time it enters society. There the right to be becomes the imperative to justice. Its origin is egotistic, but its effect is altruistic. That is, it is rational - I cannot have my justice at the expense of others without creating chaos. But humanness is more than this. The first creation of the self is an act of radical innocence - the entry into primordial justice, inscribed in the relationship between the Tragic and the Comic. This is the human text, the text of the self (animals have no text). Thereafter, humanness is the search not for the utilitarian Utopia but for primordial justice founded in the Tragic and the Comic. It is the human paradox, the origin of our self-enmity and our freedom. Justice is personal, political and ontological. If this were *not* so, violence would be the sum of humanness so long as it were, in Hobbes's meaning, effective. Humanly, Auschwitz would not have been unjust but only too small-scale to be effective. But that it *is* so, makes justice the *object* of drama.

Society is unjust. The self enters injustice. The self has two needs, one is to survive, the other to live justly. They clash. Justice has no objective, determined description but it needs one. It is not an essence, for instance, but a relationship of the imperative to the possibilities of the situation on its site. The determination is logical. Justice in society cannot be what it is in the neonate-monad. Existentially the determination should relate the relationship of the Tragic and the Comic to the site - here, society. Instead, in unjust society the description of justice must legitimise injustice. Ideology does this. It does it partly by relating the social to a historical interpretation of the ontological. Ultimately ideology's power depends on its proprietorship of two things, the economy and nothingness. Ideology must administer society efficiently. To do this it creates morality. Morality is intended to administer injustice. If I do not steal (am good) I support unjust society. I survive and may prosper by being unjust. All morality is corrupt. I live in two worlds - society (and theatre) and drama (justice). Morality is an offence against justice, which is the human imperative working through the Tragic and the Comic. The law cannot give justice. If it ever tried society would

collapse. The law administers injustice for the advantage of administration. Culture is intended to make ideology coherent and plausible. Culture may be considered as society's psychology. Like the psychology of the self in unjust society, it is divided against itself. It is a lie but it must also command enough truth to make society administerable and to a degree to express the human imperative (historically in art and religion). Culture is the lie-truth - truth had at the expense of lie.

The human imperative is to seek justice but what justice is must be determined, be created, in each historical site. It is not a matter of adapting noble everlasting aphorisms to circumstances. That would be too clumsy for humanness. The logic is deeper, it creates human reality. All that is permanent is the human imperative working through the Tragic and the Comic. Seeking justice is not an ideal. It is not genetically determined, on the contrary: it is the logic made possible by Nothingness. The logic is structural in the self, coterminous with conscious being. But ideology turns it into systematic immorality. To be moral I offend my humanness. The social consequence is chaos. I am my own enemy, and I seek revenge on my enemy. Ideology's redescription provides for this: the redescription provides victims, it is a structural support of society. Often the victims are moralised into unknowing complicity and reify their phantom role. So I act out my craving for revenge on others, but I intend it against myself. My motive for my vengeful injustice is not that I am evil or animal-atavistic - I am motivated by the sublimest human need, by the *imperative for justice*. My motivation to justice is realised in my act of injustice. Conversely, the criminal is motivated not by revenge on a society which may have deprived him - the motive for crime is *radical innocence*, the enactment of the imperative to make the world just. It is not even the Freudian desire for condign punishment. If you stand on your head long enough the world turns upside down. The white canvas must be very broad to conceal such contradictions between reality and existence, between meaning and understanding. The law can never understand the paradox, but deciphering it is the logic of drama and humanness. It is the text of Euripides, of Lear and Hamlet. But now a collapsing society can no longer be held together by the disintegrating self. In modern drama site - situation - takes precedence over character.

Social culture is the historically necessary truth-lie. For long periods of time the truth-lie suffices administration and justifies culture. The human imperative is expressed (covertly to itself) in religion and the transcendental. But there are times such as our own of rapid and extreme change. Then a gap opens between technology and the social order based on it and ideology fails. The *truth*-lie turns into the *lie*-truth and then perhaps into the lie-lie. In modern society this is fascism, the union of legend and rationalism, of mysticism and science. The *lie*-truth does not enable humanness, it becomes fanatical and destructive - it fosters the God-rot

and the instrumentalisation of science which are human plagues. But drama seeks reason, and enacts, proves it in the Invisible Object, in which reason and imagination are joined in human meaning. In such times in the past drama recreated itself in a new human subjectivity and a new human reality. This was the drama of the Greeks, Jacobean, the nineteenth-century fin de siècle and early modernity.

It is an empty cliché that human nature does not change. Humanness has no nature. The slightest knowledge of history shows that human *behaviour* changes prodigiously. Constant is the human imperative - I recognise myself in the cave artists' images, they enact my need for humanness, they are drawn for me. The origin of the cliché is this - we become more human but increased technological power gives greater violence to our decreasing humanness. It is the Faustian Trap. Humanness is materialism, we are in material nature. *In* it but not *of* it, we are *of* history. We do not change as animals or natural objects do. We translate material change - and initiate material change - within the logic of our subjectivity. We redramatise ourselves. There is nothing transcendental in religion, art or ourselves. Transcendentalism is just imagination in a meaningless cosmos seeking meaning that enables administration to administer and gives hope to humanness entangled in historical injustice. Imagination must have a gap - a nothingness - in which to be free - but in which it is also liable to fantasise, to amend existential failure in daydreams, utopias or even madness. Some animals have elementary reason. No animal has imagination. Animals are shut close to their environment. In humans there is a gap between the self and its environment. It is the gap of nothingness. It is the site of history, of the drama-stage and of absolute human logic.

The logic derives from the structure of creativity. It is as near-as-can-be innate in the self. It is the human imperative to justice implicit in the right to be, the radical innocence of the pursuit of justice in the changing site (our situation), and the concepts of the Tragic and the Comic and their relationship. Together these things are the self. Because for the Greeks the earth was still sacred they kept the Tragic and the Comic apart. For them reason was reverence. The Jacobean prepared the earth for trade, they rejoined the Tragic and the Comic. For them reason was practical. Post-modernity abandons reason. There is no meaning. In its place it puts the theatres of the tragi-comic, the Absurd, post-modern primitivism, reactionary spiritualism, Beckett and the other clowns of Auschwitz not justified by their paths, illuminated by their irony or exonerated by their bitterness. Post-modernism retards reason to linearity. To free ourselves from this chaos we must recover the Tragic and the Comic and their relationship. The relationship must be stable, but to be sensitive to change it must also be precarious - being human is dangerous and the greatest danger comes from the self. The relationship is either a new reality or a new destructiveness. Reason and imagination cannot be divided in the Tragic and the Comic. That is why their

relationship can only be enacted - recreated - in the Invisible Object. Together they enable the human, but the human does not know itself. In this Hegel is right - as yet the owl of Minerva flies at dusk.

But something - provisional and inadequate - must be said of the Tragic and the Comic and their relationship. The Tragic is meaning in the face of the meaningless universe, is vulnerability and the lesson of care, is endurance and the willingness to fear, is the pitiless abandoning of illusion and pretence. The Comic is anarchy, derision, treachery, hubris, games of death, fear, panic, nonchalance. The Tragic and the Comic take their stability from each other, and their relationship is the meaning of the self. The relationship may be understood as the situation in the gate. The gate is the site of modern drama. Tragedy asks who are the dead in the gateway? Comedy asks where does the gate lead? The relationship between the two is the logical situation in the human site, and in drama the situation in the gateway. The relationship is not changed by law or fiat or wish. It is the joint determination of freedom and necessity. The human imperative asserts its freedom not against but in terms of the situation's material necessity. What is dramatised in the gateway is what we will live and how we will die.

Society's psychology - culture - and the self's psychology both express the same logic. So far in history the two logics have sufficiently coincided. In all adversities and disasters the relationship between the Tragic and the Comic has enacted humanness. Society has ensured the self, and the self has engendered humanness in society. There is no guarantee that this continues. The self is not an essence but a relationship, not an effect of humanness but a cause of humanness. Historically the self imposes its imperative on society and society returns it to the self. What happens if society is powerful enough to abandon not the self, of course, but its human imperative? That happens when administration has sufficient power and means to totally impose its ideology on the imperative. Such a society stops creating culture and instead administers means without ends. At first this is not apparent because it lives off past culture, using up the remnants. Human dissatisfactions and problems are not redramatised to create new humanness. Instead they are made sterile - paralysed by technology and linear science. The new economic power replaces necessitousness with consumption. But to do this - to silence the imperative - morality must be made fundamentalist. Increasingly misfits and social outsiders are made victims of revenge which is increasingly severe and may become total - a post-modern form of human sacrifice. Revenge and consumption become the new morality. Consumers do not notice they live the lie-lie. How can they notice? In the working out of human logic a new reality has been created, with a new human subjectivity as part of it. That is how one day death camps became necessary institutions of their creators' administration, worthy institutions of justice. Over the gateway of Auschwitz was written *Arbeit Macht Frei*, they did not dare to write *Zum Oeutschen Volk* - the human imperative

had not been totally destroyed, exterminated. Nazism could not do it, yet democracy might.

This is not yet our situation, but we are the first society that does not create a culture. We live off our past. And as humanness is a relationship between self and society, we are dying out. To an objective observer from another world we are already dead. Our society is not post-modern, it is posthumous. The situation is not unanticipated. Some hundred years ago Freud sensed death - the Thanatos - in the beginnings of modernity. He saw it as a death-instinct in the self. But Thanatos is a characteristic not of self but of societies, it is in their logic not our instincts. The problem is not that we are evil, or have lost our religion or reverted to the beast. On the contrary, we believe in extravagant transcendentalisms and the super-rationality of science (itself a vicious combination). The problem is that we do not understand ourselves. Yet our understanding of ourselves is the meaning we give ourselves - we create the meaning, live it and *are* it. We must understand the logic of humanness and rediscover drama - it is the fatal necessity of our age.

We can now understand *Blasted*. It has two halves and between them is the barrier of the white canvas. The first half is the shabby day-to-day, which is also society's day-to-day. For the most part the characters are from a B movie. *Blasted* crosses the barrier. Posthumous society cannot cross it - certainly its reality is on the far side of the barrier, but it can bring it onto *this* side of the barrier. There it is sanitised, institutionalised, fictionalised and made normal. The second part of *Blasted* shows posthumous society's reality unsanitised. It also shows the common ontological tragedy - the self abandoned not only in posthumous society but in the meaningless universe: a self that in order to *be* must seek meaning, yet is abandoned in meaningless nothingness. All past ideology incorporated the ontological into the social - it transcendentalised nothingness. But to do that it had to relate the ontological to the human imperative and give it at least some human meaning. That is far beyond the ability of posthumous ideology: its ontological is horror movies. *Blasted* is truly innovative in the directness with which it crosses the barrier to show posthumous society's reality, its Invisible Object. The play is radical innocence talking directly to its corrupt society. It is as if Shakespeare had written Middleton's *The Changeling* (the title reveals its moment in logic; it is why in my play *The Company of Men* the protagonist has to be an orphan). Shakespeare abstained from putting a play in a madhouse. His creative role was to establish a new administrative order, but as he also enacted the human imperative he had to show that the new order would still not fulfil the imperative and in time would break down. A contemporary dramatist sees that it has broken down into chaos and there is chaos.

We are the dramatic species. Drama takes place in all human institutions and situations. There humanness or destruction may be created. But society must also

have institutions which create creation, that enact the original logic that created the self, but in terms of adult minds in the total world. This is necessary because the Tragic and the Comic are concepts and so must impose their imagination-rational interpretation in the site as it changes - it is the existential imperative of the self in change. The self must ask what is the meaning of its situation? For the Greeks the institution was the stage and drama (and its related forms), in the interregnum it was the church and religion. In modernity it is the media. But the media are just another form of consumption. They have no responsibility to the human imperative, they replace its logic with the mechanics of the market. Greek drama enacted justice, modern screens are obsessed with guilt, they reiterate violent revenge and vigilantism. They barbarise without even the spurious beneficence of other forms of consumption. We have no institution to house drama or human meaning, no creative house of creativity. We have the slums of Hollywood and the bureaucracies of TV - and the arsenals of our confusion.

It is easy to see how the self acts out the human logic. But how does the social collective act it out as if it had one will? It does not have to have one will, the logic issues over the conflicts within it. All society's structures, institutions and ideological doctrines interact - creating a logic is their *raison d'être*. The outcome of their interaction is the logic of their interaction. Necessarily society relates to its site as the self does to its. You may war within history but not against it. We can now understand Sarah Kane's role in posthumous society: suicide. When the mutually sustaining relationship of the Tragic and the Comic fails, the reason attached to imagination (in primary and later creation) becomes incoherent. Then logic makes its inexorable move. The Tragic and the Comic change places and each takes on the structural dynamic of the other. It is why post-modernism passes into posthumous-modernism. It is also Sarah Kane's trap. She did not *quite* understand *Blasted*. Nor did its first director. The owl of Minerva flies at dusk... The explanation of it she gave in later interviews was one she had been given. Many close to her told her that although she could use language she had no structure. The truth is the opposite. The structure of *Blasted* is awesomely brilliant. It is at the centre of modern drama. But she had not yet learned to introspect her creativity and there was no theatre to help her. The Royal Court's posthumous revival of *Blasted* was irresponsibly incompetent. No theatre should be excused such negligence.

That is why instead of speaking *of* her society she became its spokeswoman and spoke *for* it. She does not write the play, she becomes it. She has no alternative, it is the logic of creation in the meaningless diremption of the Tragic and the Comic. Because of the diremption, what is happening is not at first clear. She sets out to find the perfect lover. She does this on the far side of the barrier because it has become her *site* - she is the play. But the search also takes place on *this* side of the barrier. Dating, mating, matching and escort shows are TV

trivia, part of the *lie-lie*. But posthumous society plays it at face-value. It keeps (seemingly) the «tragic» and the «comic» in their right places by sanitising them as sentimentality and fun: we are lost but know where we are. It is the snake-pit world of Jerry Springer. But when you cross the barrier in posthumous society the Tragic and the Comic are *not* in their right places - the Comic drives the Tragic and meaning is changed. The logic is simple and inescapable: the search for the perfect lover is the search for someone to murder you. The murderer is the invisible object.

The next stage is even simpler. Clearly, on *this* side of the white canvas posthumous society provides consumption. What does it provide on the far side? As the Tragic and the Comic have changed places it must provide the consumption that is destruction. Society's role is to murder Sarah Kane. But the administration of morality has replaced the search for justice. Medieval society administered a *lie-truth*, it could have killed Sarah Kane for heresy, lese-majesty or treason. Posthumous society has no meaning. It kills diligently - in hecatombs - in wars and induced famines - but never for justice. It kills to sustain the consumer market. Sarah Kane seeks the human imperative where its meaning is changed. But she cannot know that - she is not writing the play but in it. She has become the prophetess of posthumous society - but she is a Cassandra who does not believe her own prophesy: in this society the Holy Grail is poisoned. Society cannot kill her because, finally, the act would be too honest - it would enact the truth of modern society, of posthumous consumption, and posthumous society is incapable of any truth. It is so entangled that it even tells lies to the truth - as a collective self its processes are transparent to all its agencies, yet it can lie even to its *own* desire for truth - a formula already established in the intensity of the self's struggle with itself in unjust society. We have made schizophrenia the art form of the dead.

Sarah Kane is locked in the play on the far side of the white canvas. Ibsen becomes Hedda Gabler. When the Tragic and the Comic change places, the imperative to humanness becomes the imperative to death. It is as it is with the criminal whose crime - however atrocious - is a search for a just world. Humanness loses everything when it loses its meaning. We cannot be human without the concept of tragedy. Whole civilisations have stood at this point. If Sarah Kane cannot find her murderer, she must kill herself. It is now the logic of her existence, the only way she can live. She has for suicide what the religious call a *calling*. Her suicide - for her - is a Comedy. For society it is a Tragedy. And there is one last step in the logic: now she is dead society can kill her. It has become safe. Her drama will be turned into theatre and marketed as a consumer product.

There is no barrier between life and drama. They are one reality, a cause in one is an effect in the other. Saying otherwise is Philistine aestheticism. Sarah Kane's last play was as total as her first. Our stage finds life only in death. If we cannot create a new drama the experiment of humanness fails. The logic that created it will destroy it.