

The Sunless Garden of the Unconsoled

Some Destinations Beyond Catastrophe

by Howard Barker

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On the future of aesthetics

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introduction by
David Kilpatrick

An Invitation to Barker's Garden

David Kilpatrick

The question concerning tragedy has been a major concern for Modernism since Nietzsche. Whether or not the art form is possible in such an age has been the subject of much debate. No writer has done more to answer the call than Howard Barker. Born in south London in 1946, his first play was staged at the Royal Court in 1970 when, along with Caryl Churchill, Howard Brenton, and David Hare, he was seen as one of a handful of promising young dramatists writing political plays pushing a progressive agenda on the British stage. Unlike his peers, however, Barker hasn't risen to popularity on either side of the pond, and this is due in no small part to the "difficult" tag frequently used to label his plays by London theatre critics. Despite this resistance, he has gone on to cultivate a body of work that has earned him another reputation: an actor's playwright. When the stages of the Royal Court and Royal Shakespeare Company no longer welcomed his writing, in 1988 actors from both companies formed The Wrestling School, a theatre company devoted exclusively to the staging of his plays. By this time his dramaturgy abandoned the ideological and didactic impulse of his earlier work. As critics failed or refused to keep up with this shift, beginning in 1986 Barker took to writing theoretical texts as programme notes, newspaper articles, and lectures, before gathering them together in one volume as *Arguments for a Theatre* in 1989 (John Calder Press), expanding with subsequent editions in 1993 and 1997 (Manchester UP). Serving to articulate his tragic vision as they elaborate what he calls the "Theatre of Catastrophe," the volume stands alongside Artaud's *The Theatre and Its Double* and Grotowski's *Towards a Poor Theatre* as the most provocative and influential works on theatre in the twentieth century.

The influence of Barker's plays and theoretical texts on the "in-yer-face" dramatists who emerged in the mid-1990s "Cool Britannia" scene is inestimable. Dramatists such as Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill, Martin McDonagh, and Martin Crimp all share with Barker a commitment to theatre as excess, where the aesthetic and ethical limitations of conventional theatre

are transgressed as a matter of course. Kane famously predicted that “in two hundred years’ time Howard Barker will be thought of a bit like Shakespeare.” While the works of Kane take their richly deserved place among the modern theatrical canon via anthologies and restaging, Barker’s work remains strangely subject to neglect, with recent cuts in funding to the British Arts Council making the survival of The Wrestling School a concern.

Not that Barker’s output has shown any signs of wear or weakening. His fifteen-hour play *The Ecstatic Bible* in 2000, his revision of Elsinore and the Hamlet myth with *Gertrude - The Cry* in 2002, and *The Seduction of Almighty God* in 2006 prove his tragic vision is as sharp as ever, adding to a body of work that is daunting in its breadth and depth. Likewise, his critical output continues in the new century, with *Death, The One and the Art of Theatre* appearing in 2005 (Routledge) while adopting the *nom-de-plume* Eduardo Houth with *A Style and its Origins*, published in 2007 (Oberon), chronicling in third-person Barker’s cultivation of a unique performative aesthetic with the productions he directed with The Wrestling School.

The following essay, “The Sunless Garden of the Unconsoled: Some Destinations Beyond Catastrophe,” would surely fit should there be a fourth edition of *Arguments for a Theatre*. Here we see Barker wrestling with tragedy, frustrated with the seeming reification of social values, the turn towards reconciliation and moral conformity that attends—however tenuously—Attic and Elizabethan tragic drama (perhaps, Barker suggests, due to the artist’s need to be patronized if not adored), seeing in such dramaturgy a paradoxical suppression of the catastrophic core of the tragic. Rejecting such gestures as cowardly compromise, Barker here explores his own texts as movements towards “the experience of Sacrifice,” with special attention to *Gertrude - The Cry* and *Wonder and Worship in the Dying Ward* (in this essay he refers to the latter as unperformed and unpublished but it has just been given a staged reading at Riverside Studios, London, 2 May 2010). Lack of familiarity with either of these scripts by Barker shouldn’t be a barrier to an understanding of what is at stake here for tragedy and catastrophic thought; Barker’s sacrificial theory of contemporary tragedy would be just as clearly articulated if he discussed plays either canonical or merely imagined. Like the work of Georges Bataille, Barker finds in sacrifice at once the antithesis and the antidote to the modern. The sense of the Sacred such sacrifice produces is one that renders any signficatory order not only suspect (as with some works by Sophocles and Shakespeare) but shattered.

With “The Sunless Garden of the Unconsoled” we find an articulation of a theatrical vision more tragic than prior tragedy would allow. With this rejection of the comforts of faith, reason or ethics, Barker dares us to consider a mode of consciousness lost in a night of non-knowledge, inviting us to the ecstasy of irrevocable loss.

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It is scarcely controversial to declare that what we find frustrating in Tragedy is its love of The Law. Given the huge extent of its creative mandate, its contempt for the mimetic rule, its hypnotized fascination with transgression, and the poetry it brings to malice, sadism, and the savage accident, this inevitable capitulation can only be experienced as disappointing. In invoking The Law I am not referring only to the prevailing disciplines of State or Faith, but also to the similarly oscillating and insecure concepts of Kindness and the Human. To admit the material condition of the practice of theatre, the fact it is never active unless authorized, hardly compensates for this sense of lack, which is diminished only if one concedes at the outset that Tragedy has not until now been an exercise in moral speculation, but first and foremost a discipline which raised the spectre of passionate disorder only to abolish it again, thereby making of temptation and obliteration twin aspects of a game played out before an audience in order to validate a status quo. Certainly no one has claimed for Tragedy that it was enlightening, notwithstanding the curious fact that the plot of the antique text was routinely described as ‘the argument.’

However, one senses it is not only the circumstances of ideology and censorship that have routinely bent the shape of tragic action into this familiar curve. Poets after all, have their ways with authority. We are the perfect liars of this and every age. This conformity of dramatic authors – and artists in general – to the moral climate of their cultural milieu invites speculation into the psychological origins of creative desire itself.

**Howard Barker,
The well and its creator : women fighting with buckets
oil on board**



It is hard to resist the suspicion that the profusion of texts in our time which purport to offer critiques of society whilst simultaneously endorsing its values unwittingly advertises a neurosis, as if by demanding deeper and deeper civility in the culture, the authors sensed the decay of it in themselves. It would perhaps be preposterous for any individual to claim he had acquired sufficient autonomy to articulate appalling propositions on the stage without admitting to the private predilections that initiated

them, and in any case the extent of an author's implication in the crimes of his characters never affects the outcome. Some greater discipline imposes its resolution. My life in theatre has to a considerable extent been shaped by this conflict between a desire to speculate freely and widely on what it is to be human and the implacable disciplines of theatrical form.

Whatever rudimentary signs of a tragic instinct exist in earlier works such as *CRIMES IN HOT COUNTRIES* or *VICTORY*, I have consistently identified *THE EUROPEANS* as the first of the Catastrophic plays, not only from its narrative inception in a crisis of order but from the insistence of the protagonist on privileging personal instinct over cultural discipline. Katrin's rage at her violation and maiming might be contained and ameliorated by the doctrine of Christ or the doctrine of Expediency, but her sense that to engage in a programme of reconciliation could only maim her further renders her an outcast, and she is routinely described as mentally ill or inveterately perverse. It is perhaps worth differentiating Katrin's moral independence from the struggle of Widow Bradshaw in *VICTORY*. Bradshaw's choice is to discard by strenuous intellectual effort her whole moral character, and the

success which attends on this enterprise perhaps suggests its superficial claim on her. Katrin's determination is visceral, and requires no education. Her criminal apotheosis is perhaps her decision to give birth in public, making of herself what I have described as 'the screaming exhibit in the Museum of Reconciliation', but her greatest and most triumphant infringement of the law is delayed until she has necessarily developed a natural affection for her child and then to wilfully break the maternal bond and return the infant to the army of the enemy whose soldiers had fathered it upon her. At this point it can safely be said that the protagonist annihilates whatever lingering sympathy an audience accustomed to reconciliation as a social principle might have entertained for her.

To invite speculation as to the consequent life of Katrin and her lover is one of the outcomes of this extremity, and I once spoke of writing a sequel to *THE EUROPEANS* if only to insist on the character of her spirituality. Imploring her lover to applaud her outrage for its *superba*, if nothing else, with the cry 'Congratulate me, then...!' might on its own have ensured no actress of the Royal Shakespeare Company would ever play Katrin, for this institution may only utter the reconciliation that is the law, if not I suspect, the instinct, of its Shakespearian heritage.

I'd like to advance my account of the dilemmas and contradictions of tragic writing in a culture of moral totality by examining two later works, one relatively established, *GERTRUDE, THE CRY*, and one recently completed and unperformed, *WONDER AND WORSHIP IN THE DYING WARD*, both of which carry the thesis of Catastrophic Theatre into yet more uncomfortable territory, namely the experience of Sacrifice.

The culture of Liberal-Humanism finds Sacrifice comprehensible only in very constrained circumstances. Unwillingly it palliates the death of soldiers by attaching the word to the memorial, but both the rhetoric and the architecture are copied from Thermopylae and the pagan Spartans, and Christ himself, the most self-conscious of all the sacrificed, knew it as a destiny in his God-character, but a nightmare in the man. His desperate pleading to be excused the very ordeal for which he was created is touchingly human and might be seen as the first expression in Western culture of the individual asserting his reluctance to perish for the collective, in other words, to be a *victim*. Liberal Humanism's obsessive desire to identify and eliminate the *victim* is an inevitable consequence of the doctrine of equality, and indeed might be regarded as its ideological justification. Victims are, of course, abundant in tragedy, and constitute the source of the dismay which initiates it, but unless one were whimsical and dared to suggest that the humiliation and death of Cordelia was a sacrifice to the eventual civilizing of King Lear, the category of victim is strictly reserved.

To invoke Sacrifice in contemporary tragedy, as it is invoked in the two texts I have described, is to rupture the contract of mutuality that is critical to the contemporary moral project. Pity here becomes irrelevant and conscience ceases to act upon the public as it ceases to act on the protagonist herself. Katrin's unnatural gesture with her own child is vastly less cruel than Gertrude's with hers, but in both cases the act is presented from the perspective of an individual driven to assert her independence not only of social obligation but of the maternal bond, a defiance of biology as well as sentiment. We are familiar with the fact that in the confined spaces of public permission, the making of one self is frustrated by the rights of another. We also know that in conventional tragedy – whilst it is anachronistic to talk of rights – the claim to existence exists only to be violated. The rise of the protagonist is essentially a criminal enterprise, and the corpses that decorate his progress are the detritus of a mesmeric journey that has only one terminus – self-disgust and some form of suicide. In the Catastrophic play the invocation of Sacrifice renders the binary ethic of criminal / victim redundant. Humanist jurisprudence might argue as to whether the sexualized murder of the old king in GERTRUDE, THE CRY, is murder or manslaughter, given the infatuated condition of his killers, but the play's trajectory, with its phase by phase disclosure of the origins of Claudius's passion, and Gertrude's frequently pitiful attempts to satisfy it, renders protest at injustice awesomely irrelevant. If betrayal of the Law is precisely where Claudius locates the proof of love – and it is Gertrude who identifies this for him – it is not entirely surprising that the supreme infidelity that proposes itself is the mother's betrayal of the son, and it is important to recognize the clear signs in this text of Gertrude's deep feeling for Hamlet. Hamlet is poisoned, and dies mesmerized by the spectacle of his mother's nakedness, his awareness that he is nothing less than a sacrifice to the religion of his mother's sexuality immaculately described in the controlled gesture with which – despite his agony – he replaces the glass on its foot. Hamlet reiterates out of sheer infantile provocation, 'the world is full of things I do not understand, but others understand them evidently' but at this moment he understands perfectly well the function, if not the justice, of his destiny, and accords it an exquisite affirmation.

The abolition of the Law that characterizes the Catastrophic play is not followed by its restitution, and the state of anxiety created in an audience by the expected, even craved, arrival of the apology cannot be dissipated.

WONDER AND WORSHIP IN THE DYING WARD is a play about revelation, its irresistible compulsion, and the ambiguities surrounding the notions of the victim and the perpetrator. It is also, crucially, about the apology and its status in the Christian-Humanist tradition. Since the Church of Rome placed the confession at the very centre of its ritual, apology has been a significant personal and cultural gesture – and in recent years – astonishingly, a political device of dubious validity. The crux of the agony of apology – for it can be

nothing less – is the sense of personal loss entailed in denying actions in which one located one’s faith in circumstances now altered. A culture of apology – removed from the context of Christian practice – finds a congenial new residence in the contemporary dispensation of Late Democracy and its tablet of laws, partly Christian, partly secular idealism, known as Human Rights. The intensity of the social consensus surrounding tolerance and freedom – nomenclature we cannot

dispute here – raises the prospect familiar from various decayed regimes of the past that one might be persuaded to apologize for what one senses was never a wrong action in the first place, and this dilemma lies at the heart of this tragedy in which revelation on the part of one character, Ostend, is followed by a terrible act of self-maiming on the part of another, an appalling reaction to a visual shock shaped by both disgust and envy.

Revelation in this narrative – its moment and its reason – is the subject of seemingly endless speculation, rather as the bizarre selection of a circus horse in preference to a motorbike by the messenger in A HOUSE OF CORRECTION preoccupies almost to distraction the characters of that play – and the gnawing obsession here of an entire hospital of untended patients with the chanted slogan ‘The door fell open, why?’ acts as a permanent and tortuous rebuke to Ostend. Given she is neither an exhibitionist nor a sadist, her showing can only be what I have to describe as divine obligation, her glimpsing of an overwhelming manifestation of spirituality compelling her to make herself visible rather as God Himself, in His devastating solitude in the waters of the universe, required to be seen, and could not *not* be seen, and



Howard Barker,
A sacred place
oil on board



Howard Barker, *Untitled*
ink and watercolor on paper

made Man precisely to be His audience. To perpetuate the affinity with Genesis, the paradox of Revelation is its unpredictable consequence, for consequences there must be, and Ostend's moment of splendour is simultaneously the triggering of the ordeal of another, here as in GERTRUDE, her own child, who as witness, must destroy herself, but in failing to do so,

haunts her mother's life, a crippled rebuke to autonomy, awesomely vengeful and whilst forever prostrate, nimble on an electric bed.

Ostend senses the orchestration of events has only one purpose – to compel her to issue the apology she has refused for twenty years, and she is, for reasons of kindness and expediency, frequently on the brink of doing so. But Ostend, like most of the protagonists of the Theatre of Catastrophe, is scrupulous in her attitude to words, knowing the residual significance of sorry even in a culture which has made of sorry a disingenuousness. She properly assumes that to deny her participation in her Revelatory experience will annihilate her integrity. Yet this is not the ugliest aspect of the equation. Worse still is the realisation that only the denigration of this treasured experience can ever relieve the agony of rage that describes her child.

As I have suggested, love alone might compel submission, and Ostend is close to this genuflection to contemporary ethics when the third significant character of the play, a far-from-infantile resident of the Dying Ward called Childlike, a scholar, dwarf and one-eyed hermaphrodite, proposes a higher law than the law of Shame, namely, the Law of the Sacred and its ritualised manifestation, the *Sacrifice*. Childlike insists that the Sacrifice, however pitiful, cannot be compensated, and that the broken woman on the mobile bed must remain forever unconsoled.

As in GERTRUDE, WONDER AND WORSHIP IN THE DYING WARD describes the terrible phenomenon of crime without punishment, and more terrible still, punishment without crime, for both Hamlet and the broken

daughter of Ostend have sinned against nothing we recognize, nor are those responsible for their injury ever driven to crave forgiveness, seek reconciliation, nor even, by their own fall, raise a quivering finger to point in the direction of a juster world. Furthermore, somewhere in this sunless garden stands a character who, like the two identified, is equally unconsolated for a savage destiny but in a further repudiation of Humanist ethics, discovers the wherewithal to applaud the arbitrary character of it. The wrecked musical prodigy Wardrobe senses the appalling significance of *loss*, the beauty of the unfulfilled, not for himself, but for others. Is he mad?

To invoke further as-yet-unperformed plays here would be tedious, and it is sufficient to say that the ruined protagonist of HARROWING AND UPLIFTING INTERVIEWS attains this state of melancholy gratification without recourse to Nihilism. Childlike's gruesome status as the worst-deformed inmate of the Dying Ward similarly entitles him to repudiate the patronage of pity and the cult of rights in his triumphant exclamation – the outcome of fastidious study of causes and effects – 'Goodbye to Why...!'

The spectacle of cruel deformity, or shattered genius, scorning the rhetoric of the Culture of Restitution inevitably makes them collusive with – or more heroically, proper consorts for – the Catastrophic protagonist with her passionate self-determination. In the ethical terms of contemporary Humanism, this is a landscape without illumination, yet in a tragic form which spurns both punishment and reward, these gestures of unaccommodating autonomy, brilliant and not necessarily brief, give testimony to a human genius that declines to be coerced by the prejudices of Christ or Reason.