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Blasted Hope: Theology and Violence in Sarah Kane

by

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Anyone familiar with the 'in-yer-face' 'brutalism' of Sarah Kane, with her staging of graphic scenes of violence that can at times out-Tarantino Tarantino in sadomasochistic gore, will be surprised by the theological company Kane's theater keeps; for it evokes a tradition reaching backwards from Jürgen Moltmann to Aquinas and ultimately to Paul. Even more surprising is the particular concern Kane shares with these Christian writers. While sin, or damnation, or a Mel Gibson-esque passion for the martyr, for the sources of the Eucharist in flagellated flesh, might conceivably give shape to her work, really she is much more interested in hope. The author of *Blasted*, *Cleansed* and *Phaedra's Love*, plays that scandalized reviewers and audiences alike with their gruesome depictions of rape, mutilation, cannibalism, war, and other forms of human degradation did not, apparently, conceive of her work in terms of despair only. In Kane's view, "to create something beautiful about despair, or out of a feeling of despair, is . . . the most hopeful, life-affirming thing a person can do."¹ Indeed, Kane takes this affirmation further, hinting at a tripartite structure familiar to us from 1st Corinthians, when she uses Paul's theological virtues to characterize her work in terms of "hope (*Blasted*), faith (*Phaedra's Love*) and love (*Crave*)."²

The allusion to Paul is probably more than a passing reference to a culturally significant paradigm, for Kane was raised in an Evangelical household and was well versed in biblical language. Indeed, although she later turned atheist, her work evinces a consistent effort on her part to grapple with key motifs from her Christian upbringing. While it's probably an overstatement to say that Kane's writing is "fired by the cruelties carried out in the name of God,"³ certainly her work can be understood in terms of semi-private religious issues: her

¹ Qtd. in Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001) 91.

² Qtd. in Sierz 120.

³ Kane's brother Simon Kane, qtd. in Simon Hattenstone, "A Sad Hurrah," *The Guardian Unlimited* 1 July 2000, 4 Oct. 2006 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/weekend/story/0,3605,338278,00.html>>.

realization that the force which should have acted as guarantor of her eternal protection, that force for salvation which had sustained her throughout a youth of religious zeal – namely, God – did not exist. The resulting "split" in her "personality and intellect" between two kinds of consciousness – one of a very final mortality and the other of an expected salvation beyond death – works its way throughout her plays in the form of a relatively dark and ironic, but also comic, reflection on key theological concepts, such as hope.⁴

This essay will seek not to argue that Kane's work, especially her play *Blasted*, is necessarily hopeful, but rather will try to understand, in theological terms, what it means that Kane designates the play as hopeful. In other words, what, in *Blasted*, carries the burden of hope? I should state at the outset that my interpretation of the hopefulness of a play like *Blasted* may at times go beyond Kane's own, for Kane was able to see *Blasted* as hopeful at least in part "because the characters continue to scrape a life out of the ruins," despite the fact that the life remaining to them is barely any life at all.⁵ Others have apparently followed Kane's lead in this. As Ken Urban puts it, after having seen *Blasted* performed at London's Royal Court Theater in 2001, there is hope because at the end of the play "people ravaged by unfathomable violence can give each other the gift of survival."⁶ Elaine Aston, although more ambiguous about the play's hopefulness, similarly concludes that Kane's vision in *Blasted* "rests on the redemptive possibility of love."⁷ Others also feel compelled to point out how *Blasted* reveals "people's capacities for resilience and adaptability,"⁸ and so on. Such characterizations, including Kane's own – which may not, of course, have been her final or even most meaningful word on the matter – strike me as profoundly insufficient grounds for claiming that a play like *Blasted* is hopeful, or even, as Kane puts it, "fucking hopeful,"⁹ and in what follows I want to show that

⁴ Qtd. in Graham Saunders, *'Love Me or Kill Me: Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes'* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002) 22.

⁵ Qtd. in Sierz 106.

⁶ Ken Urban, "An Ethics of Catastrophe: The Theatre of Sarah Kane," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 23.3 (2001): 46.

⁷ Elaine Aston, *Feminist Views on the English Stage* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 89.

⁸ David Ian Rabey, *English Drama Since 1940* (London: Longman, 2003) 206.

⁹ Qtd. in Sierz 120.

elements of a theology of hope from Kane's own Christian heritage provide a more adequate conceptual framework within which to understand the function of hope in her plays.

Blasted begins in "a very expensive hotel room in Leeds – the kind that is so expensive it could be anywhere in the world"¹⁰ – and it ends in a room somewhere in Bosnia, sometime during the war. Two characters, Ian and Cate, enter the room and eventually Cate falls prey to Ian in a night sexual of violence. Of course, she doesn't have to "fall" very far given her (albeit strained) relationship with Ian. It's clear from the start of the play that Ian is vulgar, racist and xenophobic, ultra-nationalistic, sexually dangerous, violent and, as Urban notes, "broken."¹¹ He carries a revolver which he periodically loads and unloads, and aims at Cate while using her sexually. Cate is no innocent herself, in that she seems not entirely to reject Ian's sexual abuse, and in fact toys with him sexually after he's abused her. However, compared to Ian, this woman with her tender sympathies for her mother and mentally retarded brother, her vegetarianism, her horror of violence, her limited wit and her disabilities (Cate suffers from "fits") seems oddly out of place with him. But their relationship allows Ian, at least, the perfect opportunity for his violent self-exposition. The second half of the play shifts the context explosively from this room and the rape scene to the war in Bosnia. A soldier enters, tells his story, and proceeds to victimize Ian, Cate having in the meantime escaped through the bathroom window.

The soldier and Ian have much in common. Just as Ian subjects Cate to his phallogocentrism, understood both literally and metaphorically – that is, to his penis but also his gun, his patriarchal nationalism, his homophobic masculinity – Kane subjects Ian, via the soldier, to the even more frightening autism of world-rending violence.¹² Now Ian is rendered flexible, is opened, literally and metaphorically, so that the soldier can construct himself and his (or the) world in a horrific act of closure. Perhaps Cate provides Kane with a "feminine" sensitivity precisely in order to show, first, the mechanisms of stereotypical gender relations in a patriarchy as they inhabit Ian and, second, the way sexual violence and war mirror these same gender dynamics by exposing or positing the weakness of victims in order to negate weakness,

¹⁰ Sarah Kane *Complete Plays* (London: Methuen, 2001) 3.

¹¹ Urban 45.

¹² For a more complete treatment of Kane's "gender philosophizing," see Aston 80.

openness, flexibility in the victimizer.¹³ When the wall of the hotel room is blown open by a mortar shell to mark the transition from a private instance of violence to the public violence of warfare, we understand that Ian himself has been ruptured, cracked open, along with the world he'd been using Cate to build.

The soldier also carries within himself all the conflicts Kane has exposed in the first scene between Ian and Cate. He has lost his beloved, a woman named Col, to rape, torture, mutilation and murder. The violence that took her from him is now his *modus operandi*, and he tells Ian of his horrific exploits while raping him and eating his eyes. Ian expects to be killed at any moment, and indeed he seems to ask for death, but instead the soldier shoots himself in the head with Ian's gun. Ian, sodomized and blinded, left alone in the devastated room with a war raging outside, would likely have starved to death were it not for Cate's return in the last scenes. She's become the guardian of a baby a woman on the street gave her. The baby, however, dies. She's forced to prostitute herself for food. And she has, still, to put up with Ian's destructive/self-destructive perversities. In the very last moments of the play, Kane reduces Ian to fragmented images of a pure (and purely vile) physicality – he defecates, masturbates, cannibalizes the dead baby – until nothing, it would seem, is left, certainly not humanity, and apparently not even life. According to Kane's stage directions, Ian "dies with relief" before play's end.¹⁴ But his death is illusory somehow, for when Cate brings him some food he's alive again. The two of them share the meal and sit together in silence, until Ian says, simply, "thank you" and the stage goes black.¹⁵

It's very hard not to agree with Tom Sellar that *Blasted* "insists on survival, but not on hope,"¹⁶ that survival alone is not necessarily a grounds for hope. Or, as Agathe Torti-Alcayaga writes, the violence of a play like *Blasted* is total: "One can't . . . extricate oneself from this circle of predation. Nothing exists outside of it."¹⁷ Because these responses are clearly valid to some

¹³ Kane says that "the logical conclusion to the way society expects men to behave is war," qtd. in Tom Sellar, "Truth and Dare: Sarah Kane's *Blasted*," *Theater* 27.1 (1996) 34.

¹⁴ Kane 60.

¹⁵ Kane 61.

¹⁶ Sellar 30.

¹⁷ Agathe Torti-Alcayaga, "L'oeuvre de Sarah Kane: le théâtre de la défaite," *Cycnos* 18.1 (2001) 55. My translation from the French.

extent, an effort to find hope in *Blasted* must avoid any a priori oversimplifications. For example, in ordinary usage hopefulness tends vaguely to indicate a state of mind in which the present moment is infused with optimism. In this sense, Eve Ensler's 2001 play *Necessary Targets*, also about the horrors of the Bosnian war, is hopeful.¹⁸ The women in the play, although shattered in a variety of ways and struggling with their experiences, are at least looking back at the war from the relative safety of the play's present. They're receiving therapy to help them cope with their traumas. And they're able, eventually, to learn, grow and heal. Moreover, the play ends with a strong dose of only mildly conflicted communion, and a vision of a once and future Bosnia of music, laughter, friendship – what one character calls "paradise."¹⁹ *Blasted*, if hopeful, is certainly not hopeful in the same way. Perhaps this is because *Blasted* is a far better play, more enigmatic, more provocative and nuanced than Ensler's. But there's another reason as well. Whereas hopefulness in *Necessary Targets* emerges in inverse proportion to the suffering experienced by the characters, the hope to be found in *Blasted* actually depends upon violence and pain. This is the most significant reason for which it is useful to discuss Kane's sense of hope in theological terms. Indeed, the expression of hope in the context of suffering and difficulty, in theological texts, resonates quite strikingly with Kane's own apparent perspective. Aquinas' formulation – to the effect that theological hope is hope in an "arduous" good, something difficult, even supremely difficult to obtain, but not in the last analysis utterly impossible – is apt for a reading of Kane.²⁰ Calvin too provides a useful context for this discussion. In his commentary on Romans 8.24, Calvin insists that hope comes only via "the warfare of sufferance," of difficult endurance, and thus he would even suggest that "it is expedient for us to labour in earth, to be oppressed, to mourn, to be afflicted, yea, to lie as it were half-dead, or like unto those [that] are dead" – all so that we might be as aware as possible of the vast chasm separating humanity from the object of its hope.²¹ In all of these instances, of

¹⁸ And it is so described by Christopher Price, director of the 2004 production of *Necessary Targets* at The Theater Project of Brunswick, Maine. 4 Oct. 2006 <<http://www.theaterproject.com/WhatsPlayingTargets.html>>.

¹⁹ Eve Ensler, *Necessary Targets* (New York: Dramatist's Play Service, 2003) 40.

²⁰ *Summa theologica* IIa IIae q. 17, a. 3. See also Thomas Aquinas, *Nature and Grace: Selections from the Summa Theologica of Thomas Aquinas*, trans. and ed. A. M. Fairweather (Philadelphia: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1978) 295.

²¹ John Calvin, *Commentary upon the Epistle of Saint Paul to the Romans*, trans. Christopher Rosdell, ed. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh: The Calvin Translation Society, 1844) 221.

course, hope is hope in salvation, in God's capacity to save the sinful soul and resurrect the dead.

Recent theologians also speak of a specifically Christian hope arising out of suffering, but in decidedly more ecumenical/philosophical language. Jürgen Moltmann, for instance, while using the vocabulary of salvation seems clearly to place the emphasis on the overcoming of suffering in this world. He writes that "the hope that is born of the cross and the resurrection transforms the negative, contradictory and torturing aspects of the world into terms of 'not yet', and does not suffer them to end in 'nothing.'"²² The basic thrust of his work is eschatological. And hope itself, because it is eschatological, is a sign of the need for hope, is evidence of the inadequacy of the present, of the disaster of the world from which the future will rescue believing, hoping, humanity. More, hope in the "God of promise" – the hope for "guidance, preservation, protection," etc. – takes form precisely as the imagined future negation of the actual "experience of deprivations, of being abandoned to hunger, thirst, wretchedness and . . . oppression."²³ For Moltmann, in fact, Pauline hope is predicated as a radical break with the present, and also with any dreams of heaven; its future is "the future of the very earth on which [the] cross stands" as "the enemy of death and [of] a world that puts up with death."²⁴

Kane, in evoking theological language to claim that *Blasted* is a hopeful play, that is, in characterizing a play about rape, torture, warfare and gruesome, unrelenting suffering as hopeful, may have in mind a notion of hope analogous to, if not entirely identical with, the hope of this Christian tradition. The ironies of this conjunction of brutality and traditional Christian thought are remarkable. Or at least they appear to be. We would assume that in Kane, the hoped-for goal is certainly not the same one embraced by the theologians discussed above: salvation in resurrection. And yet Kane does make resurrections of a kind central to many of her plays. Take Ian's death and "resurrection" in *Blasted* for example. The fact that he returns from his death when "it starts to rain on him,"²⁵ suggests a death and resurrection echoing the

²² Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, trans. James W. Leitch (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1967) 197.

²³ Moltmann 130-131.

²⁴ Moltmann 21.

²⁵ Kane 60.

dying to death and rising to life in baptism.²⁶ Ian's final "thank you," in light of theologies of hope, can be read as a recognition of a promised salvation. Once a participant in the world's terrible suffering, Ian has this suffering unleashed upon himself. His death is merely a consequence of that which he has experienced, but his return to life is proof of some radical break, a fracturing of all expectation, a promise – the fruit of Calvin's "warfare of sufferance." He awakens not to the absence of pain, of course, but to the awareness that his pain, his world, sets into relief the possibility of a transformed world in which the dead return to life, and in which sin and suffering are finally displaced by an unmerited generosity.

This theological reading is certainly a tempting one, especially insofar as it promises to make sense of hope in a play like *Blasted*. But it is also highly problematic. The generosity that greets Ian in his resurrected life is, at one and the same time, a violence against Cate's body and values. The "blood seeping from between her legs" when she returns with food suggests that in prostituting herself for their survival she has only allowed herself to become a more willing victim of rape.²⁷ As a result, or in the process, she's become more like Ian – eating meat she would not have touched earlier in the play, and gulping down his preferred poison, gin. Moreover, the resurrection Ian experiences seems to be something of an ambivalent device in Kane's work. In *Phaedra's Love* Hippolytus is clearly murdered on stage. Suddenly opening his eyes after having been strangled, disemboweled, and then kicked (an apparently lifeless corpse) by policemen, he sees vultures circling overhead and, with a smile, he quips: "If there could have been more moments like this."²⁸ In *Cleansed*, while all the temporal and psychological boundaries of the play are highly ambiguous, various characters – including one named Grace – also seem to die and later return to life, to be tortured and broken and yet healed. Each play insists upon a distinctive range of responses, from pathos to irony, and each moment of resurrection suggests the others in a way that makes it difficult, if not impossible, to locate a single meaning in Ian's return from death. In the end, then, we don't really know what to hear

²⁶ Kane, who apparently did not have the Passion in mind when writing, says that when she first saw the play performed Ian did indeed appear Christ-like. His resurrection, however, she reads as a death and descent into hell, rather than a rebirth and a new life. Saunders also thinks of Ian as a Christ-figure, although he understands the parallel to function as a "parody." See Saunders 64.

²⁷ Kane 60. David Ian Rabey similarly points out that Ian's "bleakly uplifting" survival is countered in "the decline of Cate." See Rabey 205.

²⁸ Kane 103.

in Ian's "thank you." Does he mean to thank Cate for returning, or to thank the God he's already rejected for the miracle? Or is he only falling still further into a self-critical irony, mocking gratitude in recognition of his persistent and inescapable despair?

On the other hand, given the frequent recurrence of religious themes in Kane's work – one might legitimately consider *Cleansed* a postmodern passion play, while *4.48 Psychosis* invokes the language of Biblical prophecy²⁹ and rearticulates the plaintive, final cry of the Markan Jesus³⁰ – it clearly won't do to reject a theological reading of *Blasted*'s hope either. But perhaps our approach needs to be rather more oblique. There is hope in *Blasted*, then, but it doesn't come from the "gift of survival," as Urban puts it, since the survival of Ian and Cate at the play's end is rather more a function of Kane's willing them to survive than anything they might be able to do for each other. The contrast with the characters themselves, their lack of will, couldn't be more striking. According to Aquinas, hope is a variety of willing, which must (as one commentator puts it) "supply the required momentum for engendering the [intellectual] act of" faith.³¹ Cate and Ian, at the play's end, merely happen to survive. Even if the play witnesses a rather morbid recognition, on Ian's part, of generosity, his final "thank you" can do no more than only vaguely soften the blow of all that has come before. Moreover, the traditional teleological structure of drama, in which events move steadily towards some ultimate resolution, is not really a part of Kane's repertoire of aesthetic devices. And practically speaking, given all the violence punctuating nearly every scene of *Blasted*, or *Phaedra's Love*, or *Cleansed*, it's very difficult to take the endings as anything but a convenient place to stop. True, the force of the play is concentrated in these last scenes. But when the vultures descend upon Hippolytus' body after his death, or when masses of rats overrun the stage at the end of *Cleansed*, one understands that these are moments of summation, closing reminders of the destruction and the sickness which have been the focus of the plays all along. That Ian and Cate are together in the same room at the play's end, somehow surviving, simply mirrors the opening scenes, except now even the pretense of civilization has been stripped away. We're left with the same experience, though: Ian, blinded by his violence and vulgarity; Cate, so insecure

²⁹ Kane 228.

³⁰ Kane 219.

³¹ Romanus Cessario, "The Theological Virtue of Hope (IIa IIae, qq. 17-22)," *The Ethics of Aquinas*, ed. Stephen J. Pope (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2002) 232.

and uncertain that she remains with her victimizer, allowing herself to be victimized for his sake. What hope there is has everything to do with the promise of a different world, of a radically distinct reality; but that promise is not to be found, or at least not fully, at the end.

Instead, it makes more sense to think of hope arising throughout *Blasted* in references to others outside the main action of the story, to partial stories we, as readers or audience, must construct for ourselves. This idea of a hope dependent upon the world's violence, upon the world as violence, leading not to a renewal inevitable in the course of time but to a radical break with lived reality – this idea is most consonant with Moltmann's theology of hope, although it is implicit in the other theologians mentioned as well.³² Moltmann's hoped-for future does not blossom organically out of the end of history, but rather arrives as that which utterly breaks with historical existence as with the "vain, forsaken, lost, godless and dead."³³ Critics who want to recognize some form of hopefulness in Kane's work make a mistake, I think, in assuming that hope must be found in concluding dramatic moments. Moreover, as the theologians remind us, logically hope is never coexistent with the object hoped-for, and thus, in Calvin's expression, "it can never be joined with manifest possession."³⁴ But, from the perspective of an Aquinas or a Moltmann, this doesn't necessarily require that the hoped-for goal be set in some impossible future, only that it be currently inaccessible. As the play unfolds, so do fragmentary narratives of other lives which help to set these characters – Cate, Ian, and the soldier – in relief. Or rather, the violence and horror of their story helps to set in relief alternative possibilities somehow inaccessible to them. And each of these half-told stories allows for the possibility of hope, hope in a world not destroyed, and unlikely to be destroyed, by the peculiarly self-absorbed and patriarchal/nationalist violence which Ian and the soldier clearly manifest. While many critics have noted Kane's debt to Beckett,³⁵ none have remarked that both Kane and Beckett make productive use of fragmentary stories external to the main plot in order to create a tension with

³² It is also similar to Walter Benjamin's version of the messianic (and more specifically, the messianic potential of historical materialism). The future is not the zone of redemption, for Benjamin's Messiah, coming on the heels of, and thus correcting, the past. Rather, like the "Jews . . . prohibited from investigating the future," given the biblical condemnation of 'soothsayers,' we must expect "every second of time" to be "the straight gate through which the Messiah might enter." See Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968) 264.

³³ Moltmann 302.

³⁴ Calvin 221.

³⁵ See Aston (78, 85), Greig (x), Saunders (54-59) and Sierz (99-100).

a sort of liberating potential in the otherwise existentially closed worlds of their plays. We might think of the boy spied "on the without" by Clov in *Endgame*, or the vaguely sketched memories of another life – "we were grape harvesting . . . my clothes dried in the sun" – in *Waiting for Godot*.³⁶ In *Blasted*, Cate speaks of her mother, father, boyfriend Shaun, and of a mentally retarded brother (whom Ian almost never fails to mock), and Ian talks about his ex-wife Stella and a son named Matthew. Their respective relationships with these others are as indicative of their own natures as anything they do or say on stage. Ian complains that his son Matthew hates him (though Cate insists that he doesn't) and he in turn despises his wife for the fact that she left him for another woman. On the other hand, Cate seems very protective of her brother and has only kind feelings towards her mother, while Shaun is neutrally drawn and the father is perhaps a threatening presence in her life – Cate's fits began when her father "came back."³⁷

The mentally-retarded brother, Stella and Matthew are particularly interesting for what they reveal about Cate and Ian and the play's possibilities for hope. Cate's brother, whom she insists is not mentally retarded but only has "learning difficulties," goes to a "day centre" for kids with disabilities.³⁸ He's got "blind friends," a fact which Cate suggests should teach the recently blinded Ian that he "can't give up."³⁹ Moreover, the center has an international flavor, since "there are Indians" there too.⁴⁰ Minimally, at least, these details suggest that community is a viable idea, that one can still tell stories of how others live mutually supportive and mutually protective lives. They also suggest that a community of the marginalized (of precisely the sorts of people Ian rails against throughout the play) not only *can* work but *does* work even as the world tears itself apart in order to establish – as Ian and the soldier try and fail to do – a hegemonically brutal power. In fact, one has the sense that the world of such communities

³⁶ Raymond Williams, in a 1961 review article, entitled "Hope Deferred," writes of such tensions that they are indicative of a "voluntary world," one in which Didi and Gogo choose to wait in hope. As an "image of fallen man," however, these two tramps seem not to have alternatives to waiting, unlike Ian and Cate. See Raymond Williams, "Hope Deferred," *Critical Essays on Samuel Beckett*, ed. Lance St. John Butler (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 1993) 112-113.

³⁷ Kane 10.

³⁸ Kane 5.

³⁹ Kane 55.

⁴⁰ Kane 5.

continues to function precisely despite the play's representations of violence. When, towards the end of the play a brutalized and blinded Ian asks Cate if she has spoken with Shaun about "what we did,"⁴¹ the question seems to imply that Shaun still continues to live within another order, one not riven by horror, one in which lovers don't have survival, and survival alone, on their minds. The war, then, reflects the lives on the stage, but it doesn't necessarily extend beyond them.

Ian has used the word "love" before in the play, specifically when speaking of Stella and Cate. But that Ian loves them means little more than that he has sex with them, or at most that they fall within his most intimate sphere of influence. We're never told why Stella "became a witch and fucked off with a dyke" though we can surmise that whatever life she's found has got to be better than the one she had with Ian.⁴² In fact, Stella's departure from Ian's world suggests, in Moltmann's terms, how future possibilities develop not in continuity with the past, but as a complete break with it.⁴³ Perhaps Matthew seems to hate his father because he too recognizes that his mother, Stella, should not have had her life's possibilities squashed by Ian's dominating masculinity. But Ian clearly feels something more for Mathew than he does for Stella. Ian never says that he loves Matthew, but in one the play's most poignant moments he asks Cate if she has seen him. Again, as when he was asking Cate about Shaun, his question seems not to take into consideration current circumstances – that is, he doesn't ask Cate about how Matthew is surviving the war, as if he takes for granted that Matthew is entirely beyond the violence experienced by Cate, Ian and the soldier. Ian merely asks Cate: "will you tell him for me," and keeps stumbling toward but never quite reaching an expression of regret and love: "Tell him – / Tell him – Don't know what to tell him Tell him" – until finally Cate cuts him short by shouting "I CAN'T."⁴⁴ She's taking care of the abandoned baby girl by now and, apparently unlike Ian – even when he's speaking of his own son's infancy – does not think of a

⁴¹ Kane 52.

⁴² Kane 19.

⁴³ The echoes of Benjamin are, again, striking. For Benjamin, the historical materialist recognizes the "revolutionary chance" available in the past; "he takes cognizance of it in order to blast a specific era out of the homogenous course of history – blasting a specific life out of the era." See Benjamin 263. Perhaps Kane, too, is *blasting* her alternative lives out of the play's history.

⁴⁴ Kane 51-52.

baby as "hopeless."⁴⁵ To spend time now trying to make amends for Ian by proxy would only be a waste of time.

Cate herself seems to take up the hopefulness implied vaguely in these other lives and, on her own initiative, creates a prayerful narrative of hopeful alternatives. The baby she's caring for dies, but her death elicits Cate's prayer for the protection of the baby's innocence as if she were to live beyond this death, not in a heavenly life, but in an alternative earthly one – à la Moltmann – in which, in the terms of the prayer, she won't "feel [any] pain or know [anything she] shouldn't know see bad things or go bad places or meet anyone who'll do bad things."⁴⁶ It's a prayer for the "innocent" too, a prayer which, Cate insists, cannot be appropriated for those who are not innocent.⁴⁷ Indeed, in a curious exchange, Ian, prodding, asks Cate whether she'll pray for him when he's dead, just as she's praying for the baby. Cate replies flatly with a "no," because there'll be "no point [in praying for you] when you're dead."⁴⁸ Ian's death is an end. The baby's death is not, if only because the baby represents an innocence which can, and does, exist in the world beyond the violence Cate and Ian have suffered. At any rate, it exists as potentiality in their world, a moment to be seized upon in a rupturing of the hopeless present. This prayer, therefore, is as much about the baby as it is about Cate, or Cate's brother, or perhaps even about Matthew, who is (Ian remembers, precisely, though he hasn't seen him for some time) twenty-four years old, and who has apparently been spared the life his father has lead, and has forced upon others. It's also a prayer, again à la Moltmann, for a time unrelated to the present, the Messianic future as a radical break with the present, and with the violence of the present. In fact, taking the baby and her innocence as the object, the prayer also vaguely suggests a more specifically Christian hope in resurrection, rendered figuratively perhaps as the rebirth of innocence in a world opened to hope. If this is the case, then perhaps Kane is using Cate, however briefly, to recast her youthful and naïve religious faith as viable option in such circumstances? It has been noted that Kane appreciated the Beckett line from *Endgame*, "God, the bastard," and that she rewrites Beckett (with a vengeance) in *Blasted* by

⁴⁵ Kane 52.

⁴⁶ Kane 57-58.

⁴⁷ Kane 58.

⁴⁸ Kane 58.

having Ian seem to finish a line of Cate's about God with: "the cunt."⁴⁹ Still, Cate's prayer is not undermined by the text. She finishes her prayer with an "amen" and the play pauses for a moment, then shifts focus as Cate "starts to leave."⁵⁰ Nor does Ian continue to mock the prayer after this but rather he lets her "amen" stand. The hope, then, also stands, awaiting only the world in which the narrative of Cate's little prayer can be played out, perhaps a world from which the present of the play will have been *blasted*.

The soldier's story, or rather the story of his Col and the untold numbers of others like her, is a story of the deepest despair, producing, via the soldier's life, an ever-widening catastrophe. But the narrative of the soldier's grief and revenge is perhaps negatively hopeful since it carries within itself the seeds of its own *eschaton*. Unlike Ian, the soldier is truly autotelic, as is his indiscriminate revenge. With his suicide, this strand of narrative, the darkest in the play, concludes, leaving space, finally, for Cate (and to some extent Ian) to trace out in recollection other, more hopeful, narratives. Perhaps hope, for Kane, is to be found precisely in that range of options which hangs in the balance. The meager stories of Cate's brother and caring mother, of Stella's new life, even of Matthew are alternatives which, each in their own way, are fraught with possibilities. The fact that they all culminate in a death which produces Cate's prayerfully constructed counter-world both reinforces their own ambiguities and yet emphasizes the importance of maintaining a theological focus on suffering as the context of, indeed as the motivation for, a hope which will not be the culmination of history, but precisely the antithesis of, a radical alternative to, history as it has played itself out – at least in the lives of Ian, Cate and the soldier (and, by extension, in the war which brings them together).

That Kane refuses her audiences any solace whatsoever at the end of *Blasted*, and nevertheless considered it a hopeful play, requires readers to interrogate the intellectual resources Kane may have brought to the writing of the play. It may be surprising to recognize that her notion of hope is so dependent upon violence and despair. But in the context of a tradition of thinking hope within Christian theology, Kane's allusion to the Pauline theological virtues, and more particularly to her sense that *Blasted* manifests hope, begins to make more sense: hope is the inverse, the other, of the worlds she presents so relentlessly in her work. Hence, any understanding of hope in her work must tease out those fragmentary visions of

⁴⁹ Kane 57.

⁵⁰ Kane 58.

other realities, those options currently inaccessible to, and yet at least potentially capable of breaking in upon, her main characters. Readers as troubled by Kane's violence as by her suicide may find all this a slender consolation. But according to theologians such as Calvin and Moltmann, such is the nature of hope.