

Death, The One,
and The Art of Theatre
(excerpt)

by Howard Barker

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HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics

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and The Art of Theatre **(excerpt)**



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introduction by
Karoline Gritzner

Some Notes towards Autonomy in Howard Barker's Art of Theatre

by Karoline Gritzner

In his philosophical commentary on Theodor W. Adorno's *Minima Moralia*, entitled *So Ist Es*, Alexander García Düttmann defines the aphorism as an aesthetic gesture which says: 'that's it' ('so ist es'). According to Düttmann, the successful aphorism does not need to be explained or elaborated. Like a work of art, it addresses the reader with an immediacy and urgency that resists translation into discursive language. Like a work of art, the aphorism is a poetic and philosophical expression: in perfect form it 'reveals the unsayable in the sayable' (Düttmann, 41). Much the same can be said of Howard Barker's *Death, The One and The Art of Theatre*, which explores the mysteries of tragedy, eroticism and death in an aphoristic form that expresses a profoundly philosophical sensibility. In the words of Maurice Blanchot and Jean-Luc Nancy, writing in aphorisms expresses a 'fragmentary demand' that calls into question the relation between the part and the whole, the finite and the infinite.¹ This discontinuous and anti-systematic mode of writing denotes a refusal to subsume the singular thought and particular expression under an overarching totality of meaning. In Barker's work this fragmentary demand is staged as an expression of subjective autonomy. Barker's own preferred term for his poetics of profound emotional experience is the 'Theatre of Catastrophe,' a tragic theatre that rejects the utilitarian values of the modern world (such as transparency, clarity, usefulness) and pursues uncompromising explorations of human pain, anxiety, instinct and transgression. Barker defends theatre, especially tragedy, as an autonomous, independent space which authenticates modes of being on their own terms. In the extra-ordinary space of tragic theatre, bodies and language, movement and expression become exceptional—suspended from the instrumentality of the outside world.

Autonomy is commonly understood as an Enlightenment concept and as instrumental in forging the myth of modernity's morally objective, self-controlled, rational human being—in effect a self without a body or desire. In the spirit of Romanticism, Barker's poetic imagination denounces the ideology

¹ See also David Ian Rabey's references to Nancy in chapter 10 of his *Howard Barker: Ecstasy and Death. An Expository Study of His Drama, Theory and Production Work, 1988-2008* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

Front image:
Howard Barker,
Dead you said
oil on board

Opposite:
Howard Barker,
A policeman tortured by nurses
oil on board

of reason in favour of exaggeration and irrationality. Here the principle of autonomy is not a denial of the sensuous or ‘merely’ private dimension of emotional experience. On the contrary, Barker translates the demand for freedom into a performance of self-definition that takes the form of connecting more deeply with the dark and obscure force field of emotional and bodily desire. It seems that only by reaching deeper and further into catastrophe can the individual experience his or her freedom *to be*. Thus, the self in the Theatre of Catastrophe answers the call of the infinite by embodying and thereby rising above social, moral, and political crisis. In the process, self-authorship borders on self-obliteration, and servitude, coercion, and pain can become manifestations of love and passion. Therefore, Barker’s poetics is also an ethics: it does not seek to reconcile differences or smooth out contradictions; it admits them and in doing so ‘serves to allow the infinite relation of Self to Other’ (Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 53). Above all, the autonomous claim of tragic theatre, this peculiar ‘art of playing with division’ (Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 360), rests on an affirmation of incomprehensibility as a primary existential value.

In Barker’s drama, to defend a position and ideal of autonomy (however precarious and self-destructive) means to admit chaos, exaggeration, and solitude, all in defence of an unknown life lived *at a remove* from what is already known and agreed upon. Dancer in *Hated Nightfall* is a good example of a transgressive dramatic character who exposes himself to an existence at the limit, defying the laws of history and politics in favour of a condition of uncertainty and contradiction.

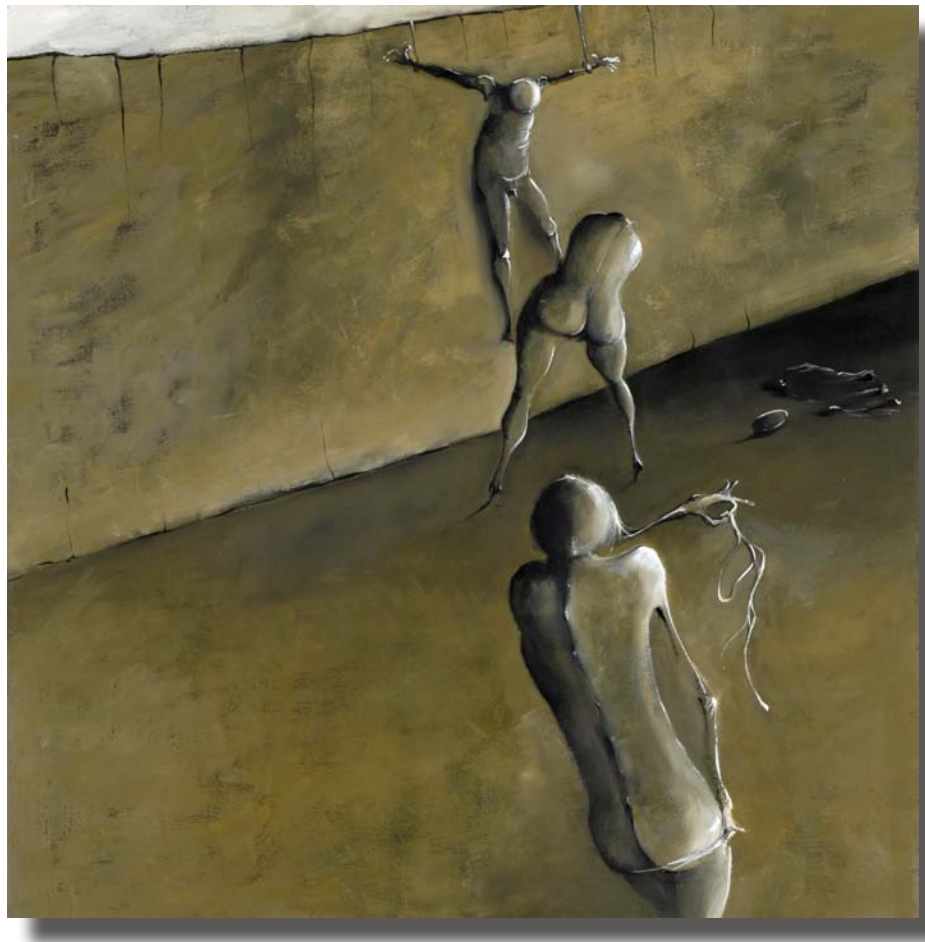
“

DANCER: [...] The gratification, the celebration, the reputation the everything heroic and magnanimous, who could refuse?
(Pause)

Only me. (Pause)

This dancing around the abyss in the Theatre of Catastrophe effects a suspension of objective truth and meaning while also suggesting a playful irresolution of conflict and interminable transvaluation of values. Sexual desire and death are the primary dramatic forces of this form of tragedy. Barker’s art of theatre is drawn to the mystery of eros and death because they offer ‘limit-experiences,’ experiences of extremity where life borders on the impossible. When death becomes an ‘object of desire’ (Barker, 75), the One, as is the case in many Barker plays, we enter an unknowable and unfathomable relation with it. “The limit-experience is the response that man encounters when he has decided to put himself radically in question. This decision

involving all being expresses the impossibility of ever stopping, whether it be at some consolation or some truth, at the interests or the results of an action, or with the certitudes of knowledge and belief" (Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 203-204). Perhaps Barker's art of theatre is a 'theatre *without limits*' (Barker, 36), an autonomous space, precisely because it recognises and affirms the value of the boundary, of experience *in extremis*, for only 'the fence' can give rise to transcending thoughts and actions.



Barker's poetic drama expresses, in Nietzschean fashion, a compulsive longing for 'unknowing,' uncertainty, and difference. Irresolution and contradiction are the hallmarks of this theatre of becoming. Barker's philosophy of theatre is disruptively theatrical because rather than constituting a dialectical search for truth, it oscillates between a multitude of appearances, gestures, and 'truths' that are discovered and experienced in moments of *ecstasis*. Theatre approaches philosophical thinking when it appears as an 'event,' following Alain Badiou: "This event—when it really is theatre, the art of the theatre—is an event of thought. This means that the assemblage of components directly produces ideas" (Badiou, 72). Barker's staging of desire, which may or may not be a 'gift of death' (Derrida)—we cannot know!—does not emerge from any foundational discourse of identity or gender politics.

Even the One does not fulfil the function of a synthesising origin or stable reference point, however cunningly she stages herself in the theatre of our imagination. Barker's conception of the One should not be confused with a metaphysical, transcendental notion of essential unity and sameness.

Rather, the appearance of the One (as lover, object of desire) in surprising manifestations, shapes, and movements—in short, his/her ‘theatricality’—is what renders the One *impossible*. The One is ‘the One’ because he has a disturbing, dislocating effect upon me; he pushes me onto a shifting ground, causing disorientation and interruption. In Barker, the One elicits a (dialogic) fragmentation of the self rather than reducing plurality or offering at-one-ment. The One agitates my becoming in space and time, in which he is also not immune to change and influence. He launches an *affect* and thus declares himself unnameable and unknowable—to *me*.

When exploring the philosophical connotations of Barker’s theatre and the poetic force of his theory, the spectre of Nietzsche is never far away. Nietzsche’s attempt to free art and thought from the burdens of morality and exclusive truths is expressed in his view that “existence and the world appear justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon” (Nietzsche, 128). Barker refines this vision by foregrounding the distinctively *theatrical* nature of human existence in the context of tragic experience, which allows for the contradictions and dissonance of human nature (the pain, pleasure, and beauty of life lived ‘beyond good and evil’) to emerge *affectively*. The theatre of tragedy invites a (potentially exhilarating) ‘self-detachment from the weight of the factual’ (Adorno, 126) and initiates an open-ended search for the infinite, for Death and the One. In doing this, Barker’s art of theatre offers the promise and challenge of profound disturbance rather than deliverance.

“

May words cease to be [...] means of salvation.

Let us count, rather, on disarray. (Blanchot)

Death, The One, and The Art of Theatre (excerpt)

by Howard Barker

1

I do not know *the theatre*, and *the theatre* does not know me.

•

There is *the theatre* and there is *the art of theatre*. All that is proposed in this book pertains to the latter.

•

Some have had to do with *the art of theatre*, but finding it too arduous, chose to join *the theatre*. These are legion. A few remained faithful. Very few, because it is a painful path.

•

The theatre purports to give pleasure to the many. *The art of theatre* lends anxiety to the few. Which is the greater gift?

•

Nothing *said* about death by the living can possibly relate to death as it will be experienced by the dying. Nothing *known* about death by the dead can be communicated to the living. Over this appalling chasm tragedy throws a frail bridge of imagination.

•

Since theatre ceased to make death its subject it surrendered its authority over the human soul. Since it allowed itself to be incorporated into mundane projects of political indoctrination and social therapy it abdicated its power. Always theatre is suborned by the idealism of its makers. Always it is traduced by the sentimental. In *the art of theatre* we pity the idealist as one pities the man with a fatal disease. This pity is strictly circumscribed. Whilst many have tried to make hospitals from theatres we keep our stage infection-free.

2

All I describe is theatre even where theatre is not the subject.

•



Howard Barker,
The hospital : mother and child with dogs and unburied dead
 oil on board

One has heard talk of many theatres existing, and of many forms, as if theatres tolerated one another. The fact is that theatres annihilate one another as all religions annihilate one another. Is this because theatre is a religion? Let us confess *the art of theatre* has many of the characteristics of religion. For example, it finds so much theatre *anathema*. It *excommunicates*. Its methods are akin to *prayer*. What distinguishes it from all religion is this, however, that it recoils from *truth*. It repudiates *truth* as vulgarity.

All cultures are enslaved by idealism – they are defined by their servitude to the ideal. Only tragedy locates the ideal in Death, but because Death is the first enemy of political systems, tragedy is caricatured as *negativity*. The bravery of tragedy – where not even sexual love is sufficient to abolish the fascination of Death – lies in its refutation of pleasure as an organizing principle of existence. Who would deny that this contempt for pleasure is also an ecstasy?

The theatre is often contrasted with the street, as if it were false, and the street real. *The art of theatre* asserts its absolute independence of the street. It values the door. It values the wall. It leaves the street to the street. In any case, who says the street is real? It *pretends* to be real. The fact so many persist in the fiction that it is real is of no concern to us.

Silence is the consequence of too-deep knowledge in some, of ignorance in others.

•

The dread of speech is a sign of spiritual health, for the banality of speech is universal and induces nausea. In *the art of theatre* we acknowledge a solitary obligation – *to save speech from itself*.

•

To tell the truth sincerely is the pitiful pretension of the theatre. To lie sincerely is the euphoria of *the art of theatre*.

•

To ask for truth in theatre is contradictory, a repudiation of its essence. Consequently, Death, a subject for which true statements are *a priori* inadmissible, is the subject most perfectly suited to the form of theatre.

3

We are not born full of sin, we are born full of the appetite for it.

•

We repudiate all those who find theatre *congenial*. *The art of theatre* is constructed on the premiss that the creation of happiness is no part of its function. Nor does it have a *function*.

•

To seduce this woman and not another. To seduce this man and not another. We are faintly discriminating.

•

To move continually out of reach. To be only ever *proximate*.

•

I come close. I tell *everything*. But only in such a way that the listener wonders if what he heard was *imagined*.

•

Confession is also discretion. 'Why did I fail to include the fact that I...?'

•

To seduce this woman and not another. To seduce this man and not another. The influence of the locality. The charm of coincidence. The failure to exploit

(the dropped handkerchief, the entire store of stratagems). The seducer's nausea at his own sentences. The prospect of having to admit nothing turned out as planned.

•

When the light came on he saw her face was disfigured. This had the effect of extinguishing his desire. He found an excuse to avoid the consequences of what he himself had initiated. His actions were however dictated by consideration of a purely *public* kind. It was not in his sexuality that he experienced offence. On the contrary he sensed his erotic instinct was enhanced by her disfigurement ('what or who had so damaged her? How had she inspired such mistreatment?'). Once he was able to acknowledge this he accepted the challenge of her condition. He nevertheless stipulated she wore tighter clothes.

•

All I describe is theatre even where theatre is not the subject.

•

So essential is theatre to *the idea of life* it cannot be compromised by making itself *the imitation of life*. It cannot be humiliated by rituals of reproduction.

•

The theatre reproduces life. *The art of theatre* invents life. This act of invention may be perceived as a critique of the poverty of existence. It is not *social criticism*.

•

The art of theatre, in its impatience with the world, utters in its own languages. Moreover it understands these languages to be the means by which its public is *cleansed* of the detritus of familiarity, domesticity and recognition.

•

The art of theatre was fear-inspiring. The Humanists, who know of no *use* for fear, nor can imagine the *sublimity* of fear, abolished it from the stage. We talk however, of theatre as crucially an art of Death. We assert the dominance of fear in the life of the characters. In this we are paradoxically, realists.

•

Death is the preoccupation of great art even where it is not the *subject* of it. When the utilitarians seized the theatre Death simply stood in the foyer, as patient as a chauffeur.

To enter the space silently. To enter it thinking of Death. To make Death the whole subject even when laughter discloses the ambiguity of our passions. To *admit* Death.

•

To *admit Death*... to know *now* what you knew but were denied consciousness of... that *all* is predicated on Death... is this political?

•

What is the function of laughter in tragedy? Can we talk of a function in tragedy? Let us put it another way. How does laughter serve the experience of tragedy? By implicating us in its seductive process. It is a dropped handkerchief.

•

The peculiar laugh of tragedy. The laugh on the rim of Death.

•

The dropped handkerchief: accident/intention/the beauty of a falling thing/white is a sign/I surrender/intimate as underwear/to retrieve it is to begin/impossible not to retrieve it/an obligation/excuse me/we both know/this will perhaps be fatal.

•

The foyer is not neutral. Always the play of Death is at war with the foyer. The foyer is *the theatre* par excellence. It is the first aim of *the art of theatre* to abolish the foyer.

•

Cruelty is cheap, like philanthropy.

•

We should all like to choose our deaths, both the moment and the manner. We should like to control this as all the episodes of life. But Death is not an episode of life, it is beyond life and nothing that pertains to life pertains to Death. It was the same with the birth agony. We were coming into a place. With Death we are going into a place. Or, if we are not going into a place, certainly we are leaving one...

•

The sexual moment is not a knowing. Its vitality is nevertheless inspired by the



misapprehension that it is a knowing, as all exploration purports to be knowing, as all journeys proclaim their knowing. The well-travelled are notoriously ignorant.

•

The ancient element of violence in the wedding is dimly visible in the tears the mother sheds for the bride. These tears are commonly misunderstood as

tears of joy, in the way a culture of gratification converts every manifestation of pain into the substance of its own sentimentality. But are these tears not tears of pity inspired by the spectacle of a beauty contrived solely for its own violation?

•

Speaking of those one might have loved, we like to indulge a spurious melancholy. The experience of life seems reducible to missed opportunities, near-encounters, appointments that failed to materialize. Thus we can comfort ourselves with another false-tragedy, that so-and-so, with whom we were destined to live a life of passion, somehow evaded us, that the objective situation conspired to obstruct a critical encounter. We are thus delivered into the power of the arbitrary, a pretext, a self-justification for spoiled life. If conversely, the loved one need not have been the *only one* (a nauseating exclusivity according to democratic ideology, where absolute interchangeability is the rule) but rather the world is profuse with possibility, the arbitrary becomes the excellent, a condition of luxury. Certainly, if it is true that if by failing to be in a certain place one relinquished *one* love, the opposite must equally apply, that by being in another place one delivered oneself to the possibility of encountering *another*...

•

All I describe is theatre even where theatre is not the subject.

•

Kiss carefully – not an admonition about kissing, an act of banality/an act of terrible depth, but about the *kissed one*.

•

The clumsiness of all theatre where the artist is not ignorant. The poverty of all text where the dramatist is not ignorant. How can we speak of ignorance as a virtue? Because we are nauseated by the *knowing*. Because we long to share the ordeal of the *unknowing*, who alone possess a beautiful intention.

•

The paradox that we require bad art to make us long for a testament of authenticity. What do we mean by authenticity? Not a *true account* (let the journalists account truthfully, i.e. not at all) but a spectacle of utterance, the utterance born of an ordeal.

•

Her dread he would say the same things. Her relief that he *did* say the same things. Her contempt that he said them...

5

The demonstration causes me to ask not what was demonstrated but who is the demonstrator?

•

When we are ordered to be free we are entitled to ask in whose interest should we be free! In the existing state of language let alone ethics, it is not self-evident that freedom is a gift.

•

Why do you require me to be free?

•

The photographic paper before its immersion in the developing tank. The invisible is present. The immanent form. But never an immutable form (we might stop the development... the exhaustion of the chemicals...).

•

The old photograph. What is behind the tree? Something was behind the tree. To turn the photograph on its edge. To scratch away the surface of the tree.

•

The land behind the tree continues. A field, leading to a road. The road leads

to the city. At this moment (the moment of the photograph) in the city a room where a woman (a man) crosses one leg over the other. This is both contained in and excluded from the photograph. The essential *agony* of all photography.

•

Where this photograph was taken (the place) may never have changed (we cannot identify the place). Whilst few places are unchanged, we cannot say authoritatively that the general law of change applies to *this place*. So the photograph has the status of a wound, which smarts with its *irresolution* ...

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