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**A Study of the Plays of Howard Barker, with Special Reference to  
the Artist Figures**

*by*

*Mamdouh Yousef Imran*

*A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Humanities,*

*University of Kent at Canterbury,*

*for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy*

*1989*

*Dedicated to*  
*Yousef Imran & Manira Muhammad, my parents,*  
*Naima Ghanem, my wife,*  
*Ruba, my daughter,*  
*and*  
*Howard Barker*

### Abstract

This thesis attempts to examine Howard Barker's plays and trace his evolution, both politically and as a dramatist, emphasising his oppositional and subversive orientation, as well as to demonstrate the shapes through which his oppositional stance is manifested.

The first part consists of two chapters, the first of which is concerned with Barker's reactions to works by fellow-authors, whether by way of ripostes or full-scale adaptations. The second chapter attends to Barker's oppositional treatment of history and myth.

The second part, which is composed of four chapters, concentrates on the aesthetic aspects of Barker's work, and points out that these, too, give clear signs of his oppositional tendency and innovativeness. The first chapter demonstrates the poetic elements of Barker's language, and the second shows that Barker is endowed with a visual imagination that enables him to construct memorable visual images on stage in illustration of dramatic conflict in his plays. The third chapter is addressed to Barker's style of characterization, and argues that Barker's tendency to define characters by their contradictions has recently given way to a more complex method, the simultaneous existence of contradictory qualities within the same psychic. The last chapter investigates the relationship Barker sets between verbal and visual language in his plays, and concludes that violence is an important term of this relationship.

The third part comprises three chapters, the first of which deals with Barker's characterization of 'non-subversive' artists, and concludes that this characterization negatively explains Barker's position at the time of writing the play concerned. The second chapter analyses Barker's portrayal of 'subversive' artists and finds out that explicit connection exists between Barker and his artists. The third chapter is a continuation of the second, but it mainly focuses upon Barker's recent propensity to use the plays themselves as vehicles to reiterate his aesthetic views.

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## Introduction

Until very recently, apart from the special issue of *Gambit* on Howard Barker, which in any case is itself a recent publication (1984), little has been published on Barker's work.<sup>1</sup> Given that Howard Barker is now into the third decade of his dramatic career, and given that he has a huge output to his credit (well over seventy works, including four volumes of poetry), and more recently, that a theatre company, the Wrestling School, was formed solely to perform his plays, a detailed assessment of his work is surely overdue. More importantly, such an assessment is, in my view, necessary because of the importance of what Barker's work says about the current political and artistic climate in Britain.

Reactions to Howard Barker's work are quite uncompromising. In the words of a theatre director, 'a well-known thing about Howard Barker' is that 'people either take violently against his work or are violently for it. Very few people can leave one of his plays feeling indifferent about it or unmoved in some way'.<sup>2</sup> A theatre critic openly admits to having been left 'more disoriented' by Howard Barker than 'any playwright I've encountered in my reviewing career... I've just read through my old reviews of his work... My inconsistency appalls me'.<sup>3</sup> Both assertions confirm that Barker's work is provocative, that it does something to people's perceptions, which to my thinking is in itself an asset. It so happens, however, that the majority of critics belong to that category of people who react violently against Barker's work. Nonetheless, some of them do concede that Howard Barker is 'underrated', being, as they further add, 'one of

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<sup>1</sup> A one-day conference, *Howard Barker and Political Theatre*, was held at Birkbeck College, University of London, 10 December 1988; David Ian Rabey, *Howard Barker: Politics and Desire* (London, 1989). The author has, unfortunately, not been able to consult Rabey's book, but Rabey has kindly made available to him a copy of the paper he gave at the Birkbeck conference, 'Howard Barker's Theatre of Education'.

<sup>2</sup> Bill Alexander, in *Refuse to Dance: The Theatre of Howard Barker*, a film by Ann Foreman screened on Channel Four on 9 November 1986. A copy of the script was kindly made available to the author by the Arts Council of Great Britain.

<sup>3</sup> Benedict Nightingale, in *New Statesman*, 11 October 1985; reprinted in *London Theatre Record*, V, no. 21 (9-22 October 1985), 1102 (p. 1012).

the most striking theatrical innovators'.<sup>4</sup> This concession gives rise to the question of whether there is any link between his underrating and his innovativeness. This thesis emphasises, both explicitly and implicitly, that a connection between the two exists, and further underlines that Barker's innovativeness, theatrical and otherwise, is propelled by his strong tendency to be oppositional both politically and as a dramatist.

The primary motive for some people's violent objections to Barker's work is, it seems, that it renders many of their rules and ideas about theatre and life redundant. Barker writes with demolishing rules, ideologies or conventions at the forefront of his mind. This thesis attempts to relate Barker's writing to existing conventions, both in theatre and in society at large, underlining the point that Barker's work is largely a reaction against those conventions. Some of the risks involved in Barker's own approach and propositions are also identified, particularly in the conclusion.

This thesis displays a relative disrespect towards conventional divisions of theory/practice, methodology/analysis. This is not to suggest that the thesis seeks the easy way out, nor, indeed, to pretend that it is free of theoretical propositions. Rather, it is to underline the inseparability of theory from critical analysis of the plays themselves, as well as to underscore the need for multiple 'modes of analysis' to engage with them. Thus, the theoretical preoccupations that inform my analysis are overtly and implicitly dispersed across various sections of this thesis.

The inseparability of theory from critical practice does, moreover, entail that Barker has his share in the theoretical concerns that animate my analysis. Indeed, my approach may, to a certain extent, look determined by Barker's own terminology and pronouncements about his work.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Colin Chambers and Mike Prior, *Playwrights' Progress: Patterns of Postwar British Drama* (Oxford, 1987), p. 86.

<sup>5</sup> Following completion of this thesis, I came across an article, in which the author levels such a charge at the writers of the articles in the special *Gambit* issue on Howard Barker: 'It is the case, in fact, that the vast bulk of existing commentary on Barker's work derives directly from Barker himself, either in the form of interviews... or through personal statements' (Robert Shaughnessy, 'Howard Barker, the Wrestling School, and the Cult of the Author', *New Theatre Quarterly*, V, no. 19 [August 1989], 264-271 (p. 269)). It is worth noting, however, that Shaughnessy restricts himself to discussion of what is called the Barker phenomenon rather than the playwright's work. Had Shaughnessy addressed himself to the latter task, he might well have tem-

Howard Barker is not a nihilist. His work always provides 'choices', 'possibilities' or 'alternatives' to the dominant and the real. Theorising is part of this process of choice. More importantly, it is a measure of Barker's achievement as a dramatist, a mark of his innovativeness, if he is able to affect the way his work is perceived and studied. As Richard Poirier argues, 'one characteristic of a very ambitious writer is that he becomes a theoretician of his work. In being so, he manages to set the terms for the criticism subsequently written about him'.<sup>6</sup> Barker is a good example of such an ambitious writer.

Nonetheless, in approaching both Barker's plays and his personal statements, I also draw upon views of theorists, including Theodor Adorno and Michael Foucault. In particular, I emphasise the parallel between the great importance Barker attaches to the human body and what these thinkers, amongst others, have written about the value of the body. Barker shares with them the view that the body is the battlefield of history, and that the recurrent outcome of that battle, that is, the essence of history, is pain. I engage with this view when dealing with Barker's treatment of history, his deconstruction of religious and literary myth, as well as the relationship he sets between sexuality and politics in his plays. Barker's treatment of these issues underlines the romantic or utopian nature of his work. This utopian nature seems to assert itself in two ways. I do not mean 'utopia' in the traditional sense- an ideal, rigid system- but one of the type Raymond Williams qualifies as 'heuristic':

It is not based on a new system as a form of critique of an existing system, or as a whole worked-through alternative to it. Its purpose, instead, is to form desire. It is an imaginative encouragement to feel and to relate differently, or to strengthen and confirm existing feelings and relationships which are not at home in the existing order and cannot be lived through it.<sup>7</sup>

Barker's definition of history in his plays as 'history of emotion, looking for a politics of emotion',<sup>8</sup> and his belief in the 'transforming' and 'regenerative' effect of 'sexual love' satisfy

pered his views and modified his conclusions.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Poirier, *Mailer* (London, 1972), p. 9. My attention was drawn to this point by David Rabey in his paper 'Howard Barker's Theatre of Education'.

<sup>7</sup> Raymond Williams, *Towards 2000* (London, 1983), p. 13.

<sup>8</sup> Howard Barker, *Ye Gotta Laugh*, an unpublished essay kindly made available to the author by Howard

Williams' positive description of utopia.<sup>9</sup> The other utopian feature of Barker's work presents itself in the negative, and can be accounted for in terms of Adorno's concept of 'negative dialectics', according to which every phenomenon recalls the image of its opposite. Thus, Barker's insistence on the exposure of pain culminates in an image of catastrophe. This image negatively alludes to its opposite, which is utopia.

Barker's movement towards an identification of the body as the site of history marks a radical shift in his intellectual stance. This shift necessitates a corresponding change in his perceptions regarding the function of art and the manner of artistic presentation. The purpose of art then becomes the exposure of pain, and the assertion of the individual's right publicly to display his or her experience of pain is the positive value of radical art. According to Barker, state ideologies and institutions, religious creeds and myths, all seek to hide pain or give it a symbolic value: therefore, if theatre does not uncover this crucial fact about history, it becomes guilty of a great historical injustice. Hence, Barker's dissatisfaction with comedy, musicals as well as with the ideological underpinning of critical realism. As Bigsby, drawing upon Adorno's philosophical and aesthetic views, contends, 'the more profoundly subversive text is... that which acknowledges the authoritarian power, the ideological force of language, the coercive strength of myth, and the social and metaphysical reassurance implicit in realism'.<sup>10</sup> Increasingly, Barker's work displays such subversive qualities. Indeed, one reason why Barker sometimes tends to write ripostes to works written by fellow-dramatists is that he detects social and metaphysical reassurance in their work. By contrast, his writing defies fixed structures, ideologies and logic: his rupturing of narrative structure and plots, his insistence on the complexity and ambiguity of experience, the instability of his characters and their irrational behaviour, as well as the poetic

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Barker.

<sup>9</sup> Howard Barker, in an interview with Tony Dunn in *Gambit International Theatre Review*, 11, no. 41 (1984), 33-44 (p. 36).

<sup>10</sup> C. W. E. Bigsby, 'The Politics of Anxiety: Contemporary Socialist Theatre in England', *Modern Drama*, XXIV, no. 4 (1981), 393-403 (p. 398).

nature of his language provide clear signs of the radical nature of his work. I expound Barker's views, aesthetic and otherwise, in the course of drawing a parallel between his characterization of the artist figure and the way he himself operates as a dramatist. In the course of my study of his language, images and characterization, I demonstrate the extent to which he puts his aesthetic pronouncements into practice.

However, Barker's formulation of such an aesthetic and political stance is part of a process of adjustment he had to make in order to cope with and remain oppositional in the changing political, social and artistic climate in present-day Britain. Like many dramatists of his generation, Barker started his dramatic career with an attack on the naturalistic style in drama. His weapons were mainly satire and the shock tactics of what is known as 'fringe' or 'alternative' theatre, although Barker himself never belonged to any fringe theatre group. Thus, what characterizes Barker's early-seventies plays, including *Edward, the Final Days*, *Skipper* and *Alpha Alpha*, is their satirical impulse and immediacy. In those plays Barker's victims are, like those of his colleagues, the supposed guardians of society's law and institutions: 'Politicians are presented as clowns, policemen as role-playing thugs, priests as crooked cartoon cut-outs'.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, it is clear that Barker's early plays are informed by his hard-line socialist beliefs at the time. He then declared himself to be 'waiting for a Marxist Labour Government'.<sup>12</sup> Thus, Barker's concentration of his attacks on right-wing politicians as well as on working-class criminals, who, in his words, 'aspire towards living the style of life of the ruling classes',<sup>13</sup> suggests the political optimism of the work as well as the underlying belief on Barker's part of the interventionist potential of theatre. In other words, his work then was his contribution towards the rapid coming to power of such a government. This expectation partly accounts for the political pessimism of what Barker calls his 'English-society plays', of which *Claw* is the first

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<sup>11</sup> Peter Ansorge, *Disrupting the Spectacle* (London, 1975), p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> Howard Barker, quoted by Nicholas de Jongh in 'Much of a Class', *The Guardian*, 5 March 1975.

<sup>13</sup> Howard Barker, quoted by Catherine Itzin in *Stages in the Revolution* (London, 1981), p. 252.

and *Downchild* is the last.<sup>14</sup> Barker wrote those plays between 1975 and 1979, a period that roughly coincided with the rule of Labour governments that did not live up to their radical promises. Thus, the images prevalent in those plays are reminiscent of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* and *1984*. Nevertheless, underlying Barker's pessimism then was his belief in the inevitability of progress along Marxist lines. It was the failure of the Labour Party to effect any historical change that made it the target of Barker's vehement criticism. Taken in relation to what has just been said about the relationship between history and the body, this belief in the inevitability of historical progress proves that Barker's journey of opposition does entail a renunciation of some previously-held principles, a point which is developed in my discussion of Barker's attitude towards ideology.

The thesis concentrates on Barker's plays and critical writings, including some of the unpublished ones. Naturally, some plays receive more attention than others. To claim that Barker's inspiration is oppositional rightly implies that all his work is subversive. Without in any way disclaiming the oppositional nature of the plays relatively neglected in this study (or, indeed, of Barker's poetry), this thesis is more concerned with the plays which have both a direct and an indirect bearing upon Barker's own concern with the artist-figure or with himself as a subversive artist.<sup>15</sup> Hence, the importance the thesis attaches to Barker's ripostes and adaptations as well as to his presentation of history and myth. Given the parallel the thesis draws between Barker's characterization of the artist-figure and the way he himself operates as a dramatist, the ripostes, adaptations and alternative historical and mythical perspectives he provides are important signs of his oppositional tendency.

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<sup>14</sup> *Passion in Six Days* (staged 1983) is a 'state-of-the-nation play' in that it savagely dramatizes the proceedings of a Labour Party conference. Nevertheless, with its emphasis on passion and sexuality, the play is symptomatic of Barker's latest writing.

<sup>15</sup> My use of the term 'subversive' artist draws upon Jean-Paul Sartre's definition of 'committed' writer as put forward in *What Is Literature?* translated by Bernard Frechtman (London, 1950).

The thesis seeks to trace Barker's evolution, both politically and as a playwright, emphasising his oppositional and subversive orientation, as well as to demonstrate the shapes through which his oppositional stance is manifested. The thesis opens with an analysis of plays which were written as ripostes to or adaptations of works by fellow-writers, and underlines the reasons which prompted him to write in such a way as well as the more subversive nature of his own versions compared to the original ones. The same method is applied in my analysis of his oppositional treatment of both history and myth. The thesis then proceeds to study the ramifications of Barker's oppositional tendency at the aesthetic level, focusing on his innovative use of language, his ability to create memorable images in illustration of dramatic conflict in his plays, the dialectic he sets between verbal and visual language, as well as on his style of characterization. In the process, Barker's innovativeness in all these areas will be construed as part of Barker's 'bid' for the status of art and of his consciousness of himself as a subversive artist. The last point then receives a special attention in the thesis, particularly in the analysis of Barker's plays in which artist-figures play major roles and aesthetic debate forms an essential part of the argument. In this regard, the thesis contends that a correlation exists between Barker's portrayal of the artist-figure and the evolution of his own position at both the political and artistic levels.

## Part One:

### Oppositional Versions

The plays to be discussed in this part are *No One Was Saved*, *My Sister and I*, *The Love of a Good Man*, *Victory*, *Pity in History*, *The Castle*, *Women Beware Women*, *The Last Supper*, *The Bite of the Night* and *The Europeans*. Being an oppositional playwright means that all Barker's plays are oppositional and subversive of the existing social, political and moral codes, as well as of hegemonic theatrical conventions. However, the plays just mentioned are even more oppositional and subversive in nature, because they are, in part, reactions to other authors reactions to certain issues, full scale adaptations of works by other writers, or, different explorations of history and existing literary and religious mythology.

The list above includes plays the significance of whose concern in art and the role of the artist in society will be investigated in the last part of this thesis. Other plays in the list do have artist figures, yet the role of such figures is neither discussed in the third part nor in the present one. My aim in this part is, instead, to analyse all the plays in the list as stark illustrations of Barker's oppositional tendency, in that they are his alternatives to works by fellow-authors as well as to dominant versions of history and myth. The first chapter in this part will address the plays that are ripostes to or large-scale adaptations of works by fellow-authors; and the second chapter will deal with the plays in which Barker provides oppositional interpretation of history and myths.

## Chapter One:

### Ripostes and Adaptations

This chapter deals with *No One Was Saved*, *My Sister and I*, *The Castle* and *Women Beware Women*, all of which are responses to or adaptations of other works of art. However, it is not the aim of this chapter to make a contrastive analysis between those works and their original counterparts, but rather to investigate the reasons which inspired Barker to write his versions, and his alternatives to the propositions of the original versions. The chapter further argues that Barker's oppositional stance is not just against what is posed in the original works, but also against what he sees as dominant in society at large. In this respect, the chapter also contends that those ripostes and adaptations are used as vehicles through which Barker's own views at the time are dramatized. Happily, those plays are written at different stages in Barker's dramatic career; therefore, they can be very important in assessing Barker's political and artistic development.

#### A. Politics and Caricature

*No One Was Saved* (staged 1971) is Barker's reaction to both the Beatles' *Eleanor Rigby* and Edward Bond's *Saved*. Both sources share a concern with the despairing conditions of working-class people, a concern which Barker also shares in his play, although he tries to be more 'realistic'. Barker's combination of the two sources turns out to be more nightmarish than both. The theme of loneliness, selfishness and injustice dealt with by the Beatles is accentuated, and for all its notoriety Bond's play is made to look unjustifiably optimistic. As Barker explains, '*No One Was Saved* is chiefly about human selfishness. The title, taken from the Beatles' hit song *Eleanor Rigby*, implies a pessimistic view in contrast to Edward Bond's optimism in *Saved*'.<sup>1</sup> Bond

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<sup>1</sup> Howard Barker, 'Notes on the Play', *No One Was Saved* (unpublished). The script was kindly made available to the author by Judy Daish Associates. Further reference to this play by page number in the text is

himself describes *Saved* as 'almost irresponsibly optimistic'.<sup>2</sup>

*No One Was Saved* tells of Eleanor's incessant desire for human contact, and of her search for an ideal- 'love'. In the process, she is exploited virtually by everybody whom she comes across. Her ailing mother wants her to be always beside her, to be, as Barker puts it, 'an audience for her suffering'. And it is when Eleanor has to rush back home to take care of the mother that her baby Scot, whom she entrusted to her uncaring and sexually liberal friend May, gets murdered in a park by Bond's gang of youths, whom Barker introduces into his play. Similarly, Father McKenzie makes of himself a real bore by also seeking to make her an audience to his political sermons as well as by trying to interfere with her personal and sexual affairs. The rest of the characters in the play use Eleanor to satisfy their sexual desire and material greed.

In fact, the larger bulk of *No One Was Saved* dramatizes Eleanor's story through scene upon scene of rape, attempted rape or wilful sexual encounters with a supposed friend called Ray, a policeman, an immigrant called Indian and with the hero of the play, the figure of John Lennon. The latter is the only one who captures Eleanor's imagination, and whom she desires and truly loves. Unfortunately for her, she discovers that even John is exploiting her. He uses her story as a raw material for a popular song. Therefore, when she hears the song on the radio, she is so disappointed and shattered that she commits suicide. The play ends with Eleanor's body being placed in a coffin in the church, only to be subjected to more humiliation and exploitation. The gang of youths who have killed her child re-appear to abuse her body sexually, and following that, Father McKenzie, who during her life, 'uses her to indulge his taste for the sordid... uses her funeral to deliver a sermon in praise of himself' as well as to advocate his political views.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, like the Beatles' song, Barker's play is about 'exploitation', but it is Barker's strong sense of 'cruel irony' about the song that inspired him to write *No One Was Saved*. The Beatles

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to the script.

<sup>2</sup> Edward Bond, *Bond Plays: One: Saved, Early Morning, The Pope's Wedding* (London, 1977), p. 309.

<sup>3</sup> Howard Barker, 'Notes on the Play'.

were 'self-consciously working class', yet they exploited the theme of loneliness of working-class people in order to score a very big commercial success. In this respect, *No One Was Saved* also contains the germ of what was to become a central issue in Barker's work- the relationship between the artist and his society or the relationship between experience and artistic creation. In fact, Barker's suspicion of the Beatles is coupled with his admission that he 'was groping blindly towards some description of the parasitic relationship between art and experience'.<sup>4</sup>

The extent of Barker's suspicion of Lennon is evident in the way Lennon is shown to be exploiting the naive and isolated, but also romantic Eleanor Rigby. Eleanor's love for John is generated and intensified by her feeling of loneliness and isolation: 'You're good for me. You take me out of myself. I could laugh when I'm with you', says Eleanor (p. 59). This connection between love and isolation is perhaps best exemplified following the murder of Eleanor's child: 'I've had no one to talk to. I've been all on my own. I was beginning to think... If it weren't for you— I would have done myself in, I would have done, I would have done something to myself' (p. 57). Eleanor is a romantic person by nature, and from the start John uses the language that sends her dreaming. The first time they meet Eleanor tells John: 'you talk a lot of nonsense': the response to this remark shows Lennon's own awareness of his limitations as well as the triviality of his artistic approach: 'What is madness, what is sanity, what's illusion, what's reality? Shakespeare said that. You can't hope to be original these days' (p. 33). However, for Eleanor, John is certainly original. She seems to be particularly impressed by Lennon's other expressions. What sticks in her mind most are phrases like 'it's love that makes the world go round... Love is everywhere... inside and outside... over and under... Love is the pendulum in the great clock of the universe... beauty is is the recognition of our perpetual nothingness in the greater nothingness of the forever' (p. 39).

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<sup>4</sup> Howard Barker, 'The Small Discovery of Energy', an interview with Simon Trussler and Malcolm Hay in *Theatre Quarterly*, 10, no. 40 (Autumn-Winter 1981), 3-14; reprinted in *New Theatre Voices of the Seventies*, edited by Simon Trussler (London, 1981), pp.184-196 (p. 186).

John is an opportunist as well as a hypocrite, and Eleanor never questions his love for her even though he barely says a word of condolence to her, following the murder of her baby. The only comment he makes in that respect is to say that the death is 'a disaster especially for him [the murdered child]' (p. 57). This remark looks indifferent, even callous in view of the protestations he makes earlier about his love for 'people as a whole... the human race' (p. 34). More to the point, although Lennon further says: 'we're all victims' (p. 57), he never bothers to explain why, and victimized by whom. Lennon is neither 'original', nor does he seem in favour of changing the situation he is criticising in his song about Eleanor. This is something she herself discovers when she hears the song on the radio. It is probably in his own interest to see a stable existing order, because he will have the opportunities provided by people like Eleanor, to compose more songs, and thereby to grow richer- a charge which seems to be implied in Barker's criticism of the Beatles.

Barker's portrayal of other characters' attitudes towards Eleanor underlies his aim for writing the play: 'You see *No One Was Saved* was political by implication and I wanted to write about class warfare'.<sup>5</sup> Presentation of the character of the policeman is particularly iconoclastic. In the first scene, an attempted rape of Eleanor by her supposed friend Ray is foiled by the unexpected arrival on the scene of a policeman. Naturally Eleanor takes courage from the presence of that policeman, whom she rightly believes is coming to rescue her. The policeman appears to be anxious to offer help. However, he, too, seems to harbour some evil intentions towards Eleanor. Most of such scenes are quite bizarre and grotesque in that they provoke simultaneous disgust and laughter. The policeman tries to persuade Eleanor to allow him to make love to her, but when she refuses he accuses her of 'criminal offence against him' personally, and on that basis he tries to arrest her. The arrest is nothing but a nasty act of rape that is also interrupted by a voice of a person responding to Eleanor's call for help. The scene ends with the

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<sup>5</sup> Howard Barker, quoted by Nicholas de Jongh in 'Much of Class'.

policeman running for cover:

ELEANOR (*about to run*). Please—

P. C. (*loudly*). Where do you think you're going— (*He grabs her arm*)

ELEANOR. What have I done—

P. C. (*foaming*). What have you done? What have you done? I'll tell you what you've done, you little whore! You've made a decent living married man believe he could do things he thought he wasn't capable of! That's what you've done! You've made a happy family man have his doubts! You've made an officer of the law give in to his criminal tendencies! (*He is pushing her to a tree.*) You evil little bitch!

(*He forces himself on her, but somehow ELEANOR tears free. She screams for help. The POLICEMAN is about to attack again when an answering voice comes off-stage. He hesitates, then runs away, ELEANOR stands, her face covered by her hands.*) (pp. 6-7)

Instead of trying to maintain the peace as he is supposed to do, the policeman is himself an active aggressor and perpetrator of violence and disorder.

*No One Was Saved* is more of a riposte to the Beatles' *Eleanor Rigby* than to Edward Bond's *Saved*. Nonetheless, the political implication in relation to this play can be better explained in terms of Bond's concept of 'rational theatre', according to which the scene of so much controversy in *Saved* should be interpreted- the stoning of the baby by the gang of working-class youths. Much as he dislikes the crime itself, Bond does not blame the direct perpetrators of the crime, but the system which is devoid of culture that would allow such youths to behave and think rationally. In his 'Note' on the play, Bond places the murder into wider context: 'Clearly the stoning to death of a baby in a London park is a typical English understatement. Compared to the 'strategic' bombing of German towns it is a negligible atrocity, compared to the cultural and emotional deprivation of most of our children its consequences are insignificant'.<sup>6</sup> Barker would certainly go along with this interpretation,<sup>7</sup> and it is precisely because he finds that Bond's ending of *Saved* is inconsistent with this assessment, that Barker

<sup>6</sup> Edward Bond, *Bond Plays: One*, pp. 310- 311.

<sup>7</sup> Barker makes a similar point at the beginning of *No End of Blame*, where an attempted rape of a model provokes a discussion by two soldier-artists on the morality of war, whereby an act of rape is viewed as petty compared to the deaths of millions of people in battles.

critically responds to Bond.

*Saved* ends with Len repairing a chair that has been broken during a row between Harry and Mary in a previous scene, thus striking an optimistic note to an otherwise altogether despairing play. Barker does not find 'the argument convincing':

The image of hope is dwarfed by having been given so much evidence against it. So I wasn't able or prepared to make a similar gesture in my play. The whole question of pessimism in my plays comes down to that, really- my inability to manufacture optimism out of situations that are amazingly dark.<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, rather than provide a dwarfed 'image of hope' at the end of *No One Was Saved*, Barker seeks to intensify the pessimistic picture dominating the play as a whole. In the final scene, Bond's youths, whom Barker introduces as a mark of his indebtedness to Bond, are once more re-introduced (the first time they appear, they murder Eleanor's baby in the park), this time in a church to abuse dead Eleanor. They open the coffin, and once they recognise that it contains the body of a 'gel', one after the other they dip their fingers into her body. They do not even bother to cover the body afterwards:

PETE. Leave it.  
 COLIN. Can't just leave it.  
 PETE. I ain't fucking lifting that up. (*He wanders off with BARRY.*) Wass in the box? Any money in the box? (*They go off stage. Sounds of offertory box being broken open.*) Tanner! One bleeding tanner!  
 COLIN. (*to MICK*) Help us put it back, will yer?  
 MICK. No, leave it. (*MICK wanders off too. COLIN tries to lift the lid, and eventually gets it roughly in place. He sits down on the coffin and lights a cigarette. The others are outside now. COLIN picks up one of the nails and tries to fix it back, without much success.*)  
 PETE. (*coming in*) Oi! Where you been?  
 COLIN. Having a fag.  
 PETE. Come on, we was waiting. (*He exits, COLIN hesitates, then throws the nail away and follows him out. Distinct sounds of the gang larking around, fading to silence.*) (pp. 86-7)

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<sup>8</sup> Howard Barker, in *New Theatre Voices of the Seventies*, p. 186. It should further be noted that the other thing which provoked Barker's critical reaction to *Saved* is what he sees as Bond's unjustifiable portrayal of the way working-class people speak- a point that will be dealt with in chapter three below.

Clearly, Colin is the 'nice guy' of the gang. In this respect, he is like Len in *Saved*. Therefore, Colin's attempt to replace the coffin is Barker's equivalent to mending of the chair. In other words, had Colin been allowed to fix the coffin, that would have been counted as Barker's optimistic note. But as always, Barker does not allow for such a reconciliatory moment in his work. The sound of the nail falling on the floor and that of the gang departing reinforce the general mood of the play.

The conditions which breed such crimes as the ones committed against the baby or his mother are brought to the attention of a church audience by Father McKenzie during Eleanor's funeral:

Eleanor Rigby is dead. (*He pauses for a dramatic effect*). But I'm not going to talk about Eleanor Rigby. Not as an individual. I'm going to talk about something else. Something called social justice, and that concerns all of us. Not just Eleanor, but all of you sitting here tonight. This isn't much of a town— it's got bad housing, bad schools, bad hospitals. Seventy per cent of the houses are deficient in some respect. Half of them haven't got bathrooms. Most of them have got outside lavatories. Not very nice, is it? Going outside in the rain when you want to relieve yourself? When you're old and ill, and you've got arthritis and chilblains— and then you get diarrhoea. Of course the W. C. gets in a mess, and of course there's no one to clean it out for you, and it smells and it's pretty nasty to look at. That's the sort of thing I'm referring to when I say 'social justice'. In a word— sordidness. Dirt. Degradation. Not colour sections, discotheques and Japanese lampshades. No, but filth and decay! Third rate lives! Ugliness and immortality! These are the conditions that breed miserable lives, and unless we change society— root and branch— there'll be a lot more like it. A lot more. A lot more promiscuity. A lot more illegitimacy, a lot more sexual deviation. And I'm here to see you know all about it. I'm here to jog your minds. I'm an irritation. You won't like me telling you these things. But you can't get rid of me. I'm a bother, you see, I make it my business. Just me— just me to keep you thinking— so you don't go to sleep. (*He grins smugly*) (p. 83).

Clearly, the passage is partly meant to make the Father appear rather silly, especially in the way he uses a supposedly solemn occasion for self-praise. However, the legitimacy of what he complains about can not be denied. Conditions of the sort he speaks about do breed social discontent and crimes.

Barker's concern with class exploitation and political warfare is similarly strong in *My Sister and I* (staged 1973). The play appears to be modelled on the plot of Shakespeare's

*Macbeth*, with certain allusions to *King Lear* as well. The play tells of an ambitious princess Marjorie's plot to replace her sister queen Liz. The princess resorts to plotting, because in normal circumstances she can never become a queen, as the current one has so many children. Therefore, the princess finds an excuse for herself not to go to watch a polo match with the rest of the Royal Family. Instead, she arranges with the driver of the Royal Family to have all the members of the family (especially those ahead of her in line for the throne) die in a crash. In anticipation of such news the princess is shown looking at the family album, airing the view that her sister is not the person for the job. Upon receiving the news of the accident and the death of the queen and her children, the princess immediately takes over. A working-class graduate, Mick, who is kept in the Palace by the princess, having refrained from killing the queen when he first broke into the Palace, also helps her, but to cover up her conspiracy.

Barker, who admits to his unfamiliarity with many of the great literary texts, does not discard the suggested connection between *My Sister and I* and *Macbeth*, but makes it clear that, if that is the case, then it has not been 'consciously' done.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, there is in fact a direct allusion in *My Sister and I* to *Macbeth*. While working out her plot, princess Marjorie addresses her husband Armstrong by the name of Macbeth, thereby suggesting the role she means him to play. Significantly, she makes the allusion almost simultaneously with her expression of her dissatisfaction with the place she occupies in line for the throne:

MARJORIE. Bugger the heredity principle. I'm five places away this year. Trust that dull bitch to have compulsive ovaries. She's nothing but a reproductive life. (*She sits on the edge of the couch.*) 25 years ago I was the next in line to it. Seems ridiculous. Not that I had these passing fancies, then... I was relieved to be the younger daughter then. But contrary to popular belief sex is not a substitute for power. (*Enter ARMSTRONG in a bath-robe.*) Oh, Macbeth!

ARMSTRONG. I wish you wouldn't leave your lovers around the house. I was chased out of the bathroom by a horde of them.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Howard Barker, in an interview with Mamdouh Imran, 12 April 1988.

<sup>10</sup> Howard Barker, *My Sister and I* (unpublished), p. 11. The script was kindly made available to the author by Judy Daish Associates. Further reference to the play by page number in the text is to the script.

Given Armstrong's own allusion to his sexual weakness, and given the princess's own distrust of his power and contempt for his lack of ambition (at one point she asks him to 'live up to his name'), the princess's address to him as Macbeth is ironical. Nevertheless, the short conversation as well as this ironical allusion suggest that Barker is patterning his play after the plot of *Macbeth* in order to present a satirical picture of the Royal Family.

Another thing that might suggest Barker's indebtedness to *Macbeth* is the appearance of the dead queen's ghost. Following her murder, the ghost of the dead queen appears to the new one:

- MICK.           *(Turning, seeing the ghostly figure of Liz. She is in a white shroud, wears white make-up with a small red scar on her forehead.)* Oh, no!
- MARJORIE.       He told me you were dead! The silly fool!
- LIZ.               I am. And all my children. Armstrong and I were thrown onto the road, he lived, I died. The others were all burned. *(Pause)*
- MARJORIE.       How dreadful... You didn't linger... did you, Liz?
- LIZ.               The driver suffered, we scarcely knew.
- MARJORIE.       He must have been dead drunk... I suppose...
- LIZ.               I forgive you, for my people's sake. I was a dull and plodding creature, guaranteed to make all the right sounds. I always envied you, and wished our positions were reversed. I know you hated me, but for my sake, rule well. Be sensible. Drop all your scandalous liaisons, love your husband, be a good mother—
- MARJORIE.       Bollocks!
- LIZ.               I forgive you, Margorie.
- MARGORIE.       Bollocks!
- LIZ.               I forgive you... *(She drifts out.)*
- MARJORIE.       How dare you! I refuse to be forgiven, you superior bitch! How dare people give me advice. (p. 30)

However, unlike Macbeth or Lady Macbeth for that matter, Marjorie neither hallucinates nor is she scared of revenge. In fact, she comes up with an 'ingenious idea', whereby the news of the queen's death is not released. Marjorie orders that a 'taxidermist' be found to deal with the body so that the public are led to believe that the queen is still alive. Shortly, after the 'taxidermist' has done the job, she orders her husband not to think of the queen 'in the past'. And the stage direction tells of Marjorie *'taking LIZ' wrist in one hand, she twists it from the wrist, in a typical*

royal wave. With the other hand, she turns the head from side to side. The effect is of a dummy or puppet. Sound of horses' hooves, carriage wheels and crowd cheers to accompany this. It stops abruptly. Marjorie lets the body fall backwards and gets up' (p. 34). The final twist of the play does, however, pick up yet another important point in *Macbeth*- the heavy burden and restrictions of power. Against the background of stuffing Liz' body by Mick, Marjorie laments the fact that Armstrong does not fancy 'making love to her', but more importantly, Marjorie adds: 'It's not as though I'm happy... I'm just as miserable as you' (p. 35).

Mick, who plays the taxidermist, is a militant working-class graduate who originally broke into the Royal Palace with the intention of assassinating the queen. However, he relents at the crucial moment, feeling that it is abominable to kill another human being. The point of this failed attempt is, like that of Kevin against Sir Harry in *Skipper*, to juxtapose the attitude of a working-class person with that of a higher-class personality. While Mick finds himself incapable of killing his class enemy, Marjorie finds it easy to dispose callously of her relatives. But the point of the play as a whole is to draw a demystifying, but caricatural picture of the Royal Family, the relationship between its members, and the language they can use. The picture is clearly an irreverent and iconoclastic one, suggesting Barker's political attitude at the time. Nevertheless, although the queen is referred to as a dummy (even in the body of the text), it is also said in the play that the monarch has some considerable political influence, mainly through control of secret police.

The vision presented in these two plays of society and the Royal Family anticipates that presented in Barker's later plays. With its 'pessimistic' picture, *No One Was Saved* is a precursor of the dystopian and nightmarish vision of *That Good between Us*. Similarly, presentation of members of the Royal Family in *My Sister and I* anticipates the figure of the Prince of Wales in *The Love of a Good Man*. However, the character of the Prince is 'more realistically' drawn than the princess or her sister in *My Sister and I*. In the latter play, Barker's satirical impulse is clearly

iconoclastic. Therefore, characters emerge as comic caricatures. But in *The Love of a Good Man* the character of the Prince is less caricatural. The gap between appearance and reality is coolly exploited. On the other hand, sexual relationships in those plays are similar to those presented in Barker's early plays: they are governed and conditioned by social conditions of the characters. The horrific experiences encountered by Eleanor are manifestations of the dehumanizing conditions both she and her attackers are subjected to. In Marjorie's case, her sexual conduct is also partly meant, as she herself implies in the quotation above, to demonstrate the connection between sexual and power relationships. Subsequent change in Barker's portrayal of sexual relationship is specially evident in the plays discussed below.

## B. Instinct and Logic

*The Castle* (staged 1985) is one of Barker's most original works; it is also amongst the first of his plays to be hailed as a great critical and theatrical success. Together with the last play to be discussed in this chapter, *Women Beware Women*, it best embodies the shift in Barker's interest from politics (as exemplified in the plays just studied) to sexuality and its redemptive effects. Had not Barker himself revealed that *The Castle* 'was very much my reaction to Greenham, but also a reaction to other playwrights' reactions', none but a speculative critic would have thought of relating the play to other ones, let alone judging it as a riposte to the plays concerned:

I was very angered and wearied by the way in which Greenham was wheeled on at the end of nearly every political play last year or the year before. It happens at the end of Edgar's *Maydays*. I don't know what he thinks he is saying there. And it happens at the end of Brenton's *The Genius*: it's just referred to as if it's the solution... What Brenton does at the end is to capitulate to his own feminism, in the way we are all supposed to be feminists. I don't claim to be one, but there was this instinct, a year or two ago, to say that Greenham was the solution, that women have the powers that men don't, and so on. And I thought that it placated the ground in a feeble way just to invoke Greenham without attempting to make it a major theme.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Howard Barker, in an interview with Finlay Donesky in *New Theatre Quarterly*, II, no. 8 (November 1986), 336-344 (p. 338).

Thus, like *No One Was Saved*, *The Castle* was partly inspired by what Barker saw as an unjustifiable conclusion or a deficient treatment of an important issue.

*The Genius* deals with the reaction of a modern-day American Galileo, who withholds his new atomic discovery and prefers exile to handing it over to the Pentagon. He finds refuge in a university in the English Midlands. There he excels not just in running a sophisticated computing program, but also in taking cocaine and making love to his friend's wife. In other words, escapism or sexual indulgence is his response to his own invention. It is, however, during one of his sexual encounters that his interest in his atomic discovery is re-awakened. He sees the dangerous equations he has discovered written on the patch of snow, where he is making love. The equations are printed by a first-year female student, who has on her own stumbled on the same scientific discoveries. Courtesy of the university vice chancellor and Leo's friend Graham Hay, the new discoveries are passed to the British military establishment. In response and in order to achieve a counterbalance the girl, who is fiercely anti-nuclear, leaves the campus, manages to evade the scores of secret police who search for her to get her to sign documents of compliance with the Official Secret Act, and succeeds in passing on the knowledge she has learned to the Russians through the letter-box of the Soviet Embassy. Meanwhile, Leo, whose secrets are now in the hands of those from whom he sought to withhold them, seems to prefer to engage himself in active opposition to deployment of the weapons the secrets have led to. He joins Gilly and other anti-nuclear women groups. The play ends with Leo and Gilly embracing outside the American base at Greenham Common, and with the police arresting the pair, together with the rest of the women protesters:

- LEO. This is what I done recently! *(He takes a brown envelope from beneath his coat. In the distance, the sound of planes approaching.)*
- GILLY. I got something too, here! *(She zips open the front of her coat. A binder. She holds it out.)* New binder! The planes with the missiles will be Galaxy transporters. We're going through the wire, onto the runway. Swop? *(They swop envelope and binder. The noise of planes and wind rising. They laugh. They embrace. ANDREA and VIRGINIA turn and run)*

*at the wire, VIRGINIA making a hold for ANDREA's foot. She climbs up the wire. The POLICEMEN run at them. They freeze, ANDREA's fingers in the wire, the POLICEMEN crowded in, LEO and GILLY embracing. The lights go down. The noise ceases. There are a few notes further from the Bach Theme.*<sup>12</sup>

In *Maydays*, David Edgar arrives with his characters to the same spot through a different route. *Maydays* is an epic, but largely journalistic dramatization of the history of the left in Europe and America. It is a history that is marked by failure, defection and dissidence. The bulk of the play charts and emphasises the similarity in terms of political alliance between Martin Glass, son of an English vicar, and Pavel Lermontov, a Russian army officer. The former makes a circular political journey from his father's vicarage to Trotskyite back to Greenham Common, where as the new owner of his father's house and as a member of an ultra-right-wing organization he is more than willing to evict the women protesters near the base. On the other hand, Lermontov changes from a disciplined but ruthless army officer during the Russian invasion of Hungary to a Soviet dissident, demonstrating in the streets of Moscow, to an exile hosted by an extreme right-wing group in England, but not without causing them some embarrassment during a press conference by speaking about things they dislike to hear. The play ends with an encounter between Glass and his former lover Amanda, an encounter during which she tries to dissuade him from calling the police to evict the protesters. In fact, shortly afterwards loud speakers are heard and lights flash signalling the arrival of the police to clear the protesters. In the final moments of the play, Edgar introduces an unexpected twist. No sooner do the lights of the police cars vanish than other headlamps appear to show two Soviet dissidents cycling in Moscow:

AMANDA.	So. Are you going to call the police?
MARTIN.	Tomorrow. Are you going to stay?
AMANDA.	Tonight. <i>(Suddenly, a LOUDSPEAKER blares, as the lights quickly fade.)</i>

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<sup>12</sup> Howard Brenton, *The Genius*, The Royal Court Writers Series, (London, 1983), p. 40.

LOUDSPEAKER. Scorcher. We have Scorcher. I repeat, we have a Scorcher. (*Sirens begin to wail. Dogs bark. Beyond the wire, searchlights and running men. Huge doors open, revealing headlamps. Engines rev.*) Cresta Run. We are go for Cresta Run. (*The headlamps— of trucks and motorcycles— career downstage, up to the wire. The lights beam through the wire, dazzling the audience. The lights flash. Engines reviving wildly.*) Kiss. We are kiss. Repeat, all units. We are kiss. (*The sirens fade. The headlamps die, as the 'vehicles' reverse away. Silence. But just before it's total, two cycle headlamps, illuminating PUGACHEV and KOROLENKO on their bicycles.*

KOROLENKO. Well, then?

PUGACHEV. How long?

KOROLENKO. How long?

PUGACHEV. Do you think you'll last? A week, a month, a year?

KOROLENKO. Maybe. Who knows? 'May Days'.<sup>13</sup>

Throughout the play 'May Days' stand for failure. Thus, the final word of *May Days* undercuts the very solution the play offers to the problems it dramatizes.

The implication of ending the play with a glimpse of both the women at a peace camp near an American base and dissident activists in Moscow is that Edgar sees in the struggles of these groups the hope for change in both the West and East. The problem is that, as Edgar himself is aware, dissidents of the East are 'appropriated' by right-wing groups in the West, and the peace movement has nearly lost the support and strength it first enjoyed.<sup>14</sup> The same could be said of Howard Brenton's ending, although in a sense the ending of *The Genius* is more logical than *May Days*. The less ambitious epic sweep as well as the more defined concern of the former makes such an ending more likely, although like Edgar, Brenton is possibly implying the futility of the peace camp activity. Nevertheless, the fact that Brenton makes the scientist join the girl in her protest suggests that Brenton is also implying that the activity is not just worthwhile but one in which men as well should take part.

Howard Barker, as quoted above, is not against Edgar's and Brenton's conclusions *per se*:

<sup>13</sup> David Edgar, *Maydays*, a Methuen New Theatrescrip (London, 1983), pp. 69-70.

<sup>14</sup> See Tony Dunn, 'Writers of the Seventies', *Plays and Players*, (June 1984), 35-6 (p. 35).

in particular, he is not against the importance both writers give to women's peace protest, only that the protest is not dealt with in both *The Genius* and *May Days* with the attention it deserves. Moreover, although Barker is under no illusion that Greenham Common 'has been ignored, and is probably destroyed now', he firmly believes that it is a phenomenon of extreme value, one that should be treated with the respect it duly deserves. Thus, Barker makes of Greenham Common the central issue in *The Castle*.

If Barker's view in *The Castle* is to be briefly summarized, it can be best expressed by what the nuclear disarmament campaigner, Lord Isted, in Barker's preceding play *Passion in Six Days* (staged 1983), calls 'disarmament by magic':

The arguments have all become redundant. The arguments and the counter-arguments. Now the life force has begun to assert itself, the dark, wet thing that wriggles in the puddle and the blood. It will bear down the chorus of the manufacturers and wash away the biscuit brains of strategists. Moisture, you see. Women and moisture. Magic.<sup>15</sup>

For both Isted and his creator, 'magic' is the solution because every argument has its opposite. The existence of such an opposite makes it difficult to arrive at meaningful conclusions. Convictions are not necessarily the outcome of logical argumentation. Instead, 'magic', which stands for 'instinct', can lead to meaningful decisions and convictions: hence the great value of the Greenham Common phenomenon.

Unlike, *The Genius* and *May Days*, *The Castle* does not make any explicit reference to Greenham Common or nuclear weapons. In fact, the play is set somewhere in England during the Crusades. *The Castle* is a 'historical' play that is 'free from history'. Barker's preoccupation is, in other words, with the present. The castle that is built stands for the nuclear weapons, and the people who fight against it are the women-residents of the surrounding community. Things seem to go pretty badly back home for the Crusaders. While the men are fighting in the Holy Land,

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<sup>15</sup> Howard Barker, *Passion in Six Days & Downchild* (London, 1985), p. 20. Further reference to both plays by page number in the text is to this edition.

their wives do not perform their 'duty' of cultivating the land, mowing the lawn or coppicing the wood. In the absence of their men, the women seem to have established a 'feminist utopia', headed by Ann the wife of the leader of the Crusaders, Stucley. Everything seems or is reported to have been peace, tranquillity, equal distribution of wealth, and freedom. A lively account of this 'utopia' is told by Skinner in that passage whose poetic merits are to be analysed in chapter three below. In the word of priest Nailer, who, together with the Lord's servant Hush, is the only man to live in that community: 'No lord's land, we said, and no common land, we said, but every man who lives shall go as he pleases, and we threw the fences down and made a bad word of fence, we called fence blasphemy, the only word we deemed so, all the rest we freed, the words for women's and men's parts we liberated'.<sup>16</sup> Naturally, Stucley is upset by this kind of system. It is also natural that he tries to destroy the system. In fact, he seems already prepared for such an eventuality. For he has brought with him a man qualified to help subject the community.

Thus, while Brenton's genius seeks to hide his discovery from the authorities, Barker's scientist is already a captive whose scientific discovery is, therefore, ready for deployment. The play dramatizes resistance of women to the deployment of weapons represented by the castle. Krak, an Arab mathematician brought by the Crusaders from the Holy Land, seems to know what to do in order to subject the environment and its people, the 'unruly women'. He assures his outraged master:

The only requirement is the restoration of a little order, the rudiments of organization established, and so on. The garden is a little overgrown, and minds gone wild through lack of discipline. Chaos is only apparent in my experience, like gravel shaken in water abhors the turbulence, and soon asserts itself in perfect order. As for the absence of hospitality, that does not offend me either, but I should like a desk at some stage.  
(p. 4)

In the second scene Krak is shown sitting at the desk, drawing the map of a castle. Within seconds the stage is filled with ladders and building instruments.

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<sup>16</sup> Howard Barker, *The Castle & Scenes from an Execution* (London, 1985), p. 13. Further reference to both plays by page number in the text is to this edition.

The women's resistance to construction of the castle manifests itself through a variety of ways, all of which stress the importance of love and creativity. Skinner who leads the resistance appears 'draped in flowers' beside the building site, and addresses Krak:

Weren't you loved? Some bit of you not nourished? Why are all your things hard things, compasses, nibs and protractors, the little armoury of your drawing board, have you looked at a flower, go on, take one, the superior geometry of the— (*He ignores her*) **WHY DON'T YOU LOOK AT A FLOWER!** (p. 15)

Clearly, Skinner emphasises the opposition among nature and science, creativity and hard tools, as well as love and power. Skinner's truncated comment is, however, the most significant. It strongly recalls Isted's comment. More importantly, it reiterates one of the most important values of 'the feminist utopia', to which I have just referred: '[We] **FOUND CUNT BEAUTIFUL** that we had hidden and suffered shame for, its lovely shapelessness, its colour all miraculous, what they had made dirty or worshipped out of ignorance' (p. 6). The central contrast is thus between what Skinner's kind of 'geometry' is and stands for and what Krak's geometry is and symbolizes. Not only is this contrast further emphasised at the end of the play, but it also confirms the superiority of Skinner's geometry over Krak's.

Skinner is probably Barker's example of a 'radical feminist' whose view is that 'oppression of women' originates in the antagonism between the sexes. She seems to believe strongly that "men" (i.e. biological and social maleness) are seen as the primary enemy, and everything that is "bad" in the world (i.e. war, aggression) is seen as "male", and everything "good", (caring, nurturing) is seen as "female".<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Skinner, who tries hard but in vain to prevent any relationship between her women-colleagues and the returning men, argues:

Where there are builders, there are whores, and where there are whores, there are criminals, and after the criminals come the police, the great heap heaving, and what was peace and simple is dirt and struggle, and where there was a field to stand up straight in there is loud and frantic city. (p. 18)

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<sup>17</sup> Michelene Wandor, *Carry On, Understudies: Theatre and Sexual Politics*, (London, 1986), p. 132. It is worth noting, however, that Barker does not claim to be a feminist, although he admits he might have an 'innate sympathy with oppression'.

In a word, Skinner sees that peace, stability and love can only exist in a place where no men live. The world can be secure only with women. This is why she has developed a passionate lesbian relationship with Ann.

Desire or sexuality is Skinner's major strength. Skinner places her love affair squarely within the opposition front against building the castle. She forcefully puts this point to her increasingly cold and disaffected friend: 'I will tell you why I love you, the more they bore into the hill the more we must talk love, the bond, fasten it tighter' (p. 19)! But while Ann agrees with Skinner about the danger of the castle, she differs from her on the tactic of resisting it. She accuses Skinner of being obsessive and excessive in expressing her anger. Skinner's retort further emphasises the danger of castle:

I am obsessive, why aren't you? *(Pause)* Every stone they raise is aimed at us. And things we have not dreamed of yet will come from it. Poems, love and gardening will be— and where you turn your eyes will be— and even the little middle of your heart which you think is your safe and actual self will be— transformed by it. I don't know how but even the way you plait your hair will be determined by it, and what we crop and even the colour of the babies, I do think it's odd, so odd, that when you resist you are obsessive but when you succumb you are not **WHOSE OBSESSION IS THIS THING** or do you mean my love, they are the same thing actually. (p. 19)

However, once Skinner recognises that the language of love leads nowhere, she resorts to violence.

Following the completion of the castle, Skinner seduces the builder Holiday only to murder him. This act may look callous, nevertheless, it is an insignificant act of murder compared to the horror that is caused by the construction of the castle. This is perhaps the reason why revelation of the death of Holiday comes hard on the heels of the damage and destruction caused by the armoured figures at the end of Act One. The appearance of armoured figures is meant to suggest the potential for a nuclear catastrophe, especially in current climate of arms race.

Suggestion of the castle being partly symbolical of the arms race is foregrounded from the planning stage by Krak himself. Much to the annoyance of his master, Krak brings the danger of the castle to his master's attention minutes before actual construction work starts:

STUCLEY. Go on!

KRAK. It resembles a defence but is really an attack.

STUCLEY. Yes—

KRAK. It cannot be destroyed—

STUCLEY. Mmm—

KRAK. Therefore it is a threat—

STUCLEY. Mmm—

KRAK. It will make enemies where there are none—

STUCLEY. You're losing me—

KRAK. It makes war necessary— (*STUCLEY looks at him*) It is the best thing I have ever done. (p. 14)

The last comment is a condemnation of Krak from his own mouth. Nevertheless, this self-criticism should not blind anybody to the fact that he has not forewarned his employer of the risks involved. But still the question arises why does not Krak try to do what Brenton's Leo does in *The Genius*?

Many factors may account for Krak's conduct. He is already a captive; therefore, he is not in a position to oppose. More importantly, the conduct is inseparable from the aim set by Barker to be achieved in the play- 'to approach the issue of mayhem in science by showing the alienation of the spirit of inquiry from the needs of community' and the unparalleled wastefulness of human resources 'into mechanics of destruction'.<sup>18</sup> These two factors combined give the most likely reason for Krak's attitude. For Barker, the allegorical or metaphorical aspect is paramount. Unlike Brenton, for example, Barker sees no point in the scientist's attempt to keep his discovery shrouded in secrecy, for such a secret no longer exists. Given the seriousness arising from the spread of the 'mechanics of destruction', the important things are to limit it from spreading further and better still eliminate it.

Spreading of the weapons, wastefulness of human resources as well as the increasing authoritarianism of those who possess the weapons are shown in *The Castle* to be going hand in hand. No sooner is the building accomplished than demands for further annexes are made. Levies

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<sup>18</sup> Howard Barker, in *Gambit*, p.33.

are imposed on the population by Stucley's regime with the full co-operation of the clergy of the 'new religion' he has founded. Stucley's harsh demands increase with his realization that another castle is being built on the other side of the hill. Therefore, Krak always finds himself required to draw more plans for more walls to cope with the threat posed by this invisible enemy. In the first moments of Act Two, Scene One, Krak underlines this point while standing in a 'shaft of light' in an 'unfinished hall':

He wants another wall, in case the first three walls are breached. The unknown enemy, the enemy who does not exist yet but who cannot fail to materialize, will batter down the first wall and leaving a carpet of twitching dead advance on the second wall, and scaling it, will see in front of them the third wall, buttressed, ditched and palisaded, this wall I have told him will break their spirit but he aches for a fourth wall, a fourth wall against which the enemy who does not exist yet but who cannot fail to materialize will be crucified. As for towers, despite their inordinate height he orders me increase them by another fifteen feet. A fifth wall I predict will be necessary, and a sixth essential, to protect the fifth, necessitating the erection of twelve flanking towers. The castle is by definition, not definitive... (p. 29)

Krak's account is a metaphorical analysis of arms race and endless modernization of atomic weapons. But his predictions and his master's worst fears materialize in the next scene, the trial scene. An explosion is then heard on the other side of the hill, indicating the real threat posed by the more fortified castle on the other side of the hill. Naturally, Stucley panics, and orders Krak to find an adequate response to this emergency. But by then Krak seems to undergo a change. He finds the courage to refuse his master's order.

Seconds after the explosion that is heard during the trial scene, Ann angrily says to Krak: 'It is you that needs to be born. I will be your midwife. Through the darkness, down the black canal' (p. 35). The reason for Ann saying this at this stage is in part due to her feeling of disappointment in Krak. Ann has, it seems, successfully forged a sexual relationship with Krak in the hope of winning him to the women's side, or, at least, to stop working for Stucley and inventing more means of destruction. However, partly because of his function- the representative of intellect, logic and argument- and partly because of his culture, Krak fails to respond with the speed that Ann expects him to respond. Her frustration with Krak and above all her fear of Krak

agreeing to build another castle lead her, following a brief encounter with Skinner, to engage in a spectacular act of a catastrophic nature. Her suicide, her death is, however, balanced by Krak's regeneration or rebirth. He soon expresses his fascination with 'cunt's geometry', and he admits the defeat of argument. Moreover, in the next scene Krak refuses to draw other plans for another castle and preoccupies himself with the new kind of geometry. But above all, his 'rebirth' takes place following his knowledge of Ann's death. As with any rebirth Krak's involves pain. This painful experience produces in him new knowledge, that of love and desire. This knowledge manifests itself at the end of the play through his acquisition of new vocabulary, the language of sexual love. To confirm the change in him, Krak reveals that he wants to draw plans for destruction of the castle.

Thus, despite its overhastiness, Ann's act contributes to the most effective method to prevent inventing more means of destruction- regenerating the scientist. The act may be implausible in that no woman can be expected to do such an act. But what really matters is its allegorical implication. The act is another example of what will happen to the human race if nuclear weapons were allowed to remain in place. Above all, through this act, together with Ann's effort, Barker is affirming women's right over death, a point that is put forcefully in the following conversation in the second scene:

NAILER            *(rising to his feet)*. They must be locked away. All women who are pregnant. Chained at wrist and ankle, like cows in the stall. They bear our future in their innards and they kill it. **BY WHAT RIGHT!** All women big about the middle, lock up! *(He hurries out. CANT straightens the limbs of the fallen)*

BATTER.           Not theirs, birth. Not theirs, is it?

CANT.             Dunno.

BATTER.           Theirs only, I mean. What's your opinion?

CANT.             No opinion.

BATTER.           Go on, I won't tell.

CANT.             No opinion! *(She carries on)* Death is not yours, either.

BATTER.           Wha'?

CANT. Not yours only, is it? Not an opinion.  
 BATTER. Come again...  
 CANT. We birth 'em, and you kill 'em. Can't be right we deliver for your slaughter. Cow mothers. Not an opinion. (p. 40)

In this short dialogue, Barker is making a comment of significant historical value. Barker seems to be saying that wars and human tragedies are rooted in the rulers right over bodies, especially the right for life and death. Through Ann's act, and through other apocalyptic images in the play, Barker is making the point that the future of the human race hangs in the balance: 'If genocide is indeed the dream of modern powers, this is not because of a recent return of the ancient right to kill; it is because power is situated and exercised at the level of life, the species, the race, and the large-scale phenomena of population'.<sup>19</sup> More importantly, Barker is suggesting that tragedies of the past and potential future ones originate with men and their hunger for power as well as their fear of losing it. In other words, he is endorsing Cant's view that the right over life and death should be entrusted to women. If that were to happen, the future of the human race would be safer and more secure. Hence the connection Barker seeks to establish between the women protesters in the play and the women at Greenham Common.

*The Castle* ends with Skinner standing on the remains of the newly demolished building, addressing the audience and reminding them that 'there was no government'. But the audience is not necessarily invited to opt for her kind of solution. Instead, the play is a celebration of Barker's concept of the 'regenerative' effect of 'sexual love'. However, in practical terms, one is bound to conclude that it is difficult to imagine a resolution to the arms race or winning a battle simply by the infusion of sexual love into the lives of scientists. But Barker does not seem to be bothered by the end of the battle. In that he is rather like his heroine, Skinner, who says to Ann at the start of their struggle against building the castle:

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<sup>19</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, translated by Robert Hurley (Harmondsworth, 1984), p. 137.

I do not know how we will win! It is not failing not to know the end at the beginning.  
Our power comes of our love. Love is also a weapon. (pp. 19-20)

### C. Sex and Politics

Similarly, in *Women Beware Women*, (staged 1986) love or sexual desire is shown to be destructive of power, although Barker himself admits that this destructiveness has been achieved in the most extreme fashion. Unlike many of the plays discussed in this chapter, *Women Beware Women* was not simply inspired by Barker's 'own' strong feeling about Thomas Middleton's play by the same name. Barker was made interested in Middleton's *Women Beware Women* by director Max Stafford-Clark, whose view is that while the play has contemporary resonance in terms of its 'perceptions about money and sex and also by the grace and directness of the language', it is trammled by 'the tragic conventions of the period'. 'The last act seemed unperformable and rather silly'; what is needed is a 'contemporary resolution of the situation and characters Middleton had set up'.<sup>20</sup> With this in mind, Barker set out on his imaginative journey of 'collaboration' with Middleton.

Barker's version comprises two symmetrical parts. The first is a summarized version of the first four acts in Middleton's play. The second part is solely Barker's; it is his 'contemporary resolution' to what Middleton offers in the four acts. Barker's resolution is no less than an all-out assault on Middleton's resolution, his fifth act and all that it represents of moral and theatrical conventions. What Barker says and does in his part accord totally with his 'artistic theory' as will be explained in the last part of this thesis. Moreover, some of the moral arguments he poses in this play anticipate the moral precepts he dwells upon in his later plays notably *The Last Supper*, *The Bite of the Night* and *The Europeans*, whose moral propositions will be the subject of the next chapter. In other words, although the invitation to re-write the play and the suggestion of the

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<sup>20</sup> Max Stafford-Clark, in the programme to The Royal Court's production of Barker's version of *Women Beware Women*.

changes required were basically Stafford-Clark's, everything that was done in the new version bears Barker's finger-prints.

For Barker (and for that matter for Stafford Clark), Middleton's theatrical conventions are inseparable from his moral conventions or those of his time. Middleton's *Women Beware Women* ends with the conventional multiple murder, or, with divine justice being done to moral transgressors. With the bodies of such transgressors piled before him on the stage, Middleton's Cardinal pronounces the final verdict on the Duke, his 'wife' and associates:

Sin, what thou art, these ruins show too piteously!  
Two kings on one throne cannot sit together  
But one must needs down, for his title's wrong:  
So where lust reigns, that prince cannot reign long.<sup>21</sup>

Clearly, the Cardinal's verdict is rooted in his religious morality. For him, man's misdemeanour is related to the original sin. Thus, through the Cardinal, Middleton is affirming his adherence to the concept of poetic justice and restoration of social order. Barker describes Middleton's 'morality' as false, and dismisses the cardinal as 'a spokesman for a lie': 'So I remade the cardinal. When morality is only convention, you get bad art'.<sup>22</sup> Re-making the Cardinal involves an evolution of 'new morality' and 'a new form of art' to embody it. Thus, instead of a restoration of order, Barker's ending of his version is meant to affirm his desire for a change of order, and for the 'new kind of morality' to take over.

Barker's criticism of Middleton's Cardinal is probably unfair, for it partly implies that the Cardinal is ready to suspend exercising his moral duty towards his brother the Duke- to turn a blind eye to the latter immoral practice. On the contrary, by no means does the Cardinal spare the Duke in his criticism. In fact, at one point in the play, the Cardinal makes it clear to his brother that, as he is a person in authority, the punishment awaiting him is much greater, because he sets

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<sup>21</sup> Thomas Middleton, *Women Beware Women*, edited by Roma Gill (London, 1968), p. 112

<sup>22</sup> Howard Barker, in the programme to the Royal Court's production of his version of *Women Beware Women*.

a bad example to the ordinary man in the street. Even Barker himself appears to appreciate the criticism of the Duke by Middleton's Cardinal. Indeed, it is to Barker's credit that in his transposition of lines, he chooses to start his adapted version with the Cardinal's critical words. Doing so, Barker does, however, seem to foreground the Duke's lasciviousness and abuse of political power. Barker also probably means to underscore the failure of the Cardinal's existing policy, and thereby pave the way for a change in tactics- the re-making of the Cardinal, to make him a spokesman for the new morality.

As suggested above, 'the new morality' in *Women Beware Women* is a more extreme dramatization of the concept of love presented in *The Castle*. Re-making of the Cardinal is evidenced in what he does and says the first time he appears on the stage in Barker's part. The words reinforce or are the outcome of what is visually presented. To put it psychologically, showing the Cardinal looking through a telescope (Part Two, Scene Two), while his brother the Duke is teasing him about his sexual experience, reveals the direction of the Cardinal's moral change from that of religion to sexuality. Observing is in some respect dreaming, a way to achieve release and sexual gratification through 'illusionary happiness'.<sup>23</sup> In other words, the telescope is the instrument used to create the impression of the 'distance between the subject and the object', which active scopophilia demands:

Pleasurable looking here takes the form of voyeurism, in which the object of the look is outside of, and distanced from, the subject, and there is apparently no comeback for the spectator in the form either of returned look or other response, or punishment for looking.<sup>24</sup>

This visually-expressed change of the Cardinal qualifies him to become an informed critic, even a spokesman of the 'new morality'. With back turned to the Duke, the Cardinal angrily says:

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<sup>23</sup> See Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, translated by Vincent R. Carfagno (Harmondsworth, 1970), p. 179. It is worth mentioning, however, that the telescope is not in Barker's text, but was William Gaskell's idea for the production of the play. In Barker's text 'observing' is supposed to be looking through the window. That does not, however, seem to alter the conclusion made above.

<sup>24</sup> Annette Kuhn, *Women Pictures: Feminism and Cinema* (London, 1982), p. 58.

Stop your philandering, I said. Stop this endless fingering of flesh. I said the public do not like to see this in their governor, but they do! I was wrong there. Profoundly wrong. Who rips the sheets with him, and who was grappled half way down the stairs is all public speculation, keeps the masses warm with itching. It's the entertainment of the modern state and the proper function of an aristocracy! No, carry on, I was wrong to reprimand him! There, church dignitary bows to insatiable appetite of prince...<sup>25</sup>

Thus, the Cardinal's acknowledgement of misjudgement is also concomitant with a significant discovery- the political dimensions of the Duke's sexual approach. It is an approach that can account for the obscene exposure of the naked body in an affluent society. The Cardinal's point is, in other words, that in a society like the Duke's, 'the exposure of the (for all practical purposes) naked body is permitted and even encouraged, and the taboos on pre- and extramarital intercourse are considerably relaxed. Thus, we are faced with the contradiction that liberalization of sexuality provides an instinctual basis for the repressive and aggressive power' of that society.<sup>26</sup>

The intimate intertwining and overlapping set by the Cardinal between the Duke's sexual conduct and his hunger for power and stability of his regime are later brought about even more forcefully by the Duke himself during the following dialogue that takes place just when sycophant Hippolito comes to the Palace to apologize for his sister's 'unruly behaviour':

DUKE.                   ... (*HIPPOLITO kisses his cheek*) My popularity was never higher, and she dangles from me, flashing like some encrusted gem, blinding discontent and dazzling the cynic. Duchess of Florence! How does the title please you?

BIANCA.               It enhances my beauty.

DUKE.                   It does so, and your enhanced beauty in turn enhances me. It would not have troubled me were you a laundress with eight bastards, I would have carried you here. I must have beauty.

MOTHER.              Yes, but what is it, this thing beauty?

DUKE.                   What it is I couldn't tell you. What is not I know when I look at you.

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<sup>25</sup> Howard Barker and Thomas Middleton, *Women Beware Women* (John Calders in association with the Royal Court Theatre, London, 1986), p. 20. Further reference to the play by page number in the text is to this edition.

<sup>26</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, (London, 1969), p. 9.

MOTHER.  
DUKE

She has a straight nose, and last year curved noses were in....

(*stung*). Stuff your wisdom. I'll tell you what beauty is, it is what all men collude in desiring, and what all men desire I must have, and fuck it, so there, silence your curiosity with that. (*BIANCA looks at him reproachfully*) She forces crudity out of me, and now I am embarrassed, why do you keep her here? (*He turns to MOTHER*) You will see, old mother, that the dossers will applaud my wedding and go home warmer than they would be from a meal, there is great nourishment in pageantry. Later, the royal birth will have them gasping who cannot conceive themselves, and those that can will name their stinking brats after ours immaculate.... (*He goes to BIANCA.*) Why has she not conceived already, she might grow a belly from a kiss so sweet is her saliva and so fecund her red mouth... (*They gaze at one another.*)

HIPPOLITO. I'll come back later for the details of the wedding.... (pp. 25-6)

Hippolito's departure is balanced by the Cardinal's entry, who, together with the Mother, stares at the couple, and makes his most explicit remark about his replacement of one religion by another: 'The service says, which I have recited over the bowed heads of the betrothed a thousand times and always wondered at it, "with my body I thee worship". What says the Almighty to this other faith? Is he not a jealous god? What worship is it? Can you tell?' (p. 26). The question is addressed to the already bewitched Mother.

However, it is evident in the dialogue above that through having beauty or by beautifying herself, Bianca is shown to make her entry to the Duke's domain of political power. The entry in turn enhances and strengthens the Duke's position. This reciprocity is more asserted by the Duke's definition of beauty as the thing which 'all men collude in desiring', and more importantly by the resultant strident assertion 'and what all men desire I must have, and fuck it'. The Duke's remarks further suggest that in such a society as his, women are either completely excluded from the power structure, or that alternatively they are expected to identify with Bianca, which is the same thing actually. In other words, the Duke is aware, and seems quite happy to declare, that in his type of society, what really matters for a political leader like himself is to ensure that he gets the support of men, for it is the latter who have the real power and control over society. That is why he is even more pleased to erect himself as the head of that society, as the

one whose desire epitomizes and stands for the desires of all men.<sup>27</sup> This, on the other hand, explains why the Duke is extremely antagonistic to Livia, who presents a different kind of desire, something over which he, therefore, has no control.

In the programme to his produced version of the play, Barker makes two strident assertions, both of which are enacted in Livia's sexual contact: the first is 'even bought sex carries hope', and the second is 'desire alters perception'. These two assertions are obviously two ways of putting his central concept of 'sexual love' as 'regenerative'. Regeneration in Barker's terms seems to be almost equal to social and political liberation, for he elsewhere elaborates:

I think the form in which sexuality expresses itself is partly a feeling of pain, but the outcome of it is to force transition in the characters, and the characters who endure these experiences are people who want them. I mean, usually especially the women actually... But the outcome of this experience of pain is knowledge... Not only does sex change them as individuals, but it also makes them, or it certainly makes Livia wish to change society. In other words, it is the liberation, the freeing of thought that desire produces that leads her into a conflict with the state itself.<sup>28</sup>

The ending of *Women Beware Women* shows how resolution of the conflict between Livia and the state acts for Livia's advantage. Her sexual transformation engenders a social transformation.

Barker's own statements and the general thrust of many of his plays, especially in the presentation of women-characters- for example, Livia in the play under discussion, Erica in *Crimes in Hot Countries*, and Helen in *The Bite of the Night*- lead one to believe, as hinted above, that Barker's views are paralleled with Freudo-Marxist thinking.<sup>29</sup> However, the point that has to be emphasised in this respect is that neither in *Women Beware Women* nor in any of his other plays does Barker appear to portray sexuality in terms of its repression, as the Freudo-Marxists

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<sup>27</sup> A similar point is even more strongly put in Barker's other play *Victory: Choices in Reaction*, where King Charles' sexual aggressiveness dramatizes, as Tony Dunn argues, the saying attributed to King James I 'a king is an erection of the body politic' ('Howard Barker: Socialist Playwright for Our Times', *Gambit International Theatre Review*, 11, no. 41 [1984], 59-91 (pp. 78-83)); see also section VIII, 'Head' of Norman O. Brown's book *Love's Body*, (New York, 1968), upon which Dunn's 'analysis of *Victory* draws heavily'.

<sup>28</sup> Howard Barker, in an interview with Mamdouh Imran.

<sup>29</sup> In an interview with Mamdouh Imran, Barker indicates that he does not read the work of people like Reich, Marcuse or for that matter Foucault, but he is aware of their ideas. More to the point, he thinks that what they say is 'a useful way to my work actually'.

tend to do. In other words, unlike Reich, for example, Barker does not endeavour to present 'a form of idealism whose politics opposes the repression of sexuality to its liberation'.<sup>30</sup> Instead, in Barker's plays, liberation is the synthesis of a number of antagonistic sexual discourses, according to which what is important is not 'to determine whether one says yes or no to sex... but to account for the fact that it is spoken about, to discover who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak, the institutions which prompt people to speak about it and which store and distribute the things that are said'.<sup>31</sup> Accordingly, in *Women Beware Women*, rather than repressed, sex is incited and aroused. But this is done in such a way as to provide a larger basis for the dominant discourse, namely the Duke's.

Thus, although, for example, the Ward's and Isabella's sexual relationship is conducted within the marital framework, the circumstances in which the marriage is arranged, and more importantly, the fact that it is sealed by the Duke himself, demonstrate that the latter is happy with it. More importantly, the Duke seems to be aware from the start of Hippolito's incestuous relationship with his niece Isabella: however, not only does the Duke tolerate it, but he also encourages this kind of behaviour, because it is 'done with taste and judgement, never coarse and never loud' (p. 25). In other words, the Duke is prepared to condone any form of sexual behaviour as long as it does not pose a threat to his own regime. Indeed, he immediately makes it crystal clear that sexual discipline forms an integral part of his policy. In the same scene, the Duke arrogantly declares: 'I tell you how we govern. Tinsel to the nostrils and a spike at the arse' (p. 25). The method that is employed is, however, not one of physical torture or bodily violence, as this quotation might seem to suggest. Instead, a technology of power, one of many in the hands of modern state, is manipulated and utilized to achieve similar effect.

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<sup>30</sup> Jon Cook, 'Note on History, Politics and Sexuality', in *The Left and the Erotic*, edited by Eileen Philips (London, 1983), pp. 83-112 (p. 86).

<sup>31</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I*, p. 11

Livia, who rebels against the Duke's sexual discourse, is not only ostracized but also hystericized. This hystericization of Livia involves 'a thorough medicalization' of her body and sex in the name of 'safeguarding of society'.<sup>32</sup> Thus, her hypocritical brother revealingly threatens her with medical reports in order to place her in an asylum:

HIPPOLITO.       Madness! You have come apart somewhere—  
 LIVIA.               Well, yes, all over!  
 HIPPOLITO.       I need but a pair of signatures and you can be transported to a  
                           high and ventilated room where nuns will rope you to bed. I need  
                           but two doctor's signatures. (p. 27)

This is, as it were, the rough face of the Duke's sexual discourse. The other lies in his own sexual explicitness and his readiness to make of it the talk of the country. In this way, as the Cardinal accurately puts it in the passage quoted above, the Duke ensures tranquil government.

However, what has to be underlined quite forcefully here is that all along in Barker's part heavy emphasis is being laid on the allegorical significance of the wedding day. 'Indeed, it's evident', as one critic suggests, 'we're supposed to see a parallel between the Duke's courtship of the commoner Bianca, with all its attendant ado, and the not exactly underpublicised engagement and wedding of our very own Charles and Di'.<sup>33</sup> The allegorical parallel is reinforced in Livia's remarks directed at the audience at the very beginning of part two.

In the first part, Middleton's Livia is shown as a totally corrupt and intriguing character who connives at Isabella's incest, acts as a procuress for the Duke, and actually arranges for his seduction of Bianca. In Barker's part, she adopts a completely new posture. Along the lines stated by Barker above, Livia appears, together with the dispossessed Leantio, to declare that she has been completely transformed. The first scene of part two is actually one of shocking sexual images and scatology. The audience hardly come to terms with what affronts them on the stage

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<sup>32</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 146-147.

<sup>33</sup> Benedict Nightingale, a review of *Women Beware Women*, in *New Statesman*, 14 February, 1986, p. 30.

than they find themselves, too, the object of Leantio's and Livia's lavish abuse. In what looks like an effort to further the allegorical implication of the play, the audience are placed in the same position as the Duke's people: that is, they are informed that they are living in a 'waste land', and thereby suffer from '**repetition of the mundane life**' (p. 19). No wonder that the only change that is witnessed in such a land is superficial or physical like painting 'the lamp posts for the royal wedding' (p. 19). Just in contrast, both Leantio and Livia emphasise that they have undergone a different kind of change, one of regeneration and liberation. Five days of seemingly uninterrupted sexual enjoyment, in what looks like a utopian island, seem to have transformed the couple's lives, and in Livia's case filled her with an ardent desire to change the outside world. This is why she preaches her 'religion' of desire and passion, something which inevitably brings her into conflict with the Duke.

Despite the latter's permissiveness and sexual openness, he never tolerates Livia's, because he is aware of the political repercussions. The Duke's criticism of Livia's sexual conduct confirms the veracity of its redemptive effects. He concentrates on what he sees the unconventional and scandalous aspect of that relationship. For example, the Duke complains that the then officer Leantio is having an affair with such an 'old' woman as Livia: 'I think our officers, however lowly, ought not to scandalize us with weird appetites. Can't he speak to girls' (p. 20)? Above all, the Duke is extremely annoyed to learn that Leantio and Livia 'carry their joint lechery into the street when they snatch time from the bedroom' (p. 25). He is in particular quite upset about what he calls 'wall-fucking', because 'it's violence. Pageantry and violence' (p. 25). Clearly therefore, the Duke does not want to expose the public to a sexual spectacle that is diametrically opposed to his. In other words, Livia's sexual approach is not liberating in a strictly Reichian sense, but in a discursive sense, that is, in relation to the Duke's disciplinary sexual involvement.

Livia's antagonism to the Duke naturally leads her to forge an alliance with the other rebel

in the play, Sordido. The latter's relationship with Livia is identical with the Cardinal's relationship with the Duke. Sordido is a self-avowedly mad person who in his own words is 'made for the age'. He is a sexually and socially impoverished character, but he is no less committed to rebellion and revolution than Livia, only perhaps he lacks the means to do so. Thus, what remains for him is to have his wishes fulfilled and desires satisfied in a form of an extraordinary dream he unfolds to Leantio, Bianca's former husband:

*(LEANTIO starts to go) Plot with me. (He stops) I shall burst into the wedding and take the impeccable by force. My first and only entrance to the gateway of all life and death. In her washed matrimonial skin, all scented for the state and bishops' twittering, I'll force her. Down on some polished marbles in foams of lace and splitting fabrics I'll fuck her place! (Pause) There, forget I spoke, only a vision. I am liable to visions. (p. 29)*

However, if at the time Leantio, for understandable reasons appears baffled and 'deeply stirred' by Sordido's vision, his girlfriend Livia finds in the dragging of that dream 'into the daylight' the golden chance to materialize her desire to overthrow the existing power structure. Thus, Bianca is made the centre of conflict between two antagonistic discourses.

As Livia explains to Leantio, Sordido's intended rape of Bianca will have twofold effects: first, it entails the victim's salvation, and second, it signifies the downfall of the state apparatus:

LEANTIO. Save her! By rape! Since when was rape salvation?

LIVIA. Leantio, whole cliffs of lies fall down in storms. By this catastrophe she'll grope for knowledge her ambition hides from her. And simultaneously, Sordido's crime will rock the state of its foundations, which is erected on such lies as ducal marriages. (p. 30)

Then suddenly Livia recaptures her intriguing past, this time, however, skilfully and successfully to arrange for the materialization of Sordido's vision. Thus, shortly afterwards, Sordido is shown bursting into the wedding hall, throws himself on Bianca, and declares: 'This is the proper matrimony! The people marry you' (p. 33)! In other words, Middleton's spectacle of death and reconciliation is changed in Barker's version into a spectacle of an opposite kind, one of death in order to affect 'revolutionary change'. It is not just that perception is changed, but the whole system is overturned. The Duke enters, tries to to rectify the situation and proceed with the

ceremony, but Bianca, by now equally changed (by her forced sexual experience), prevents that from happening. The Duke finally acknowledges defeat, and the play ends with him inviting both Leantio and Livia to assume power. The fact that the virginal Sordido is the only person who dies in that spectacle confirms the 'religious' dimension Barker attaches to his concept of sexual love. Within the discursive antagonism operating in the play Sordido is a counterpoise to the Cardinal. While the Cardinal is a compromiser, Sordido is the saver and rescuer.

But of course, if it were not for Livia's help and skill, Sordido's rescuing mission could have never materialized. Thus, Livia is shown as a character who plays an influential role, and is capable of inducing political change. Presenting her as such, Barker, one would expect, should be praised by women, and his heroine to be admired and identified with. However, some feminist-oriented critics strongly resent Livia's approach to liberation. In the eyes of many of those critics, the means through which Livia effects this liberation defeminise her. For them, Livia is simply a 'man with a skirt': 'Her language describes sexual experience in terms of male fantasies of all the dominating phallus which hurts and tears, reaching the womb and heart. The knowledge which this coitus brings fuels her determination for political change but it is a change which is to be brought about by humiliating Bianca and destroying her as a false image of purity'.<sup>34</sup> Livia's justification for the rape is, for those critics, particularly 'offensive': 'Pity her who uses cunt as a property, to buy her way up floors of privilege. When Sordido's forced his pain on her she'll learn the thing she sells can just as well be stolen' (p. 31). Moreover, some feminist-oriented critics even more strongly object to Barker's portrayal of victim Bianca herself- as a 'sexual object'. In Barker's *Women Beware Women*, those critics may further claim that Bianca can be said to 'connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*', that is, a figure whose 'appearance [is] coded for strong visual and erotic impact'.<sup>35</sup> This entails a complex process of voyeurism and identification on the part of the

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<sup>34</sup> Kathleen McLuskie, *Renaissance Dramatists* (Hemel Hempstead, 1989), pp. 21-22. A copy of the relevant chapter was kindly made available to the author by Kathleen McLuskie.

<sup>35</sup> Lura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, 16, no. 3 (Autumn, 1975), 6-18 (p. 11).

audience, whether fictional characters or the spectators. It also involves what is called looking 'in the reverse formation... pleasure in being looked at'.<sup>36</sup>

Bianca's positioning during the preparation for the wedding ceremony may be interpreted as designed to achieve 'scopophilia' effects. Whenever Bianca meets the Cardinal throughout this period she plays on his 'erotic fantasy': 'Say I'm perfect, you who has been since his cradle, celibate, tell me I am perfect (p. 32)! This remark also implies that Bianca herself is happy, or, in fact is willing to be the object she is shown to be. On the other hand, for the Mother, Bianca seems to be a character to be identified with, almost wishing herself to be in the position of her daughter-in-law, thus indirectly siding with the Duke against her own son. At one point the Mother openly exonerates Bianca from blame for deserting Leantio, because he can not provide her with what the Duke can. More importantly, the Mother reminisces over the past, lamenting the fact that she herself did not seize the opportunities that were available to her. The Mother's identification with Bianca reaches its climax when the latter is in her bridal dress: 'You dazzle darling. Brilliance splashing through my cataracts. If I were a man, I'd say fuck God, why kneel to him, this is perfection. And it is... (*She weeps*)' (p. 32) Remarks such as those, coupled with the way Bianca is made to look, may also have the effect of causing some members of the audience to identify with Bianca. On the other hand, some male members of the audience, whose erotic fantasies may have been aroused by Bianca's fetishization, are led to satisfy this fantasy by identifying with the 'star', in this case the Duke: 'By means of identifying with him, through participation in his power, the spectator can indirectly possess her too'.<sup>37</sup>

This kind of criticism of Barker's work is good as far as it goes. Barker's aim is not, however, to initiate and lead to the effects just suggested. If anything, Barker is actually drawing the attention of his audience to the danger of such a culture which encourages this kind of

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

presentation of sexuality. As is partly explained above, and as Jonathan Dollimore argues, Barker's purpose is to dramatise two 'conceptions of desire: desire at the mercy of power, desire as subversive of power. Or rather, by creatively vandalising the earlier play, Barker sets up a violent dialectic between the two'.<sup>38</sup> Fetishization or commercialization of Bianca is an inevitable outcome of the Duke's sexual discourse. Moreover, vandalising seems to involve, in part, carrying through to their logical conclusions some important elements in Middleton's play. In the procession scene, the Duke is shown to be peeping at Bianca on the balcony. This look has all the voyeuristic qualities that have been mentioned above. Even more so the Duke's visualization of her, since then, as reported by Guardiano. In fact, this erotic fantasization of Bianca on the Duke's part later acquires a new dimension: it becomes sadistic. Bianca is trapped into meeting the Duke in Livia's house, and when she tries to resist his sexual advances, although seemingly apologetically, he actually threatens her with physical violence:

BIANCA. Oh, treachery to honour!

DUKE. Prethee, tremble not. I feel thy breast shake like a turtle panting under a loving hand that makes much on't. Why art so fearful? As I'm friend to brightness, there's nothing but respect and honour near thee. You know me, you have seen me; here's a heart can witness I've seen thee.

BIANCA. The more's my danger.

DUKE. The more's thy happiness. Pish, strive not, sweet! This strength were excellent employed in love, now, but here 'tis spent amiss. Strive not to seek thy liberty and keep me in prison.

BIANCA. Oh, my lord!

DUKE. Take warning, I beseech thee. Thou seem'st to me a creature so composed of gentleness I should be sorry the least force should lay an unkind touch upon thee. (p. 10)

The words used here are certainly Middleton's, and the implication is that 'the seduction is inescapable. But so too is its effect on Bianca. Treated as a chattel, as merchandise, as prey, she now regards herself as tainted goods ('mine honour's leprous'), and feels she may as well sell to

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<sup>38</sup> Jonathan Dollimore, 'Middleton and Barker: Creative Vandalism', in the programme to the Royal Court's production of Barker's version of *Women Beware Women*.

the highest bidder'.<sup>39</sup> And in Florence, the highest bidder is naturally the Duke. In his part, Barker simply foregrounds the corruptive effects of money and power on Bianca as a character. Her desire is governed by her hunger for political power. This contamination of desire on Bianca's part effectively dehumanises her, a point that is emphasised by nearly all the other major characters.

The speaker for the new morality, the Cardinal, who has lived his 'life with symbols', says to Bianca, when she plays on his erotic fantasy, before the ceremony: 'I think- you are not a woman at all- but a symbol of the state' (p. 32). This symbolism is also essential, as mentioned above, to Sordido's dream as well as the view of the person who helps bring the dream into daylight, Livia. Above all, it is a view that is confirmed by the Duke himself, the moment he discovers that Bianca herself has changed. Following his slaying of the perpetrator, Sordido, the Duke tries to rescue the state by insisting that the wedding ceremony should go ahead. When the then changed Bianca refuses to go to church, the Duke reminds her of her symbolism and therefore of her duty to preserve the marriage plan:

DUKE. Powder her cheek. We are late already—  
 BIANCA. No. (*Pause. He stares at her.*) No.  
 DUKE. I would remind you, lovely as you are—  
 BIANCA. Are? Liar. You mean were.  
 DUKE. I would remind you, lovely as you—  
 BIANCA. Were—  
 DUKE. You are not flesh alone but also state, as I am, also state.  
 BIANCA. You did not mention that behind the statues, I thought you then pure male but now I find—  
 DUKE. Mention it? You knew it hypocrite! The rod that thrust between your skirts was double thick with wealth and treble thick with power, you flowed for it! (*Pause*)  
 BIANCA. Yes... and that's not love, is it? Is it? (*She looks at THE CARDINAL*) Oh, what am I, then? When I go— when I tremble for a man, for this man and not for that one, what is it made of, love?

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<sup>39</sup> Margot Heinemann, *Puritanism and Theatre: Thomas Middleton and Opposition Drama under the Early Stuarts* (Cambridge, 1980), p. 184.

- CARDINAL. A discourse on the origin of passion I more than most, would dearly love to hear deliberated, but in the street all Florence wonders what—
- BIANCA. Oh, fuck Florence.... (*She smiles*) Well, of course, I have.... (*She goes to LIVIA*) Dear woman, your eyes are gates damming back the torrents in your soul.... (*LIVIA holds her*) I forgive you.... the selling of me to this merchant of men... and I forgive you twice.... the undoing of my knotted womb which swelled and gushed to base desire.... (*to DUKE ETC*) I'll not act the coronation. (*She holds LIVIA*) (p. 34)

The dialogue summarizes in few lines the play as a whole. Above all the dialogue underscores not just the inseparability of sexual relationships and power relationships, but more importantly it underlines the liberating value of sexual love. It is significant, in this respect, that this is the first time that Bianca mentions the word 'love'. It is a description of her short, forced but nevertheless regenerative experience with the man lying dead on the floor, Sordido.

However, to a certain extent, Barker is liable to the charge that he sometimes uses 'female sexuality as a substitute for, rather than illustration of, female political power'.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, the symbolism can not be dissolved from the discursive value attached to the rape of Bianca: 'Words, expressions, propositions, etc., change their meaning according to the position held by those who use them'.<sup>41</sup> In *Women Beware Women*, from her position as a regenerated woman Livia (and for that matter Barker) gives a discursive meaning to 'rape' dependent upon the position held by the perpetrators themselves. Thus, Bianca's first rape, that is, by the Duke, is called (during the conversation between Livia and Leantio) 'seduction' and 'violation', while the second rape, by Sordido, is called 'deliverance' and 'salvation'.

Barker is aware that for some people this argument is difficult to stomach. He is equally aware of theatrical conventions and of the risks involved in dealing with sexual matters on stage:

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<sup>40</sup> Ruth Shade, 'ALL PASSION IS A RISK: Howard Barker: Sex and Sexual Politics', *Gambit International Theatre Review*, 11, no. 41 (1984), 101-110 (p. 105).

<sup>41</sup> Michel Pêcheux, *Language, Semantics and Ideology*, translated by Harbans Nagpal (London, 1982), p. 111.

Sexual embrace in the theatre, if it is not in some sense impossible, painful or even dishonest, is I think nearly unwatchable. The fact of pure feeling, which it is supposed to represent, turns the audience very self-consciously in a voyeuristic relation to the actors in a way that does not occur in for example, an acted moment of violence.<sup>42</sup>

Based on what is elaborated above, the second rape is more of a political act of violence than a pure sexual exercise. With Bianca representing the state, Sordido's cry- 'the people marry you'- has a special political resonance. Thus, though the manner through which the change is brought about is extreme, it is dramatically justified. Therefore, to accuse Barker of encouraging immorality or of 'male chauvinism' is based upon a false interpretation of Barker's intentions.

Moreover, some critics find the political implication of the ending is even historically justified. Barker's resolution is certainly contemporary, in that it represents a view held by some people at the present time, but surprisingly some critics argue that it is also contemporary in being more true to the spirit of the Jacobean period than was the original piece itself:

England was in a process of change from a society based on rank and status to one based more directly on wealth and property; and this meant a shake-up of social and moral codes. There was an exceptional degree of social mobility, and contemporaries were very conscious of this shifting and changing.<sup>43</sup>

Mindful of this kind of historical analysis Barker himself draws an analogy in the programme between 'Florence' and 'England' in terms of hegemony of what he calls 'the super-finance economies' as well as commercialization of 'love'. More to the point, Jonathan Dollimore draws on such an historical reading of the Jacobean period to endorse Barker's ending of his adaptation of *Women Beware Women*:

Barker's version ends with a crisis in- perhaps even the collapse of- the state. Now if we share the view of those historians and critics who have recently discovered in the conflict and crisis of Jacobean drama a prefiguring of the English Revolution of 1642, then maybe it's Barker's ending which is perversely faithful to the play's originating history, its context, though only by violating the text itself.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Howard Barker, in a letter to Mamdouh Imran, 27 October 1988.

<sup>43</sup> Margot Heinemann, *Puritanism and Theatre*, p. 3.

<sup>44</sup> Jonathan Dollimore, in 'Middleton and Barker: Creative Vandalism'.

## Chapter Two:

### History and Myth

This chapter contends that Barker's plays are historical precisely because they are 'free from history' - history both as it is laid down in some textbooks as well as as it is presented by fellow-dramatists. The chapter further maintains that this oppositional and innovative treatment of history is inseparable from his unswerving commitment to the demands of his imagination and his fulfilment of his responsibility as an artist.

'My history plays', Howard Barker intimates, 'are imagined history. I don't do research... the absence or misuse of facts does not make them any less historical... Research cramps the imagination... An artist should have the sensibility to make leaps which don't depend on evidence'.<sup>1</sup> Thus, freedom of artistic expression is, for Barker, of paramount importance. His insistence on artistic freedom is, nevertheless, partly intended to emphasise that his history plays are not costume drama or exercises in nostalgia. Nor do they seek to be analytical of certain historical moments, so as to determine what went wrong and thereby prescribe what should have been done instead. His plays are not 'juvenile acts of iconoclasm' in their portrayal of heroes and historical, religious or mythical figures, either. More importantly, although, as is pointed out below, Barker is concerned with addressing the hidden, he does not endeavour to drag out hidden facts, for to do so is to engage in a mythologisation of a different order. The only 'historical truth', for Barker, is- and herein lies his commitment to art- 'the imaginative truth', the truth of a speculative artist. It follows, then, that, for Barker, imaginative truth is superior to any other kind

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<sup>1</sup> Howard Barker, in *Gambit*, and as quoted by Jim Hiley in 'Barker's Bite', *Radio Times*, (29 June- 5July 1985), 8-9, pp. 34, 9, respectively. As he has two degrees in history, Barker may not, in any case, need to undertake further research. He himself does not, however, stake much on his academic background except in that it has given him 'a profound sense of European suffering'.

of truth.

Barker does not discard this claim, but he is keen to emphasise that his position stems from the fact that this kind of truth, the imaginative one, does not need any 'validation beyond the tolerance of theatre... the theatre itself permits and licenses it'.<sup>2</sup> In other words, Barker places his hope in the audience; great demands are placed on the audience to appreciate what they witness on the stage on its own terms. They should view the plays as works of imagination. Therefore, they must judge the plays imaginatively, and not according to standards of outside reality, whether political, social or moral. Making this demand on the audience is connected with what Barker takes to be the absolute responsibility of the artist- to dream and 'speculate, and not to educate or elucidate, or lead, or instruct'.<sup>3</sup> Put differently, Barker requires his audience to be artist-like in their appreciation of his plays, to have the sensibility the artist has, to make the leaps the artist makes, and to have the imaginative will and power to accompany him on a speculative journey in search of a 'speculative truth'- a journey towards a terrain uncontaminated by existing reality outside the theatre.

Now, some may say this is all a form of indulgence, an exercise in abstraction. But as Adorno says, 'the new is necessarily abstract'.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, as Michel Foucault also observes, to be abstract does not necessarily entail the absence of truth. Fictive history is not devoid of truth, either:

The possibility exists for fiction to function in truth, for a fictional discourse to induce effects of truth, and for bringing it about that a true discourse engenders or 'manufactures' something that does not as yet exist, that is, 'fictions' it. One 'fictions' history on the basis of a political reality that makes it true, one 'fictions' a politics not yet in existence on the basis of a historical truth.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Howard Barker, in a letter to Mamdouh Imran, 28 December 1988.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, edited by Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, translated by C. Lendart (London, 1984), p. 32.

<sup>5</sup> Michel Foucault, *Power and Knowledge: Selected Interviews by Michel Foucault*, translated by Colin Gordon and others, edited by Colin Gordon (Brighton, 1980), p. 193.

Such a fictionalization of history also seems to underline an inextricable connection between myth and history. As Roland Barthes points out, 'myth consists in overturning culture into nature'; it is an 'inversion' under whose effect 'the quite contingent foundations of the utterance become Common Sense, Right Reason, the Norm, General Opinion'.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, Barker uses history in an imaginative way in order to illuminate or 'to unlock feelings about the present', so that existing 'conventions of thought' are subverted, and 'the lurking popular will... repressed under so much news and propaganda' is given an outlet and a form.<sup>7</sup> In order for it to materialise, this unlocking may need only an allusion or a moving speech within a proper dramatic and imaginatively historical context. Such a speech is, for example, provided by the figure of Stalin in *The Power of the Dog*, a play the large bulk of which imaginatively dramatizes the aftermath of World War Two:

I think sometimes of a stranger on another planet, fixing his single eye to the lens of a powerful telescope, and bringing Europe into view. Imagine the sheer frenzy that will greet his eyes! An ant-heap kicked into activity, every road and track jammed with civilians or armies jostling one another as they pass, some marching East, some fleeing West, some wandering south, some lost, some under orders, some with guards, some unaccompanied, some crooks, some murderers, the killer and the mother of the killed tramping in opposite directions on the same rutted road, his sack of loot jostling her bag of baby clothes, his curse and her groan. Who knows where he will find himself, by what gate a child will be born, or in what ditch an old woman breathe her last? Is this chaos? Or is it a building site? (pp. 27-28)

Barker cites this speech to illustrate the inseparability in his work between history and myth. He argues that this speech has 'riveting effect on the audience not just because it's poetic, but because it somehow addresses hidden knowledge'.<sup>8</sup> This 'hidden knowledge' is related to the role played by the Russians in World War Two, and the way that role has been perceived, or rather not perceived at all in the West, say, during VE Day celebrations. The Russians, Barker believes- indeed it is historically true- played the decisive role in defeating Nazi Germany. Thus, in

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<sup>6</sup> Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, translated by Stephen Heath (London, 1977), p. 165.

<sup>7</sup> Howard Barker, in *Gambit*, p. 34.

<sup>8</sup> Howard Barker, in *New Theatre Quarterly*, p. 338.

ignoring the sacrifices of the Russians, the Western establishments and their organs, including the media, have created a delusion, a myth whereby credit for the triumph over the Nazis is given almost solely to the Western powers. In other words, by denigrating the part played by the Russians, the West raise their position into a mythical status. What is historically true has been pushed underground, has been suppressed into the domain of the unconscious. And through Stalin's speech, Barker hopes to appeal to this 'hidden' or 'unspoken historical perspective': he foregrounds it into the consciousness of his audience.

Barker's method is, nevertheless, different from the 'historical researcher'. There is nothing in Barker's work to tie him with, for example, Edward Bond, John McGrath or Caryl Churchill. There is nothing of the demystifying iconoclasm that characterizes Bond's portrayal of the figure of William Shakespeare in *Bingo*, especially with regard to Shakespeare's position in relation to contemporary land enclosures. Equally, Barker's presentation of history is far removed from the way McGrath deals with it in *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*. To connect the current exploitation of Scotland by the multinational corporations with previously unknown facts about the Clearances in the past, may be a valid point, but it remains simplistic in its didacticism and propaganda. Barker's method is even distinctly different from the more sophisticated treatment of history by Churchill in, amongst others, *Top Girls* and *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*, where the audience are 'made aware of a deliberate clash of epochs, cultures, mores'.<sup>9</sup> In fact, it is wrong to suggest that Barker is interested in the hidden as such or in juxtaposing historical or cultural perspectives: rather he historicises the present. Like Foucault's, Barker's aim is 'to find the conceptual underpinnings of some key practices in modern culture, placing them in historical perspective'.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Allen Cave, *Drama in Performance on London Stage 1970 to 1985* (Gerrards Cross, 1987), p. 259.

<sup>10</sup> J. G. Merquior, *Foucault* (London, 1984), p. 15.

Barker is especially interested in the human aspect of the historical experience, and not simply in documentation: 'Anyone who knows something of Russia in this century is bound to be... deeply moved... History makes you angry'.<sup>11</sup> Indeed suffering and anger are major features of Barker's presentation of history. 'An ant-heap kicked into activity', Stalin's metaphor in the speech above, evokes a feeling of chaos and absolute disorder. Its arbitrariness creates a vivid picture of the experience of history as Barker sees it: 'the obscurity of pain, above all, the accidental and disorganized way in which society moves from state to state, crushing the human spirit on its way'.<sup>12</sup> In other words, Barker's view of history is based on a denial of the linearity of history.

One of the definitions used by Barker to emphasise this chaotic nature of history is to describe it as a mad animal: for instance, what would a mad dog do except rage round and bite at random? Naturally, it is the body of its victim that feels the bite and endures the pain and suffering. In this respect, it is no surprise that Barker chooses to make of the body a central issue in his presentation of history. Indeed, images of the body disintegrating, maimed, subjected or transgressing abound in Barker's plays. As Michel Foucault demonstrates in various studies of his, the human body is the battlefield of history. This is because 'the divided and fractured body is marked by the historical events of discourse, of power-knowledge, of politics, and of class struggle'.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, for Howard Barker, 'the body is the ground of fictions, in both the sexual and historical world of the plays... It is the actual place of history, the point at which "History" (official, state, academic, pomp) meets the human'.<sup>14</sup> In this respect, probably the most historical of Barker's plays are those like *The Love of a Good Man*, *Victory*, *Pity in History*, *The Power of the Dog*, *The Bite of the Night* and *The Europeans*, in which a body, missing, dead or fragmented

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<sup>11</sup> Howard Barker, in *New Theatre Voices in the Seventies*, p. 196.

<sup>12</sup> Howard Barker, in a letter to Mamdouh Imran, 28 December 1988.

<sup>13</sup> Charles C. Lembert and Garth Gillan, *Michel Foucault: Social Theory and Transgression* (New York, 1982), pp. 82-3.

<sup>14</sup> Howard Barker, in a letter to Mamdouh Imran, 28 December 1988.

provides 'the impetus' for action, and incarnates the sufferings of the victims of 'historical events of discourse'.

Given that, as shown above, in Barker's work, history is inseparable from mythology, it follows that the body is equally central to Barker's interpretation of myth. The body is, indeed, crucial in the destruction of long-held sexual, religious and literary myths. This is especially noticeable in *The Possibilities*, *The Last Supper* and *The Bite of the Night*. It should, however, be stressed that this rather complex rendering of history, especially the integral relationship set among history, mythology and the body, is something that has steadily been developing in Barker's work. In fact, this chapter is divided into two sections- one dealing with history and the other with myth- partly to trace this development. In Barker's early work, history is presented as part of his concern with the politics of the nation, while in the later work, history is dealt with as part of his interest in sexuality and myth. First, Barker proves that history is itself a myth, then, he proceeds to demonstrate that existing religious and literary myths are there to justify the myth of history.

### A. History

Barker's sense of history is always very strong. It is evident from the start of his dramatic career: in *Cheek* (staged 1970), his first staged play, where a flashback to war time shows Lurie's mother flirting with an American officer. The hero of Barker's first three-act play *Claw* (staged 1975), Noel Biledew, is a war orphan who, through pimping, 'claws' his way up the social ladder in the post-war period. Generally speaking, Barker's characters show a marked awareness of history. For example, in *Claw*, Old Biledew warns his step-son against aligning himself with 'the prevailing flow of history';<sup>15</sup> in *Stripwell* (staged 1975), the old and disabled Labour politician,

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<sup>15</sup> Howard Barker, *Stripwell & Claw* (London, 1977), p. 167. Further reference to both plays by page number in the text is to this edition.

Jarrow, is so disgusted with what a history book says about a government in which he served that he undertakes: 'Ramsay McDonald, I will not let them slander you! (*Long pause*) God Almighty, we are being swamped with lies' (p. 15). In fact, politicians on both sides of the political spectrum seem to worry about the judgement of history. For instance, the Labour Home Secretary Mrs Orbison, in *That Good between Us* (staged 1977), having consented to introduce emergency measures, recognises that 'history will be very hard on me. On all of us', but she resents being described as a 'fascist'.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, the right-wing ideologue Ezra Fricker, in *The Loud Boy's Life*, who defines 'war' as 'the Rude Man of history',<sup>17</sup> declines to seize power by force, because he must 'know what history will say of me' (p. 37). In like manner, informed, as it were, by Gordon's dictum, in *Birth on a Hard Shoulder* (staged 1980)- 'history is the history of dedicated individuals'- (p. 90) figures like Gocher in *Fair Slaughter* (staged 1976) and Vera in *All Bleeding* (staged reading 1977) undertake to be historical individuals. Gocher aspires to be 'as world historical as you were [Tovarish]'<sup>18</sup> and Vera sees his mission as an artist wholly dependent upon his involvement in history: 'I want to be involved in history. I want to influence' it.<sup>19</sup> Despite these assertions, none of those individuals, however, manages to fulfill his or her grand desire.

Barker's hard-line socialist orientation earlier in his dramatic career underlies his view of history in his early work. For him, to be historical is to initiate political change. He is at the same time aware that 'it's very hard to be "historical" in England'.<sup>20</sup> What Engels had predicted to be imminent more than a century ago has so far failed to materialise. This failure, he believes, leads to chaos and social decline. Assessing Barker's work at the end of the first decade of his dramatic

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<sup>16</sup> Howard Barker, *That Good between Us & Credentials of a Sympathiser* (London, 1980), p. 40. Further reference to both plays by page number in the text is to this edition.

<sup>17</sup> Howard Barker, *Two Plays for the Right: The Loud Boy's Life & Birth on a Hard Shoulder* (London, 1982), p. 20. Further reference to both plays by page number in the text is to this edition.

<sup>18</sup> Howard Barker, *Crimes in Hot Countries & Fair Slaughter* (London, 1984), p. 70. Further reference to both plays by page number in the text is to this edition.

<sup>19</sup> Howard Barker, *The Love of a Good Man & All Bleeding* (London, 1980), p. 85. Further reference to both plays by page number in the text is to this edition.

<sup>20</sup> Howard Barker, quoted by Catherine Itzin in *Stages in the Revolution*, p. 254.

career, Ruth Shade concludes that 'history may well see Barker's plays as drawing a picture of the decomposition of Europe after the First World War'.<sup>21</sup> This means that the forces who have taken upon themselves the right to change society have either disastrously failed or have turned out to be traitors to their ideals. In this respect, the pronouncements made by the individuals, quoted above, are important only in as much as they implicitly say about the wider political context. That is to say, the pronouncements are significant in what they say about the forces of which the individuals concerned are product. In England, the major political force that has sought to achieve this grand historical mission through parliamentary democracy, and that has been given the opportunity to do so, but failed to live up to its declared ideals, is the Labour Party. Therefore, it is no surprise that images of decline and decomposition abound, especially where Labour politicians preside over the system shown to be prevailing in Barker's plays.

Mrs Orbison, in *That Good between Us*, may have a strong 'sense of responsibility', but she can not fulfill it, even if she wants to, because the organization to which she belongs is 'in essence and deeds treacherous to the values it claims to espouse'. 'Capitalism', as Barker asserts, 'is massively destructive of human community and values'; therefore, in not actively seeking to overthrow capitalism, the Labour Party in effect contributes to its stabilisation and to the destruction of values.<sup>22</sup> The Labour Party does not seek to change the system, because it has become part of it. A successful policy, as the Labour Home secretary, in *The Hang of the Gaol*, puts it, can only be one of accommodation and compromise:

George, we happen to be lumbered here with what they call the party-system, the Westminster model, call it what you like. And the bulk of the population of this long-suffering island of ours are under the impression it is freedom. The thought of this freedom no doubt gives comfort to old ladies dying of neglect in tower-blocks. It is no doubt shouted from terraces by fifteen year-old illiterates. But it is what we've got and we 'ave got to work with it, bent and crippled as it is. Nothing is perfect, least of all corruption, but the smelly old women and the schizophrenic kids don't give a bugger

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<sup>21</sup> Ruth Shade, 'Into the Second Decade: A Study of Howard Barker's Plays for the Theatre' (unpublished M. A. dissertation, University of Essex, 1981), p.90.

<sup>22</sup> Howard Barker, in a letter to *Tribune*, 23 September 1977.

to your morals. We did not choose the system, but we have got to get the hang of it. (Pause.) I have not got clean hands, George. I am not pure. I will be laid to rest to the jeers of history. But I serve. By Christ, I serve.<sup>23</sup>

The words are addressed to George Jardine, an ex-communist, now a retired civil servant heading an inquiry team into a fire in a prison in the English Midlands.

Motivated by a 'strong moral sense', Jardine seems determined to follow the investigation through, and to let inquiry take its course. But for his boss, the Home Secretary, this course is out of the question. The problem is that the real arsonist is the prison governor, Colonel Cooper, who has been appointed to the job on the recommendation of the Home Secretary himself. More importantly, incriminating Cooper would not just be embarrassing for the minister himself, but could cost the whole government the general election that is due shortly. In short, for Stagg, the issue needs to be whitewashed. Jardine obliges, not least, because he is, above all, interested in becoming a knight- a title for which he is promised nomination by Stagg in return. The speech, moreover, makes it clear that Stagg is conscious that his action and that of the Government in general will be judged as treacherous, but the whole situation is beyond his control. He has to make the best of what is available, but not to change it. And how could he or why should he endeavour to change it, since the people are content with what they have got?

Stagg's view points to a connection that is set between history and myth in Barker's work. As practised in a capitalist system, freedom, Barker believes, is itself a myth. 'The real tragedy of England', Barker argues, 'is the fact that the population subscribes to a myth of freedom, a notion that freedom is about universal suffrage and the parliamentary system, and they are aided and abetted in this by the capitalist press'.<sup>24</sup> For him, freedom should mean much more than that. In communist countries, he further points out, freedom is to be free from unemployment, exploitation and homelessness. It should not, however, be inferred that Barker is advocating a

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<sup>23</sup> Howard Barker, *The Hang of the Gaol & Heaven* (London, 1982), p. 77. Further reference to the two plays by page number in the text is to this edition.

<sup>24</sup> Howard Barker, quoted by Catherine Itzin in *Stages in the Revolution*, pp. 256-7.

communist-style concept of freedom, for he is equally critical of the 'stultifying bureaucratic repression' that accompanies freedom in the East. But the point is that 'ballot-boxing' is a 'nineteenth-century' concept that is now rendered wholly inadequate. The Labour Party, in subscribing to this outdated concept of freedom, confirms its failure to live up to what it claims- the force of change and progress.

In *Downchild* (staged 1985), the last of his state-of-the-nation plays, Barker goes into the economics of the matter, the economic reasons which have prevented Labour from fulfilling its 'historic mission'. The party's retention of an existing bureaucracy is partly to blame for the failure. In the trial scene in *Downchild*, the ex-Labour Prime Minister Lord Scadding gives a lively account of how he has been forced to compromise on his 'ambitious programme' and betray those who voted him for office:

I was a baby, chucking bricks across the floor. On Chequers carpets had my tantrums, on Downing Street tiles piddled my despair. Banging my tiny fists against the Real World. Do you know that phrase? It swung against me like a door, smack in my baby kisser. The Real World. They trooped into my office, civil servants, bankers, chiefs of police, and there it was, sat on their shoulders grinning at me like an imp. Real World versus baby tantrums. Heads of departments saying what I wanted wasn't on. Their phrase- not on. Not in the Real World which they owned. Sir This, Sir That, and Sir the Other. Ever wondered why I stuck gangsters in the Honours List? My tantrum. My last revenge on all the knights who grinned at me with marble teeth. And baby me, who thought he drank of power. Out of the baby feeder of Westminster, guzzling air. Never. Never touched the shit that hung off power's arse. *(Pause)* All the muck you wrote about me, all the dirt newsprint flung at Ann— pissing on a baby, Tom. Never touched the real dirt, did you? *(Pause)* Defence rests. (P. 100)

Lord Scadding makes this admission after a host of charges are listed against him by the gossip columnist Downchild, now judge Lord Cocky. The charges include one which says: 'I could have fucked History but I dribbled in my pants' (p. 97). Scadding's original reply is both short and to the point: 'I held office. I did not govern' (p. 99). The lengthy speech, just quoted, is merely an elaboration of the difference between governing and holding office. Scadding acknowledges that he was a nominal figure; those who governed were those ones with the economic and military power- the real world. Had he seriously contemplated engineering any significant change, the real

world would have readily mobilised its forces, tanks would have instantaneously been sent to the streets. And who would have suffered? Certainly, it would have been people like delinquent Stoot. For Scadding, the choice was stark: blood or delinquency: 'I was a very clever baby, Tom. Preferred delinquents to dead boys' (p. 100).

This presentation of recent history through focusing on the Labour Party presents Barker with a bit of a dilemma. He is on record as saying that he is not prepared, as it were, to vote for the alternative- revolution- because it is going to be bloody and violent. In any case to preach that in his plays would mean to engage himself in simplistic acts of iconoclasm and propaganda- something which he is not prepared to do, either. On the other hand, while he refrains from portraying right-wing politicians and Tories as monsters (his drawing of Ezra Fricker, who is patterned after Enoch Powell, is sympathetic), he never even remotely endorses their policies. Barker is not a political writer who argues on behalf of any political grouping. He passionately believes that '*without* political change, human nature deteriorates. And England is not changing'. Therefore, as he further adds, what he shows in plays like *That Good between Us*, *The Hang of the Gaol* and *Downchild* is 'a world in which morality has evaporated, has gone in abeyance. In which human goodness, as we understand it, has been eroded by the prevailing corruption of a truly decadent society'.<sup>25</sup> Thus, underlying the picture of chaos, decay and social decomposition that Barker draws in his work, is his recognition of the difficulty of being historical in England. His sense of history also reflects his worry and anxiety about conditions of the world: the moral chaos and destruction of values in this country and beyond.<sup>26</sup>

Evidence of a connection between the body and history could be traced in Barker's early or 'English-society plays', including *That Good between Us* and *Fair Slaughter*. But the connection

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<sup>25</sup> Howard Barker, in a letter to *Tribune*, 23 September 1977.

<sup>26</sup> In his paper, 'Thematic Issues in Barker's Most Recent Work', in *Howard Barker and Political Theatre*, Eric Mottram points out that history is one of Barker's central concerns, and confirms that his presentation of it is marked by his awareness of the 'permanent state of emergency' that dominates human life.

is most evident in plays set in known historical moments of collapse and crisis. Barker keeps 'dramatizing the aftermath of war- understanding that our history is largely the aftermaths of wars'.<sup>27</sup> He also does so because these moments provide him with the proper raw material to dramatize his thesis that the body is the 'site' of history. *The Love of a Good Man* (staged 1978), a play that dramatizes the aftermath of World War One, has, in this respect, suffered badly at the hands of critics. For example, John Elsom claims that Barker's 'bitterness feels uprooted', and accuses him of 'wilful refusal to burden his play with too much research', although he has no personal experience of the events he writes about. 'The play', Elsom adds, 'ends disastrously with a silly seance; but long before that last mistake, it was hard to ignore kindly the themes which were arbitrarily introduced and arbitrarily dropped- Northern Ireland, the Bishop's sermon on why God likes pain, the confusions of an embryo monarch and the death obsessions of the piously nostalgic'.<sup>28</sup> Having praised the production of the play at the Sheffield Crucible, Robert Cushman finds it necessary to 'justify myself'. His justification turns out to be nothing but renunciation of 'the kind of play that *The Love of a Good Man* has generally been taken to be, the kind in which a playwright presents a received view of a Britain which is dressed up in some suspect metaphor, bound to be described by someone as a "powerful image"'. And implying that Barker is only after easy laughs and satire, Cushman ends his 'new review' of the play by expressing his sympathy for the reasons 'why critics have taken it for another easy attack on undefended targets'.<sup>29</sup>

It is true that construction of a cemetery for the war dead is what apparently preoccupies the characters on the stage, but it is the presence of Mrs Toynbee that gives the play its dramatic focus, and makes the connections Barker sets between history and the body all the more

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<sup>27</sup> Eric Mottram, 'The Vital Language of Impotence', *Gambit International Theatre Review*, 11, no. 41 (1984), 47-57 (p. 48).

<sup>28</sup> John Elsom, 'Dire Straits', *The Listener* (24 January, 1980), p. 120

<sup>29</sup> Robert Cushman, a review of *The Love of a Good Man*, in *Observer*, 20 January 1980.

convincing.<sup>30</sup> Mrs Toynbee's task is to recover the body of her dead son Billy. Therefore, the body becomes, as Barker puts it, the 'ground of fiction' in *The Love of a Good Man*. By meeting nearly every character in the play during that search, Mrs Toynbee provides the play with the necessary dramatic shape and focus. But the fictional is historically rooted, and truth is not absent at all. Every one of her meetings in this journey for the recovery of the body has its political implication and historic value. In fact, from the point of view developed in this chapter the most crucial meeting of all is her brief encounter with Colonel Hard.

The first of two brief appearances of Hard takes place at the end of Act One, where he presents himself as a *Deus ex machina* for soldiers worried about their job prospects:

Gentlemen. (*They drift to a standstill.*) Give me five minutes of your time. The corpses will not grudge it. (*They examine him.*) I have watched you, and read you. I read men like others read horses or books. And in your strong backs I read a certain privilege, the privilege of making history. I am inviting you to write with me what children will pore over in their history books. What do you say? (p. 46)

For Hard, the privilege in making history is sacrifice and death for the sake of the Empire. Hard actually names Ireland as the place for their sacrifice, their next round of violence. But Ireland could be anywhere else in the world. What Barker is suggesting here is that most history books embody ideas like Hard's. What children learn in schools is false stories of heroism and sacrifice. Death is glorified so as to ensure more supplies of fuel, of human beings ready to sacrifice themselves in response to jingoistic feelings of rulers. Those soldiers could enter history only through death, by giving up their bodies. Their bodies are, therefore, the site of accumulated myths of history.

Hard's march is not just over working-class victims as the soldiers he is addressing. Indeed, it is to Barker's credit that he chooses to make his central figure a woman, albeit, an upper-crust woman. The bite of history does after all transcend class barriers. Mrs Toynbee, who has been

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<sup>30</sup> In a review of *The Love of a Good Man* in *Plays and Players*, 27, no. 5 (February, 1980), p. 25, Gillan Wood considers 'Mrs Toynbee's presence in *The Love of a Good Man*... its major flaw'.

watching Hard addressing the soldiers/workers, interrupts:

MRS TOYNBEE. Colonel Hard?  
 HARD. *(turning)*. Yes, I am Colonel Hard.  
 MRS TOYNBEE. *Cult of Empire?*  
 HARD. I am the author of that book.  
 MRS TOYNBEE. At Tonbridge I asked you a question once. About the place of women.  
 HARD. Women?  
 MRS TOYNBEE. Yes. Service, you said.  
 HARD. Really? I may well have done.  
 MRS TOYNBEE. Then I bought a copy of your book.  
 HARD. I am flattered.  
 MRS TOYNBEE. And you signed it.  
 HARD. Yes, I do that, after the meetings I hold a stall.  
*(Pause.)*  
 MRS TOYNBEE. Lies *(Pause.)* Your book. *(Pause.)* Lies upon lies.  
 HARD. I'm sorry you felt that. Empire is a difficult subject.  
 MRS TOYNBEE. My son read it. He believed you. Now he's dead.  
 HARD. I'm sorry. We lost a lot of people.  
 MRS TOYNBEE. Give me my money back. *(He gawps.)* My five shillings. Give it back. (pp. 48-9)

Mrs Toynbee's journey to recover the body of the son is historical in that having read and allowed her son to read Hard's book about the Empire, she has become, as it were, a co-writer of official history. By contrast, in embarking upon a journey to recover the body of the son, she is effectively writing Barker's oppositional version of history: the fate of victims of official history.

Consequently, it would be surprising if the Gentleman, the Prince of Wales' companion, did not find the Bishop's sermon in which he speaks about God and pain embarrassing and wrong. But it is even stranger that some of the critics, named, above should judge the sermon as irrelevant or a weakness of the play. The Bishop is condemning official versions of history; all such values as sacrifice and sympathy that can help unscrupulous characters like Hard and Hacker. The Bishop is, in this respect, a forerunner of a whole breed of religious figures, analysed below, in Barker's work, who are changed by witnessing acts of cruelty, and are prepared to tell

the truth even though it runs counter to their beliefs.

Like Michel Foucault, in *The Love of a Good Man* Barker stresses the political significance of the body in history. The body is the site of power relationships. Beside the political meaning attached to Mrs Toynbee's body in Hard's 'book of history' (a breeding machine), a similar function is attached to it by his ally, the chief contractor Hacker. As a businessman, history, for Hacker, can only mean making money. Hacker does not make any bones about his business. His aide Bride pronounces the contract for building the cemetery as a 'contract with our dead'. Hacker dances to this tune by exclaiming: 'Did we [businessmen] not lose our boys as well? Not me personally, but the business people did. Money was made on the one 'and, but sons were slain on the other' (p. 6).<sup>31</sup> However, as he later explains to his ingenuous apprentice Clout, Hacker's exclusion of himself from the group of businessmen who have sacrificed their sons is not an admission of his unwillingness to offer sacrifice: 'Mrs Hacker is forty-three and sterile as a collar stud. It's been like shooting into concrete these last twenty years! What's gonna 'appen suddenly? Use your 'ead?' (p. 29)! Quite simply, Hacker is scared of dying suddenly before having an heir to ensure the continuity of his business empire. His passion for Mrs Toynbee is, above all, heightened by the fact that she is already proven to be capable of producing children, no matter how 'lyricist' or 'touching' the language he uses.<sup>32</sup>

Freud could be invoked to interpret Hacker's passion as a manifestation of his lust for money and material gain. But Barker appears to use Hacker's involvement with Mrs Toynbee to dramatize another aspect of the relationship between the body and history by showing the fragmentation of the body in terms of disciplinary codes as well as dispersion of power relations.<sup>33</sup> Hacker, too, is searching for a body, but for a living one- a child. In this sense, his

<sup>31</sup> Incidentally, Mrs Toynbee's husband was also a businessman who reportedly had a heart attack, following the failure of what he hoped to be a lucrative shipment of tea.

<sup>32</sup> See Ian McDiarmid, 'Howard Barker: A Personal View', *Gambit Theatre International Review*, 11, no. 41 (1984), 93-9 (p. 95).

<sup>33</sup> See Charles Lumbert and Garth Gillan, *Michel Foucault*, p. 74.

ultimate aim is to create a disciplined and docile body of Mrs Toynbee. But securing her in the first place entails a lot of bargaining, including with his apprentice Clout. Ironically the latter, unlike what Hacker would seem to think, uses his head well. In order to fulfill Toynbee's condition, Hacker has to make financial concessions to Clout, corresponding with the seemingly unending new conditions imposed by Mrs Toynbee. In his quest for a child, Hacker allows himself to be exploited, as it were, both from above and below. Thus, beside making the point that sex is used as a procreative activity, through Hacker's experience with both Mrs Toynbee and his apprentice Clout, Barker seems to be dismissing the 'localised' conception of power. Although the play raises issues about class struggle, Barker declines to present the issues in simplistic and ideologically-based manner. 'Barker', as Eric Mottram rightly asserts, 'is devoid of workerism- no party of British society is exonerated from the delinquency of needing power over someone, nobody is free from violence'.<sup>34</sup> Power is ubiquitous and always has 'myriad effects'. In *The Love of a Good Man*, Barker places the body, whether that of Billy or that of his mother, at the centre of those effects of power.<sup>35</sup>

The introduction of the Prince of Wales, supposedly there to inaugurate the cemetery and pick up the name of the unknown warrior, is probably meant to demonstrate further the plurality and complexity of power. It may also mean that Barker seeks to place the relationship between history and the body in a wider context. Mrs Toynbee plays the game of power well. She skilfully identifies the shifting patterns of power, and readily locates a suitable place for herself. Now that she has secured the return of her son's body (his name having been picked up by the Prince courtesy of Clout's ingenuity), Mrs Toynbee turns her attention to the Prince himself. But because of problems of his own, the Prince does not seem to need any unusual efforts. Following the Seance, closing 'his eyes in despair', he takes the initiative and flirts with her in the most

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<sup>34</sup> Eric Mottram, 'The Vital Language of Impotence', p. 48.

<sup>35</sup> See Michel Foucault, *Power and Knowledge*, p. 188.

unusual and crude manner: 'I WANT TO F—F—F— FUCK YOUR CUNT' (P. 67)! Contrary to what reviewers of the production thought of this remark, it does not prove Barker's iconoclastic intention. Instead, his aim is apparently to signal class differentiation in history through reference to the body. As Foucault argues, the intensity of repression of the body is historically stronger in the higher classes than the lower ones. It is one method of affirming social differentiation.<sup>36</sup> And in letting the Prince speak in this way, Barker affirms the Prince's class origin.<sup>37</sup>

Given the Prince's social position, it is only normal that Mrs Toynbee should gratefully accept the compliment, and desert Hacker right away. But it is the latter's understanding of his position within this power structure that might make his new stand admirable:

MRS TOYNBEE. I promised I'd make love to you. If you insist on it, I'll stand by that.  
(*Pause. HACKER is winded.*)

HACKER (*sarcastically*). Well, there is honour for yer. There is cricket as ever was. She tips a fuck to me like dropping a porter 'alf a crown. (*Pause.*) I don't believe you 'ave a body. You 'ave a ready reckoner bound in skin.

MRS TOYNBEE. We live as we must, don't we!

HACKER. I'm sorry, but I can't stand 'ere and not 'it back. I am no bloody gentleman, all 'andshakes and treachery. Give a bloke 'is dignity!

PRINCE. My fault all this.

GENTLEMAN. Nonsense.

PRINCE. Mine entirely.

GENTLEMAN (*turning to him*). Nothing can be your fault. It says so in the constitution. (p. 68)

The Gentleman's comments places the point, just explained, about the body and class in its proper historical perspective. Hacker's reaction equally reinforces it. But the irony in Hacker's position is that he is just as guilty of the very thing with which he charges Mrs Toynbee. In fact,

<sup>36</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I*, p. 129.

<sup>37</sup> The remark could equally be construed as Barker's comment on certain members of the Royal Family who are known to have at times used vulgar language.

he is, in a sense, forced to condemn his own hypocrisy. For what has Hacker's aim all along been except to make of Mrs Toynbee 'a ready-reckoner' or a body 'disciplined for productivity'?<sup>38</sup> Mrs Toynbee is merely following Hacker's code of practice. As such he of all people is least entitled to complain about her behaviour.

Nevertheless, that Hacker is revealed hypocritical and spiteful, though significant, is not the important issue here; what is really important is his discovery of his dignity. Hacker's assertion of his dignity is historical in that it represents the protest of the underdog in human relations over the years. Taken in relation to the Gentleman's reference to the constitution, Hacker's discovery of his dignity is well timed to reinforce a familiar argument that the whole system is structured to deprive the underdogs of their dignity. Moments earlier, when the Gentleman threatens Hacker with cancellation of his contract and even with prison, he turns to the Prince and says: 'England, what I would not 'ave done for it on condition I wasn't out of pocket. You people turn patriots into spivs' (p. 68). It matters little whether Hacker is working class or an aspiring aristocrat. Dignity under pressure becomes the issue in this complex and dangerous environment. Indeed, the fact that both Mrs Toynbee and Hacker are not working class could only heighten the plight of members of that class. The less advantaged are likely to suffer more humiliation in similar circumstances.

It is interesting to note that Barker makes of discovery of one's dignity a crucial issue in this panoramic discourse on history and the body. *The Love of a Good Man* ends in a typical Barker fashion: the audience's expectations are disrupted until the very last moments of the play, and the reconciliatory moment is always demolished. The final words in the play are left for Hacker. To the tune of 'When Irish Eyes' being whistled by departing Riddle, indicating the latter's content with being a member of Hard's imperial army, Hacker, deprived of profits and more importantly of Mrs Toynbee, gazes at the chair where she was sitting few moments earlier; then, '

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<sup>38</sup> Charles Lambert and Garth Gillan, *Michel Foucault*, p. 74.

*surreptitiously, with a glance over his shoulder, he examines the chair, then picking it up, he kisses the seat [and says]: fuck it... I have the moral fibre of a rat'* (pp. 69-70). Given what he has been doing all along, and coming as it does hard on the heels of his rather spectacular challenge to the Prince, Hacker's 'assertion of his right', is probably an accurate moral self-assessment. But this is an unsettling moment, as it is not clear whether given the possibility of a recurrence of similar circumstances, Hacker will embark on a code of practice similar to that he has been adopting, or whether he will, instead, act on his moral discovery and go on trying to assert his dignity. But the importance of Hacker's belated discovery is that it is placed by Barker within a wide and complex historical context.

Following the unknown-warrior ceremony, Hacker, still unaware that Mrs Toynbee means to desert him, congratulates himself and his apprentice Clout for their achievement and the historical position they have just secured for Mrs Toynbee's son:

Mr Billy Toynbee. In Westminster Abbey before a massive concourse of the nation.  
Buried among kings and poets. Ramsay MacDonald, Mr Asquith, and assembled  
upper class tarts weeping. I feel quite envious. (p. 57)

Earlier Hacker spoke about his name being written in small letters at the back of epitaphs that would soon be rubbed out. So his envy, is, in this respect, understandable. Hacker is probably signalling his class aspirations here, for Mrs Toynbee herself is an upper-class woman. But to discover that Mrs Toynbee's aim is also to secure a position for her dead son amongst state dignitary of past and recent history, would indicate that she still immensely appreciates her social position. In other words, Hacker is unknowingly fooling himself into believing that she would truly have him as a future husband.

Mrs Toynbee's feeling of grief over the son is undeniably genuine, but given her entanglement with the Prince, her case is somehow diminished, especially viewed in relation to Hacker's remark about weeping tarts. The ending of the play suggests that were she to be seen weeping, it would be over the body of the Prince and not that of the son. This conclusion further

enhances Barker's already strong point, regarding the unknown warrior. For Billy can reach this status only in death. The point that is thus being made by Barker is that state dignitaries of past and present march over the bodies of their victims. But in order to enhance his point Barker deconstructs the myth of the unknown warrior by foregrounding the unknown or the suppressed barbarous fact about history. It is very significant indeed that the returned body is not that of Billy Toyne but of a German soldier. For how did the body of this German soldier and his colleagues come into deadly and destructive contact with that of Billy and his colleagues except for the fanatical fascism of his statesmen, too? History is nothing but a 'march' by rulers on both sides to the conflict 'over the prostrate bodies of their victims'.<sup>39</sup>

Barker has often been accused of being a pessimist, even a nihilist. 'Worryingly', it is thought, 'Barker's plays communicate unqualified unadulterated nihilism, where nothing is of any value and everything (and of course everyone) is expendable in the cause of nothing but chaos'.<sup>40</sup> This statement perversely validates Barker's view of history. It indicates that Barker negatively calls for the necessity of social change. Underneath this kind of criticism, however, is a view of history as linear; that the writer should paint a positive view of the future and demonstrate the inevitability of progress or triumph of the proletariat, and so on. Barker finds it difficult to write in those terms. However, Barker is not short of gestures as to how to cope with the chaos of history. Hacker's indignant protest is surely a good example. What makes his position greatly admirable is that he is not led to discover it but pushed towards it. Given his position in the power structure shown to be existing in the play, Hacker's discovery of his dignity is certainly a very positive gesture and even a socialist one.<sup>41</sup> It is socialist in that it is a manifestation of his

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<sup>39</sup> Walter Benjamin, quoted by Frederic Jameson, *Political Unconsciousness: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Cambridge, 1983), p. 281. See also Tony Dunn's good analyses of the play, in which he demonstrates the importance of the body in the forced clash between what he calls an 'idealistic' and 'pragmatic' worlds in *The Love of a Good Man* ('Howard Barker: Socialist Playwright for Our Times', pp. 73-78).

<sup>40</sup> Catherine Itzin, 'Nihilist View of Ideology', *Tribune*, 5 August 1977.

<sup>41</sup> In fact in his interview in *New Theatre Voices of the Seventies*, p. 196, Barker himself identifies this quality, the primitive assertion of one's dignity, as a positive and socialist feature in his work.

recognition of the humiliation he has to endure as a result of his lower status in a class-structured society. Had it been one of the working-class figures in the play who has made this positive gesture, Barker could, with some justification, have been accused of being patronising.

Standing up to one's dignity can, however, be a costly thing- indeed disastrous and deadly, as the experience of Scrope in *Victory: Choices in Reaction* (staged 1983) proves. Most of the ingredients present in *The Love of a Good Man* are also available in *Victory*: a renowned moment of crisis in history, this time the aftermath of the English Revolution; a woman in pursuit of a disintegrating body; a sex-maniac monarch who also at one stage tries to seduce her; and a number of money-grabbers. However, compared with *The Love of a Good Man*, *Victory* is more tragic in mode and more complex in its characterization as well as in its treatment of situation. One way of describing *The Love of a Good Man* is to say it is a dark comedy or a farce. Certainly Hacker's relationship has its comic moments. *Victory*, on the other hand, is probably the first play to exemplify what Barker later calls a 'new form of tragedy' or 'theatre of catastrophe'. Pain or reconciliation with pain is the hallmark of the last type of theatre. Therefore, for Barker, it is the most suitable method to deal with history as, for him, pain is the essence of history.

*Victory* includes names of actual figures of the period in question. Those figures include King Charles II, the poet John Milton, and the king's mistress Devonshire. It is perhaps because of the presence of such names that critics wrongly believe that Barker is after 'authenticity'. That he is not, disrupts their expectations and leads them to conclude that the play is not historical in any sense: 'History provides a context for Barker but little more: *Victory* is fundamentally a study of how an individual sustains a private integrity in the face of seemingly overwhelming odds; it is about the astonishing subterfuges necessary to keep alight the spirit in an age of darkness. Other historical periods could have afforded analogous contexts'.<sup>42</sup> The fact that, as Cave indicates, other periods could have provided suitable context for Barker's play makes it all the more

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<sup>42</sup> Richard Allen Cave, *New British Drama in Performance on the London Stage: 1970 to 1985*, p. 293.

historical. For it is an asset of *Victory*, if other historical contexts are equally congenial to what it says.

As pointed out at the start of this chapter, Barker's history is that of the present historicised. He tends to emphasise similarities rather than make contrastive analysis. It is no secret that Barker has written this play in reaction to the successive election of a right-wing government in this country. The similitude between the political situation now and then in the Restoration period prompted him to write *Victory*. For one of Barker's main concerns is indeed, as Cave suggests, to present choices as to how an aggressive right-wing ideology can be faced. Thus, starting with an image, Barker constructs a world in which the nature of opposition comes under investigation. As in *The Love of a Good Man*, in order to give this investigation the necessary historic overview, the body is made the intersection point between disciplinary codes and diverse power relations.

As its title suggests, *Victory: Choices in Reaction* presents a number of choices by characters reacting to their environment. The first choice in reaction is, of course, that of the restoration of Monarchy itself- it is a reaction to the revolutionary Republicanism. In the play, exhumation of the John Bradshaw's body seems to be the pre-condition of the King for his return from France.<sup>43</sup> But the very first words of the play suggest that this (exhumation) was made possible by an act of betrayal on the part of Scrope, the former secretary of the exhumed regicide. Given the power and aggressiveness of the Royalist camp, signified by the obsessively sexual language of the soldiers, and later of the King and his cavaliers, Scrope's act seems understandable.<sup>44</sup> It is only that Scrope himself never seems to forgive himself for this act. Thus,

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<sup>43</sup> The king's reaction to the rising power of Capital will be tackled in chapter four, as this is done through visual and bodily imagery.

<sup>44</sup> Cave, amongst others, misinterprets the purpose of Barker's use of scatological language: 'The explicitness and obscenity pall because shock is not a response that readily activates imaginative or intellectual discrimination' (*New British Drama in Performance on the London Stage: 1970 to 1985*, p. 293). But, if used at all, shock is, in this respect, at the bottom of Barker's list of priorities. Language is here used as a device of affirming the fictionality of characters. Above all, the use of language in this way is also intended to signal its use by the Royalist Camp as a technology of power, as a element in the 'regime' of 'power-knowledge-pleasure' in the play. For a slightly different interpretation of the relationship between language and power in this play, see Eric Mottram, 'The Vital Language of Impotence', p. 47. However, regardless of the fact that, as mentioned above, Barker does not seek authenticity, this language is not entirely anachronis-

the act prompts him to react in a way which strongly re-affirms his devotion to the Republican ideals.

Scrope starts where Hacker ends, and where Stoa in *Downchild* later does, with the assertion of his dignity and his right to say no to the existing regime. Indeed throughout Scrope is shown to be representing the outright, uncompromising or fight-it-to-the-finish kind of opposition to the loosely combined powers of Monarchy and Capital. As such Scrope makes of himself a 'legitimate' target to the monarch's wrath and revenge- Scrope's tongue is ripped off. Disfigured as he then becomes, Scrope is displayed or rather offered as a wedding gift for the would-be couple, Devonshire and Hambro. Even then Scrope mutters what the king calls 'the filthy act of History', the slogans of the revolution:

- SCROPE. Long liff the commonwealth ohh equals!  
 CHARLES. Oh, no, that's old stuff, ain't it—  
 SCROPE. Down wiff the sin ohh money and monarchy!  
 CHARLES. Oh, dear, I never asked him to say this!  
 SCROPE. Long liff the atheist re— hub— lic!  
 CHARLES. Stop spoiling Billy's banquet with all this old stuff, really, it was a youthful aberration, wasn't it, this old red muck!  
 SCROPE (*in tears and frustration*). The sin off kings- disease of riches—  
 BRADSHAW. Shut up.  
 SCROPE (*seeing her*). Aaagggghhheddawaay!  
 BRADSHAW. Just shut up.  
 SCROPE (*recoiling from her*). Aaagggghhheddawaay!  
 BRADSHAW. What do you think you've got there, dignity? Really, I have seen some idiots, crashing about the doorposts of time and history, shouting out their old abuse, but you, what have you discovered, your manhood or something? You absurd thing, you should be nailed to board. Shut up. (pp. 58-59)

The marriage is supposed to represent the unity of state and financial powers under the king's leadership. Thus, a gift that stands for the extinction of the opposing camp in form of Scrope's disfigured body- a sad present as the king calls it- would be the appropriate choice. The king's

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tic. Since Cave is after authenticity, he should have noted the representativeness of the language in *Victory* of the literary language of the age in question as he must be aware of the highly scatological nature of language in some of the Restoration poetry.

toning down of his rhetoric is probably meant to indicate his sense of triumph and security, because of the would-be full restoration of the power of monarchy. But in making him speak in such a calm and dignified manner, Barker also means to heighten further the dramatic and tragic moment, already made intense visually through contrast between people in their bridal dress and Scrope's deformed body- through verbal contrast of tone and diction. The king probably expects Scrope to express regret and to recant. Instead, Scrope surprises him by defiantly yelling the mottos of the Commonwealth.

Bradshaw's intervention at that moment has a crucial value. She gives an accurate historical assessment of Scrope's position. In highlighting the penalty for outright opposition and standing up to one's dignity, Bradshaw historicises Scrope's experience. But regardless of how derogatory of Scrope Bradshaw's remark is, it confirms Barker's point, already visually made, about history and the body. To oppose in the way Scrope does is to receive the battering of history. The body is at the receiving end of the stick of history. Not only is his tongue ripped, but Scrope is most likely eliminated, for nothing is heard about him thereafter. Ripping out Scrope's tongue or his physical elimination is a manifestation of a deadly clash between two opposing ideologies.

In pronouncing Scrope an 'idiot', Bradshaw probably speaks for a large section of her theatre audience as well. For given the circumstances, admirable though it really is, Scrope's conduct is futile and suicidal. Nevertheless, in apologizing, as she soon does, to her audience in the play for her 'unseemly' interruption of the wedding ceremony, and more importantly in declaring herself 'perfectly all right', having 'clean drawers' and 'lips', she is effectively inviting her theatre audience to pass a judgement on her own choice in reaction, suggesting that their judgement should be tempered by understanding Scrope's bodily condition at the time. In fact, part of Barker's aim in *Victory* is to provide his audience with a number of choices from which to choose, were they to be faced with similar position. He, however, declines to take a direct instructive role; nor does he appear to take sides with any of his characters against the others. In

fact, in this particular case, he makes the choice of each one of them all the more credible by keeping them side by side.

From the moment they meet until she secures her place as Devonshire's servant, Bradshaw is always accompanied by Scrope. In the process, they comment on the acts of one another, while their theatre audience can judge them both. The difference between the two is brought about from the time they appear on stage together- indeed, Bradshaw's own final assessment of Scrope is anticipated then. Equally the audience are given enough information about what to expect from her even before the two characters meet. Bradshaw's aim is to rid herself of what she now considers a handicap- her dead husband's revolutionary politics. This is evident from the start of the play. Although her children Cropper and McConochie ultimately make their own choices in reaction, she does her part by educating them away from their father's ideals. When Scrope himself comes full with apologies for the disclosure of his master's place of burial, he is surprised to find that Bradshaw could not care less: 'done with accusing... done with shame, and conscience, duty, guilt, and power, all of it' (p. 18). Bradshaw's point is that this is no time to stand up for one's principle and dignity, but to keep the head down and lie down, even crawl on four limbs like an animal:

We must crawl now, go down on all fours, be a dog or rabbit, no more standing up now, standing is over, standing up's for men with sin and dignity. No, got to be a dog now, and keep our teeth. I am crawling and barking, stalking, fawning, stealing breakfast, running when I see a stick, taken when I'm taken, pupping under hedges, being a proper four-legged bitch. (*Pause. He stares at her.*) Well, of course I shall have to learn it! Can't be a dog overnight! (p. 18)

Not expecting such a reaction from her, Scrope naturally gazes at her in amazement.

The whole of Bradshaw's experience is epitomised in a brief lecture she gives to the king's mistress Devonshire in response to the latter's request for advice as to whether she must go back to the king or not:

Yes means no resistance. Yes means going with the current. Yes means lying down when it rains and standing up when it's sunny. Yes urge. Yes womb. Yes power. I lived with a man whose no was in the middle of his heart, whose no kept him thin as a

bone and stole the juices from him. No is pain and yes is pleasure, no is man and yes is nature. Yes is old age and no is early death. Yes is laughter, no is torture. I hate no. No is misery and lonely nights. Do you follow or shall I say it again? (p. 41)

Like the Bishop's sermon in *The Love of a Good Man*, this lecture embodies Barker's view about history and its rootedness in the body. Bradshaw manages to do those strange and rather irrational acts by creating a docile body of herself or a body that is capable of withstanding suffering, pain and humiliation. Thus, Cave's conclusion about the play is basically correct except that he fails to appreciate the historical dimension of his conclusion.

However, it would be a gross misinterpretation of Bradshaw's character to suggest that she is a 'yes-figure' in the tradition of Jardine or Scadding in the plays discussed above. Even though she acts in the way she does basically for her survival, 'resistance', the word she dismisses, would seem to be her aim. Bradshaw stands at the opposite of Jardine's and Scadding's yes. Equally, she is on the opposite side of Scrope's no. In other words, Bradshaw is at once a 'yes' and 'no' figure. And Barker skilfully keeps her on those edges until the very end of her journey. For her apparent wilful accommodation with the regime is throughout simultaneously undercut by the very fact that she is undergoing all the trouble, all the suffering and humiliation in order to re-possess the remains of her husband- an act that should imply a re-affirmation of her belief in his ideals. In fact, it is probably more true to say that she is a no-figure like Scrope. And in placing them side by side, Barker presents his audience with two versions of a no-figure. Despite their apparent differences these characters are basically similar. The effects of history on their bodies should not, therefore, be dissimilar. This is why it is important to emphasise this complexity or duality of Bradshaw's character. In being shown such a complex and unstable figure, one who combines within herself the will to submit and rebel, and almost permanently acting upon this will, Bradshaw is made by Barker a character who perfectly embodies the view he sets between history and the body. Bradshaw's body is, metaphorically speaking, fractured. The duality in her character is a product of or an equivalent to the conflict between the vanishing ideology and the rising one. In other words, despite what she claims about herself, being 'perfectly all right' and

having 'lips', like Scrope, Bradshaw is a fractured and fragmented body. It is only because Scrope is not such a complex figure that his body is 'literally' damaged, so to speak.

What is said of Scrope could equally be said about his political enemy the cavalier Ball. The latter is an ardent supporter of absolute Monarchy, a remnant of the pre-Revolution Monarchy. In this respect, it is interesting to note that before he rapes Bradshaw, Ball threateningly declares: '**Look, I am an agent of Charles Stuart, all I do is legal, naught is wrong, see**' (p. 43)? Thus, as an agent of an absolute figure, as apparently Ball believes himself to be, Ball feels entitled to do whatever he likes. The king, however, recognises that he needs the co-operation of the City in order to have the semblance of absolutism that he or Ball seeks. But because he is such a one-sided or flat character, Ball can not understand the complexities involved. During the wedding, his enthusiasm gets the better of him, and he murders Hambro- an act that costs him the loss of his tongue. In this respect, the fracturing of Scrope's body is a manifestation of a conflict between a defunct wing, so to speak, of the Monarchist ideology and the rising and stronger wing.

Amidst the chaos following Ball's act during the wedding scene, Bradshaw manages to get hold of the remains of her husband's body. *Victory* ends on a rainy day at Bradshaw's daughter's house in Suffolk. Having achieved her goal, Bradshaw goes back there, carrying a bag full of bones. She is as usual accompanied, but this time not by Scrope but by deformed Ball, whose baby (the product of the rape earlier) and hers, she is also carrying. The daughter is naturally surprised to see her mother and her companions, but with rain falling and the sound of thunder roaring, it is no time to keep the comers outside. She invites them to come inside the house: '*BRADSHAW does not move. CROPPER takes the baby from her, hurries away. After a few moments BRADSHAW goes to BALL, puts her arm round him. She pulls a scarf over his head, then they go, clasped together, towards the house*' (p. 63). This embrace of fractured bodies is 'emblematic of an unlikely reconciliation of opposites, united in essence, the *leitmotif* of the play'.<sup>45</sup> These two characters were and are still at opposite poles from the official point of view of

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<sup>45</sup> David Rabey, 'Howard Barker's Theatre of Education'.

history; that is, they are still ideologically and politically bitter enemies, but they are united from the unofficial viewpoint of history; that is in their experience of pain, the essence of history. In other words, the embrace is equivalent in its significance to the selection of a body of a German soldier to be the unknown warrior in *The Love of a Good Man*. The embrace of the broken bodies is historical because it reveals the barbarism of history.<sup>46</sup>

Based on what so far been said, it is entirely to be expected that Barker's plays should continue to be dismissed as unhistorical. What informs Barker's critics' view of history is their belief in progress, whether in the 'conservative' or 'progressive' sense. By contrast, with his emphasis on essence, and more importantly with his association of that essence with suffering, 'sameness' is, probably, the most appropriate word to describe Barker's view of history. If the term 'story' is to be used to describe Barker's presentation of history, it should be emphasised that the story tells a very lengthy tale of barbarism. Viewed in this way, it is easy to understand why historical moments provide a context for Barker and nothing else. This conclusion may seem to lend some credence to charges of pessimism levelled with frequency at his work. But, in fact, if anything, this 'bleak' view of human history points to his romanticism. It leads to the conclusion that 'a utopian impulse' underlies his view of history. In this respect, what is said about George Orwell's work is equally true of Barker's. The negative images Barker seems obsessed with presenting 'dialectically allude' to his utopia. Barker's utopianism 'realizes itself most precisely not in the positive determination of what it wants, but in the statement of what it does not want'.<sup>47</sup> In presenting this nightmarish vision of history, Barker is alluding to the possibility of another being, an alternative form of existence.

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<sup>46</sup> In its eloquence and improbability the embrace between Ball and Bradshaw anticipates that between Ilona and Stalin at the end of *The Power of the Dog*, a play which also deals with the effect of a clash between ideologies, this time communist and fascist, on the body.

<sup>47</sup> See Heinz Zimmermann, 'Wesker and Utopia in the Sixties', *Modern Drama*, XXIX, no. 2 (June 1986), 184-206 (p. 186).

## B. Myth

Apart from what he says in the quotation above about the mythical aspect of his treatment of history, Barker does not provide a particular definition of myth, but given his view of history he does not need to offer one. What he is saying is that history, the history he is opposing, is itself a myth because it is based on inversion of truth. In saying that, Barker is entirely consistent in his claim about the intricate relationship between history and myth in his work. If, as he maintains, the essence of history is pain, then, any story, any political, moral, religious, philosophical or social creed or grouping which seeks to hide, obliterate or nullify pain stands accused in Barker's book of history. Barker's recent tendency to write works overtly concerned with long-held religious and literary mythology should, therefore, be viewed within this context. His main contention seems to be, and what the remaining part of this chapter seeks to prove is that, being themselves rooted in acts of violence and cruelty, myths are there to justify the barbarism of history.

In terms of the relationship set between history and myth, *Pity in History*, a television play (transmitted 1985), can be judged as transitional, marking Barker's change of direction towards illumination of the dark side of history through analysis of religious and literary myth. Like *Victory*, the play is set in 17th century, focusing this time on the attitude of the Cromwellian army during the Revolution. In fact, the play seems to be a dense re-cycling of *The Love of a Good Man*, and *Victory*. By reversing and developing some of the situations and character-relationships and hints in those plays, *Pity in History* also anticipates *The Last Supper*.

*Pity in History*, therefore, contains most of the elements needed to dramatize Barker's view about the relationship between history and the body. In this respect, it is likely that the randomness of the cook's shooting is meant to signify the arbitrary and unpredictable progress of history. The display of the victim's wound and suffering foregrounds the pain such an accidental movement of history brings about. The officer's decision to remove him from sight shows how

decision makers try to hide the true facts of history in order to carry on with their policies smoothly. Obviously, the rootedness of the historical experience in the body is from the start brought to the viewer's attention with the exhibition of the wounded person. But the removal of Murgatroyd to the crypt turns out to be a device intended to demonstrate further the fracturing of the body in correspondence with the clash between the warring factions. Fearing that his noise would attract the Republican soldiers' attention, the former lady of the manor, who later happens to seek refuge in the crypt, slits Murgatroyd's throat.

The first words uttered by the soldiers establish the complicity of religion in the cruelty in history. In a sense, *Pity in History* is a dramatization of the Bishop's sermon in *The Love of a Good Man*. The relationship between God and pain is established in a straightforward manner:

BOYS.	Why are we fighting?
SOLDIERS.	Because we are right!
BOYS.	Why will we win?
SOLDIERS.	Because we are stronger!
BOYS.	Why are we stronger?
SOLDIERS.	Because God is on our side!
MURGATROYD.	I can see you, Apps, I watch you, Apps, eyes right to the stretcher, look, the dead man's eyes!
BOYS.	Are we right to be ruthless?
SOLDIERS.	It shortens the pain. <sup>48</sup>

The soldiers' speedy answers as well as the assertiveness of the answers suggest that the soldiers are robots programmed to fight and kill. More importantly, the substance of what the soldiers say or the logic of it firmly indicates that God is on the side of violence and infliction of pain. The soldiers are given a moral basis for their violence. Elimination of pain through ruthlessness and efficient acts of cruelty is made their responsibility. However, if due to some inefficient act of ruthlessness a victim suffers from prolonged pain, as is the case with Murgatroyd, then, the victim can be sure of an even greater reward. Chaplain Croop tells Murgatroyd: 'Rest now, you

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<sup>48</sup> Howard Barker, 'Pity in History', *Gambit International Theatre Research*, 11, no. 41 (1984), 5-31 (p. 7). Further reference to this play by page number in the text is to this edition.

have your pain in a perfect cause- for Christ and liberty' (p. 8). What Barker appears to be saying is that in seeking to cancel out pain in the name of a higher moral order, in propagating the view that the course of history is supernaturally determined, Christianity mythologises history, and thereby justifies the cruelty of real history.<sup>49</sup>

This point is reinforced when Croop is shown to act to thwart any attempt to 'desupernaturalise' the course of history, or the cause of suffering in history. Barker uses the encounter between officer Factor and mason Gaukroger to promote what can be termed as 'a negative dialectic' of history. Apparently confident that God is on his side and in fulfilment of his moral and revolutionary crusade, officer Factor enters the church to destroy the emblems of immorality, the statues, including the one Gaukroger is still carving. In his down-to-earth response to the officer's claim about God, Gaukroger brings the liturgies shouted by the soldiers at the start of the play to their logical conclusion. If not amoral and an active supporter of violence, God, as Gaukroger argues, is a fence-sitter. Both sides to the conflict 'quote Him', so it stands to reason that he is on 'the side that will win, of course' (p. 21). But when morality is discussed in terms of aesthetics, it transpires that Factor's discourse is equally down-to-earth. Factor accuses Gaukroger of telling lies, of not showing the true self of the character whose statue he is carving. Gaukroger counteracts by saying that, morality notwithstanding, his art tells the truth. It tells that the man's wife has the money to commission him.

In the ensuing discussion Gaukroger provides 'the document-of-culture' history of England, while Factor presents 'the document-of-barbarism' one. Gaukroger re-tells a nightmare he once had, in which 'people spent their lives making something they called Museum... And the Museum grew, until it covered England'. Gaukroger sees his work among the 'documents' in that museum, but that is how it goes, 'No pity in History', as he further adds. Factor immediately supplies the barbaric history of that museum: 'It's sweat, and suffering, and going without, and touching caps,

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<sup>49</sup> See Martin Jay, *Adorno* (London, 1984), p. 109.

and bending knees, and dirty childbirths on old straw, and drinking unclean water and all old England's lovely parks and stinking hospitals' (p. 25). Though the speech is basically intended to counteract Gaukroger's re-telling of his dream, Factor intends it as a signal for his men to start demolition work.

However, horrified to listen to such a view which makes of 'property' a 'sin', chaplain Croop, who happens to be standing by, intervenes in time to stop the senseless destruction. The chaplain reminds the officer that communist teaching is prohibited in the army. 'God's kingdom on earth' does not mean a classless society, as Factor believes. Instead, as the chaplain lectures the soldiers following the dismissal of Factor, there must be 'patience, tolerance and self-control': 'I think we say, though we have come from battle rough-handed and clumsy in our boots, we might tread among fine things and yet break none. So the people may say of us, look, the regiment passed by with feet as light as angels, though five hundred marched among fine china, they did not break a single cup' (pp. 26-27). Thus the tone and diction of the chaplain's address markedly contrast with Gaukroger's and Factor's. And Barker's point is that this advocacy of angelic behaviour is nothing but an idealisation of the course of history, an idealisation that is basically aimed at obscuring pain, the essence of history.

In *The Last Supper* (staged 1988), history itself is re-presented through a re-appraisal of Christian mythology. Sub-titled 'A New Testament', the play is not an attempt to re-write the story of Jesus or an act of iconoclasm on Barker's part. Barker can only be described as an iconoclast, if telling the truth is in itself an act of iconoclasm. His 'New Testament' is nothing but his nightmarish vision of history told within the context of what he terms 'the very repulsive side of Christ's teachings'.<sup>50</sup> Thus, if the play is to be summarised in a single sentence, the most appropriate would be Lvov's intervention when some of his disciples are commenting on the return of an 'ambulance train' from the war front: 'The posturing of pity obscures... the secret

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<sup>50</sup> Howard Barker, quoted by Steve Grant, 'Barker's Bite', *Time Out* (17-24 February 1988), 14-5 (p. 14).

pleasure in another's agony'.<sup>51</sup> As I shall argue in chapter nine, Barker's messianic figure is an artist, a dreamer who is concerned with telling his people the truth. As he sees it, 'pity', a central value of the figure he is opposing, is a murderer of truth. It obscures the reality of the moment, and provides the opportunists and the unscrupulous with an outlet to secure their ends. Like Christ, Lvov presents his teachings in parables.

Many reviewers of the production have noted with disapproval that the parables do nothing to clarify Lvov's already obscure teachings or the complex text of the play itself. But that goes into the very heart of the matter: obscurity of parables and play is part of both being oppositional to Christ's teachings. The parables are not parables in the way Christ's parables are. They do not tell stories with particular messages. Instead, they present fragmentary images of alternative life in which Christ's teachings are rendered redundant. This is achieved through so many contradictions and very irrational changes in character and situation within a single parable. In other words, the parables embody the Lvovian philosophy in as much as they are contexts that demonstrate the negative, but very often neglected aspect of Christian values, as Barker sees it. It is particularly important for the actors to demonstrate instability of characters, and the arbitrariness and contradiction of each moment. Equally, the audience must be prepared to think carefully in order to make sense of the contradictory images shown on stage, to formulate the messages of the parables.

The parables can be made sense of by adding them up together and at once dialectically relating them to both Lvov's and Christ's teachings. The parables progress cumulatively; that is, they present different possibilities which confirm Lvov's statement, just quoted, as the following analysis of the first three of them shows.

In the first parable, three soldiers are shown entering a monastery on orders to remove its

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<sup>51</sup> *Howard Barker, The Last Supper* (London, 1988), p. 19. Further reference to this play by page number in the text is to this edition.

bells. In war conditions, such as those shown to be existing in *The Last Supper*, soldiers are expected to go on the rampage: to loot, rape, beat and kill. Fearful of any such acts taking place in the monastery, Little Monk welcomes the soldiers and offers to provide them with food and drink, a luxury in times of war. Yet these soldiers are different. They decline the offer and take it to be an attempt on Little Monk's part to distract them from their job. Little Monk then resigns himself to what he thinks will be the soldiers next step. He kneels down and asks the soldiers to beat him. That too, they take to be an attempt to distract them from doing the job they came to do. However, once the Monk recognises that, as they claim, the soldiers neither beat nor kill, the Monk himself starts to change his attitude towards them. He begins to act in an unexpected manner, just as the soldiers themselves are. From respect inspired by fear of the soldiers, he reacts with contempt and derision, calling them 'scum' and threatening to 'thrash them' with 'a branch'. Another unexpected element arises with the entry of Abbott. Thinking that the soldiers have scared Little Monk, Abbott pleads with them to forget about Little Monk and beat him instead. But once the latter recognises that they are not interested in beating, he orders that their weapons be confiscated and kept in the crypt until the end of the war. However, the re-entry of Little Monk with a stick further complicates the situation and heightens the contradiction in the parable. Despite Abbott's request to Little Monk to restrain himself, the latter insists on beating the soldiers:

ABBOTT.	Lie on the floor, or he will kick you. <i>(They lie down.)</i> Oh, God! I threatened them with violence and they reacted!
LITTLE MONK.	I want to beat them!
ABBOTT.	No, no-
LITTLE MONK.	<b>I want to beat them!</b>
ABBOTT	<i>(turning away).</i> All right, beat them!
LITTLE MONK.	Hey! <i>(He whacks their backs.)</i>
ABBOTT.	We are beating our enemies...
LITTLE MONK.	Now I want to kill them!
ABBOTT.	No!

LITTLE MONK.      Yes! (*He goes to thrash them again. The ABBOTT grabs him.*)  
 Why not! Why not!

ABBOTT.              I don't know, I only— (*They grapple with each other.*)

LITTLE MONK.      Let me go!

ABBOTT                In the name of God, I—

LITTLE MONK.      I hate you! I hate you! (*He slaps the ABBOTT's face . He stops. They are breathless.*) You see how we... you se how...  
 (p. 6)

Thus, once the soldiers act in an unexpected manner, once the Monk's expectations of the soldiers are denied, he is himself revealed as a secretly aggressive character, devoid of pity and sympathy. 'Marching in circles', the phrase frequently repeated by the soldiers, does seem to refer to social values. Once somebody deviates from those values or does not live up to people's expectation of him or her, he or she is attacked by those who would not normally be expected to behave in a bad manner.

The second parable proceeds to discredit the concept of pity from another angle. A child is shown crying for help in the snow. A woman passes by, but she ignores the child's cries. The woman is not spoiled by pity. Her pigs are more important to her than the child. In any case, with the war going on unabated, the child may not have a long life. However, because the child makes herself so pathetic, the woman relents for a moment, during which she finds herself trapped in the snow. The child tries to take chance of the woman's moment of shame, but she, too, finds herself trapped and unable to go to the house. Nevertheless, the child manages to cause the woman more trouble by attracting the soldiers' attention:

McNOY.                We're coming!

McSTAIN.              We see you!

MacTTLEE.            We kill nobody! (*They pick their way over the stage.*)

WIDOW.                You had to call help. Now look at us. If I had taken no notice how perfect everything would have been. I know I should never have left the house. One error! That's all it takes! One error and every error follows after! This comes of heeding the human voice.

ALL SOLDIERS        (*looking*). Women in holes...

WIDOW. Only pigs are worth replying to.  
 ALL SOLDIERS. Pigs! Where?  
 WIDOW. You see, everything's the result of everything else!  
 ALL SOLDIERS. What pigs?  
 CHILD. On the bed.  
 MacATTLEE. On the bed?  
 CHILD. In the bathroom.  
 McNOY. In the bathroom?  
 WIDOW. Kill everything. Kill the lot! (p. 16)

Thus, because of her shame and pity, the woman is rendered a victim to exploitation by both the child and the soldiers. It only needed one act of charity to render her penniless, and later a victim of an attempted act of rape.

Similarly, in the third parable, while on 'a mission of mercy', as she puts it, a Nun is shown trapped in her teaching at the Nunnery. She falls prey to a blind but very opportunistic Violinist. Because she does not respond to his first calls for help, the Violinist breaks his bow. Even though she suspects he is blackmailing her, the Nun cannot refrain from offering help. The Violinist, who keeps saying that he brings tears to the eyes by playing Bartok, seizes that chance to rob her of her money and attempts to rape her. He is, however, prevented from doing such an ugly crime by the sudden appearance of the soldiers. Worse still the soldiers seem to blame her for breaking the bow of the Violinist.

VIOLINIST *(standing)*. I'll march with you, then. Soldiers always find the roads. And what's a beggar without roads?  
 McSTAIN. This is the road.  
 VIOLINIST. This is the road? They are not what they used to be, then...  
*(They start to move.)*  
 NUN. Don't go without me!  
 VIOLINIST. Don't go? But you have a mission.  
 NUN. No. I never had a mission. I was running away. *(Pause.)*  
 VIOLINIST. Hold my shoulder, then, and if we meet peasants they will trust you, because of your habit. Then we can rob them better.  
 ALL SOLDIERS. Thus we might all survive. (p. 28)

Both the Soldiers' statement and the Nun's decision to cling to her rapist strongly recall *Victory*,

especially Bradshaw's robbery of her husband's followers and the education she offers them as a result of such an act.

In fact, each of the parables in *The Last Supper* strikes an optimistic note. But the optimism is inseparable from the attempt in each to strike a further blow at the concept of pity and related values. Having herself been victimised, the Nun herself takes part in inflicting suffering on others. Her aim is presumably like Bradshaw's, to give the victims the 'education of a life-time'. In one of his aphorisms of which the parables are meant to be illustrations, Lvov is reported to have taught his disciples that 'the right to suffering' is paramount: 'She who hides her pain conspires in the infliction of the wound that follows' (p. 37). Had the Nun decided to acquiesce or forgive her attacker, she would have been liable to such a charge. Thus, within the context of the abolition of pity that this parable or the play in general is advocating the Nun's facilitation of pain is a positive act. Similarly, the Abbott's decision in the first parable to let the soldiers go away with the bells is an optimistic counter measure to Little Monk's aggression and his lack of any sense of pity. The Abbott is perversely regenerated by his recognition of the falsehood of his values.

The parables do, therefore, clarify rather than obfuscate their author's ideas. These are no more than a negative critique of Christ's teachings. In a way what Lvov does is to turn Christian or conventional moral and liberal values upside-down by foregrounding the negative side of the values. Therefore, judging Lvov and his disciples by the standards of existing values would make them look very awkward characters. The full implication of the parables is especially evident in Lvov's relationship with the disciples, and the way each of them acts or introduces herself or himself. None of those makes the slightest concessions to charity, pity, shame, or sympathy. For example, Susannah proudly declares that she has smothered conscience in her own hands, and steals food from a children's orphanage. Similarly, because Judith would not allow pity to destroy her life, she announces the death of her husband in the most impassioned and calculated manner.

Likewise, Anna is ever so grateful to Lvov for making her not ashamed of being a prostitute. In like manner, Ivory unashamedly reveals his cannibalism. And the nurse Marya at one stage appears with hands and attire fully stained with blood, and tells in a very straightforward manner how she does the amputations of the wounded in war. However, it is this kind of passivity, cruelty and callousness on the part of the disciples and their leader that makes of *The Last Supper* a historical play. Pity and other related tenets of faith and morality are tranquilizers which aim at obscuring and diminishing the experience of pain and thereby hide the essential fact about history.

Lvov's growing realization of the waning of his powers leads him to conclude: 'If I wish to live forever, I have to die' (p. 47). As Lvov is a parody of Christ, this conclusion would imply that Christ had similarly suffered from a credibility gap. In other words, Christ's last supper was prompted by his fear of the revelation of the negative aspect to his teaching rather than to an act of betrayal on the part of somebody else. Christ's death in such a spectacular fashion was, therefore, meant both to distract his followers from recognising the full negative aspect of his teaching as well as to ensure its tyrannical permanence. 'Surely', Barker believes, 'the impetus of Christ's programme was running out and it needed an act of such mythic proportions to carry it through'.<sup>52</sup> Given that continuity of Christ's teaching is partly to blame for such an act, and given that continuity of the teaching and obscurity of the fact about history go hand in hand, but above all given that Barker is presenting the negative image of Christ's views, it is not unexpected that his own saints, as it were, commit acts of similar nature in order to promote or ensure the continuity of their own teaching or discoveries. Doing an act of violence with the intention of demolishing deceptive views about history involves some kind of sinning or transgressing in the traditional sense. Barker appears to make of such a sin a pre-condition for the full fact about the essence of history as he sees it.

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<sup>52</sup> Howard Barker, quoted by Steve Grant in 'Barker's Bite', *Time Out*, p. 14.

The last point is particularly stressed in *The Europeans* and *The Bite of the Night*. *The Europeans*, which has not been performed yet, tells the story of the emperor of Austria's plans for the future of Europe, following the end of the Ottoman expansion into Europe in 1683. However, from the start the emperor's plans run into trouble, because the emperor's leading general, Starhemberg, who has secured the military victory over the Turks, declines to take part in the plans. Instead, the general devotes much of his time and energy to a pregnant girl, Katrin, who has been maimed during the battle. Katrin, for her part, refuses to induce pity, and is not happy with the sympathy by some characters in the play. Starhemberg is the one who from the start shows admiration for rather than sympathy with her. Having witnessed and perpetrated much killing, he seems to have been changed by that experience. Therefore, in order to make the public aware of this suffering, Starhemberg helps Katrin expose her pain in public. In fact, he later seeks to intensify her tragedy by handing over her child Concilia to the child's ancestors, the Turks. Meanwhile, the emperor, whose movements are closely monitored and recorded by a painter, celebrates the triumph, and makes a number of ridiculous gestures, including a disguise amongst beggars in order to watch a fire-works display, but most important of all, he holds a number of sessions with various kinds of advisers, including a half-hour session with his leading academics and critics to discuss and develop a new form of art suitable for the new era. The story is given a couple of twists by dealing with the parent-child relationship, as both Starhemberg and the priest Orphuls are frequently visited by their hungry mothers. These twists are, nevertheless, closely related to the main theme or story of the play.

In *The Europeans*, the murder of his mother is both a culmination of a process of discovery on the part of priest Orphuls as well as a prelude for his elevation to the rank of Barker's kind of saint. The philosophy of this new saint is embodied in a sermon he delivers shortly after the murder. The sermon is quoted here in full partly because it also serves as an excellent epilogue to the analysis of *The Last Supper*:

Am I not the centre of the world? *(Pause)* And all that occurs, does it not occur that I might be its beneficiary, nourished on it, be it filth or excellence? *(Pause)* I assert, even the death of love is nourishment to the soul, and therefore what is evil? *(Pause)* I do not blaspheme when I declare the gift of life to be paltry and our best service to God is not to thank Him, endless thanking, no, but to improve His offer, and yet you do not, I think if I were God I would declare with some dismay, with some weariness or even vehemence, how little they do with the breath I gave them, they exhale repetitions, they kiss liars, they sleep even during waking hours, why did I make them thus I erred in some respect, they fill me with horror, have you no notion of God's horror? I am talking of the God in us whose profound groan is the background to our clatter, a bass note- **DO STOP JUMPING UP AND DOWN AND SHAKING YOUR HEAD**, is that freedom? If it was freedom, it is freedom no longer, the word is volatile, am I too difficult for you, then **REJOICE! THE SO CALLED SIMPLICITY OF CHRIST IS ITSELF A BLASPHEMY**. *(Pause)* I had not done Evil, how could I address you, who have perhaps thought Evil only? If I did not know Pity, how could I be strong, do you not know Pity is a **MAGNIFICENT MOMENT OF CONSCIOUSNESS?** It is not simple, do not hold hands there, **DO NOT HOLD HANDS IN FALSE GESTURES** as if by crowding you will exclude the groan of God, no, you must have the sound of His despair, we must learn from Judas whose gospel is not written, we should learn from the one who stood alone, for Judas did not sell Christ, the silver is a smothering of supreme motive, Judas was not corrupt but a lover of knowledge and Christ's only equal, you must pity, which is a passionate emotion and not a dead and flaccid thing as is, Pity, Knowledge, Beauty, these are the three orders of the Groaning God, I speak as your adviser in whose pain you may see real beauty, yes, I praise my beauty and you must praise yours, I end here in a proper and terrible exhaustion, I have laid myself before you which is the duty of a priest, I expose myself to you, I lay myself bare.... (pp. 87-88)

The logic for making of the murder of his mother the crossing point in Orphuls' transformation from a priest in the traditional Christian sense into the type of a priest advocated by Barker seems to involve a number of things all of which have a bearing on the interrelationship set between history, mythology and the body in Barker's work.

Charity, as the saying goes, begins at home. Therefore, in murdering his mother the priest gives a totally new meaning to charity or pity. Besides, as the priest views his transformation as a rebirth, he seems to use his mother as the vehicle for his second birth. Above all, as his reference to the 'God in us' suggests, the murder of the mother has the effect of 'desupernaturalising' or humanising the course of history or the experience of pain in history. Naturally, as a Christian priest, Orphuls looked upon Christ as the model, the epitome of suffering and sacrifice. Therefore, during the war he urged his followers to make more sacrifices in the war of liberation from the Muslims, taking Christ as their example. The priest's obliteration of pain in the name of

Christ is later channelled to serve the state, as is the case in *Pity in History*. The priest cooperates with the emperor in the latter's attempt to create a new culture for the new Europe. Orphuls strives to persuade Katrin, the injured citizen, to stay indoors content that the sacrifice she has made has paid dividend. The priest is interested in her story only in as much as it tells of the 'passage of Islam', implying that history is a question of victory or defeat in a battle. In other words, the priest wants to enclose her story in the museum of the state's official history, forgetting that in doing so, he conceals the cruelty of both Islam and Christianity. But the priest's regeneration or humanisation of the experience of pain in history has more to do with Katrin's mentor, general Starhemberg rather than with Katrin herself.

For the priest, general Starhemberg is already a Christ of some sort, because he has rescued Vienna from the Muslim occupation. Inevitably therefore, Starhemberg's determination to let Katrin expose her miseries arouses Orphuls' curiosity, and leads him to reconsider his own interest in Katrin's story. Through his association with Starhemberg, Orphuls learns that the latter's concern with Katrin is rooted in his own experience of suffering and his own cruel deeds in the war. Starhemberg, it transpires, believes that every emotion or character has its contradiction within it. 'Christ', Starhemberg explains to an ever attentive Orphuls, 'also suffered the intensest hate or he could never have found charity' (p. 65). In other words, for Starhemberg, charity, like pity, is primarily intended by Christ to obscure the true nature of his deeds or teachings. Thus, by intensifying Katrin's pain, Starhemberg suggests, he is not simply declining to be charitable or sympathetic, but also, unlike Christ, he sticks with the truth. This knowledge produces in Orphuls a mixed feeling of guilt and resentment: guilt that he has himself been ignorant of the truth and thereby contributing to much of the suffering in the war through his calls for sacrifice; and resentment for being 'tricked' by, as Stucley in *The Castle* puts it, 'The Master of Cruelty'. The priest's murder of the mother, therefore, is a manifestation of his experiencing the most intense feeling of the contradiction of pity; that is pain. In other words, as Barker puts it,

the priest's acts 'liberate him and give him power through knowledge'.<sup>53</sup> His knowledge helps him to transgress and thereby respond to the God in him, to become a new Christ who finds beauty in the ugly truth about human experience in history. The trinity of the human Christ, as Orphuls himself says, is: 'Pity, Knowledge, Beauty'.

Recurrence of words like Christ and Christianity in the analysis of the last three plays should not be interpreted as giving further ammunition for those who accuse Barker of indulging in acts of blasphemy.<sup>54</sup> Neither should my emphasis on the religious concern of the work be concerned as a diversion from the main purpose of this chapter. As I shall argue in chapter nine, the last two plays are, above all, aesthetic statements in which Barker airs his aesthetic and political views about existing society at large and in particular about the function of art and the artist in contemporary society. In concerning himself with subjects of apparently religious import, Barker is merely tracing back the cultural underpinnings of existing moral values in society. Thus, when he shows the flaws and weakness inherent in the cultural and religious precedents of contemporary culture, he foregrounds his claim about the moral collapse of this culture. In other words, Barker's interest in religious mythology is also his way of unlocking feeling about the present.

This historical aspect in Barker's work is emphasised by him in his programme notes to his most recently staged work, *The Bite of the Night* (staged 1988). This time the play shows him excavating the mantle of literary myth of antiquity to discover an even deeper cultural precedent for the breakdown and collapse of moral values in contemporary society. 'The play for an age of fracture is itself fractured', Barker asserts in his 'Notes on Witnessing the Play'. He means to alert

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<sup>53</sup> Howard Barker, in a letter to Mamdouh Imran, 28 December 1988.

<sup>54</sup> Barker's attention is not, however, confined to demonstrating the negative aspects of Christianity. He is no less scathing of Islam or Judaism. For him, both are also rooted in cruelty. The playlet about Judith and the Holofermes in *The Possibilities* focuses on that aspect in Judaism. As for Islam, it is equally shown to blame for Katrin's tragedy in *The Europeans*. But it should be noted that in *The Europeans*, as well as in a playlet in *Possibilities* and in the Interludes in the *Bite of the Night*, Barker's concern is to demonstrate the effect of clash between religions on the human personality. The clash of culture along those terms is one of the issues highlighted by Eric Mottram in his paper 'Thematic Issues in Barker's Most Recent Work'.

the audience that it does not 'struggle for permanent coherence, which is associated with the narrative of naturalism, but experiences the play moment by moment, contradiction by contradiction'. Fracturing is, therefore, Barker's way of making demands on his audience, of asking them to construct the meaning the play contains out of the cumulative effects that the play has. Fracturing also seems to be metaphorical of the way history is presented in *The Bite of the Night*, or the way the present is historicised. In this respect, it is very significant that excavation is done on Barker's behalf by the last classical scholar in a burnt-down contemporary university.

Together with his student Hogbin, Dr. Savage, as he is called, sets out on an imagined journey in search of something called knowledge. The journey takes him through Troy where he meets Helen of Troy, her creator the poet Homer and the nineteenth-century German archaeologist who actually discovered the site of the ancient city of Troy. Subtitled 'An Education', the play provides the knowledge which Savage discovers on his journey of excavation- that history is far more complex than some historians would have us believe. What is important, as the Prologue to the Second Act tells, is the consequence of or people's reaction to an event not the event itself:

Sarajevo did not cause the death of fifteen  
Million  
The theft of Helen did not cause the Siege of Troy  
Or Japan's atrocity Hiroshima  
**No more causes of wars will do**  
Not just the act  
But the choice the act induced.<sup>55</sup>

The fact this or that incident has happened or this or that person has done something or been mistreated is not in itself important. What is true is that people never learn from tragic events of history. Both causes and effects of such incidents are soon forgotten with the result that human history continues to reveal more suffering and pain.

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<sup>55</sup> Howard Barker, *The Bite of the Night* (London, 1988), pp. 40-1. Further reference to this play by page number in the text is to this edition.

In the Interlude at the end of Act Two, Schliemann is shown leading a group of Turkish labourers on his expedition of excavation. In the process, he delivers a lecture in which he makes some revelations which both ridicule official versions of history and provide the basis of Barker's argument about history as presented in *The Bite of the Night*. Being a European, Schliemann finds it incumbent upon him to search for 'Helen's bed', for 'Europe begins in Helen's bed' (p. 64). However, instead of one Troy he finds a number of Troys, each with its distinct features and systems of government. From then he goes on to reveal that the whole thing about Helen's story is 'desperate and ever-less viable imitations of a cultural entity expunged by history' (p. 65). Helen's story has no factual basis, but is there as a symbol of cultural entity and a clash between as well as a triumph of one culture over another: 'The Asiatics took Helen into Asia. The Europeans took Helen back again. At that moment they became a culture' (p. 65). The imperialistic nature of this culture is indicated in the Interlude by the fact that Schliemann speaks in derogatory terms against the Turkish workers. However, Barker signals the barbaric nature of both cultures through the discovery of a deformed body of a child, instead of Helen's bed.

In fact, foregrounding the barbaric nature of culture and history is what *The Bite of the Night* is all about. Pity, sympathy, charity are throughout emphasised by the main protagonists, Savage and Helen, to be irrelevant to the course of history. Both of them recognise that the body, the site of pain and desire, is the only legitimate source of knowledge of history. Savage understands that in order to be introduced to this painful knowledge, he has himself to experience pain. Thus, *The Bite of the Night* starts where Orphuls ends in *The Europeans*. Savage, who on his first appearance on stage is shown carrying his old father and holding his son's hand, soon gets rid of them both. He sells the son to a soap boiler, and smothers the father. In doing those cruel acts he frees himself from a heavy burden, an obstacle to knowledge. Each of the Troys through which he passes, he discovers, has, as Schliemann says, its own way of governing and tough methods of disciplining dissenters. For example, in Paper Troy, Savage witnesses the

severing of the tongue of Helen's husband and former ruler of the city. Soon afterwards, Savage himself is tied to a bin full of portions of human flesh, which are later exhibited one by one by his student Hogbin. The implication of these and many similar atrocities is made clear during a conversation with Helen in what is called Fragrant Troy:

- HELEN.        You have lost the will— are you listening?
- SAVAGE.       Fifty and no knowledge yet! (*Pause. She stares appalled.*)
- HELEN.        No knowledge? Look at me. Sliced. Minimal. Reduced. Hacked. Slashed. Incapable. How dare you say no knowledge. I am it. (*Pause. He fixes her with a look.*) That isn't looking it's a fence.
- SAVAGE.       What's a look, Helen? (*Pause.*)
- HELEN.        What it is, I don't know. What it was, I will tell you. It was a thing as solid as a girder, down which streamed all the populations of our forbidden life... (*Pause. SAVAGE sobs.*) (p. 71)

With the fall of each Troy Helen's body is physically reduced and disfigured. Each new system identifies her as the enemy of its peace and stability. Therefore, on her body the history of Troy is written. Thus, in Helen's disintegrating body Barker presents a powerful and chilling image of the barbarism in history, as he sees it.

The reason why Helen is identified as a transgressor and as an enemy is because of her sexuality. In other words, punishment is meted at Helen not simply because the regimes do not know on whom to apportion blame, but because they accurately understand who the enemy is. Obviously, this view of sexuality accords with Barker's concept of sexual love as regenerative, but the relevance of sexuality to the view of history as presented in *The Bite of the Night* can also be explained along the lines argued in Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Human history, according to Freud, is a constant deadly and futile conflict between what he calls Eros and Thanatos. Sexuality, like other instincts, must be checked in the interest of civilization.<sup>56</sup> In fact, a direct allusion to Freud's theory is later made during an encounter between Helen and Savage's son, then himself a soap boiler, looking for raw material to cope with the increasing demand for

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<sup>56</sup> See Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, translated by Joan Riviere, revised and newly edited by James Strachey (London, 1969), p. 59.

soap in Fragrant Troy. Fully deformed and on her own, Helen listens to the Boy's explanation of her condition. Her deformity is the price of Eros, the penalty for the huge cost in life that her transgression has brought upon the Peloponnese. She refuses the blame, indicating that people's lack of understanding of the act is the real cause of death. Nonetheless, she makes it clear that to die for Eros is worthier than 'flags', 'banks' and even 'books'. The Boy uses her defiant reply to carry his argument further in the hope of making his appalling intention look logical. As Eros can not be dispensed with, no matter what pain it brings, the Boy callously suggests that she should give her consent for the remaining part of her body to be turned into soap. The aim is to make all women 'at moments of their choice, Hellenic': 'the lending of transgression to the ashamed, the loan of passion to the guilty, the licensing of total love to the domestic' (p. 80). Naturally, Helen is horrified at the thought. However, it is not death which horrifies her, but the thought of her being made into the means of domesticity. For domesticity means submission and smothers desire, something against which she has been fighting all along.

Some may argue that Barker's crippling of Helen ultimately undercuts his presentation of her as a strong and challenging woman. But this goes into the heart of his whole concept about history and myth. Myths are based on savagery and cruelty, and not simply heroism and glory. Crippling her is Barker's way of lending a voice to suffering, which is the pre-condition for truth and knowledge of history.

## Part Two:

### Language and Visual Effects

The aesthetic aspects of Barker's playwrighting are foregrounded by him in a remark made half way through his dramatic career:

My first instinct is not to write a political play in the sense that its didactic purpose is paramount, but to write a play in which politics happen to be the arena of action. Classical aesthetic values- style, language, character- are primary over political ends of the play.<sup>1</sup>

In the same place, Barker rightly expresses the view that he is under no illusion that theatre can produce social change. Elsewhere, Barker acknowledges that he is not 'a good political writer', being not in possession of a coherent 'Marxist viewpoint', as many fellow-dramatists are.<sup>2</sup>

However, it seems that Barker prioritises the aesthetic values in his work precisely because of its strong political nature. After all, to use theatre as an 'arena for the free assault of our society' and as a place to 'engage in debate about our society',<sup>3</sup> as Barker seeks to do, is itself an act loaded with political implications. This use of theatre runs counter to the traditional view of it: a place mostly geared to entertainment. Moreover, debate and assault necessitate the presence of another side, which in turn may involve resistance on the part of that side to what is being proposed on stage as the topic for debate or assault. Given that the views debated or assaulted are mainly those of the middle class, the class from whose members most theatre audiences come, resistance is bound to be stronger. Not only do members of this group find their expectations of theatre cheated, but more importantly, because they are the dominant group in society, they also

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<sup>1</sup> Howard Barker, quoted by Catherine Itzin in *Stage in the Revolution*, p. 250.

<sup>2</sup> Howard Barker, quoted by John Sutherland in 'The riddle of Ezra Fricker', a review of *The Loud Boy's Life*, *Times Literary Supplement*, 7 March 1980, p. 264.

<sup>3</sup> Howard Barker, quoted by Ronald Hayman in his essay on the playwright in *Contemporary Dramatists*, edited by James Vinson, second edition (London, 1977), pp. 64-6 (p. 65).

find that their values and interests are the centre for debate and assault on stage.

Furthermore, the rift between a playwright like Barker, who deals with radical ideas, and his audience has increasingly been widening in the 1980s. Despite the difficulties just mentioned, in the seventies it was more or less 'fashionable' for writers to use theatre in the way Barker suggests, and for the audience to be willing to subject themselves to such an experience of theatre. Such a readiness on the part of the audience, and for that matter on the part of theatre companies, is not something that a radical author can count on in the eighties. The political climate in this decade, the increasing polarization of society, makes it difficult for such an author to operate. People tend to have very strong views and convictions, and therefore do not have open minds. Unwilling to run with the tide or to make concessions to theatre companies or audience, and at the same time determined to fulfill his role as an artist and get his radical message across, Barker seems to conclude that the best way he could do that is to prioritise the aesthetic values of his work. Barker's use of elevated style and heightened language, as well as his use of very powerful visual imagery, are partly intended by him as an attack on the audience's resistance to his radical ideas. What he seems to hope is that the audience will recognise that what it witnesses is art and not simple propaganda of any kind. In fact, even the most hostile of his critics grudgingly acknowledge his artistic skills, notably his poetic language and visual mind.

This part attends to aesthetic values in Barker's work. The first chapter is devoted to Barker's style and poetic language; the second chapter deals with Barker's skilful use of visual imagery and dramatic effects; the third chapter studies his method of characterization; and the fourth chapter seeks to explain the relationship between verbal and visual language in his work.

### Chapter Three:

#### Style and Poetic Language

Barker's use of language has always been recognised as one of his major strengths as a dramatist. Even critics, who may violently disagree with his ideas, grudgingly tend to note with appreciation his stylistic innovation. For example, Michael Billington criticises Barker's 'disregard for certain inviolable rules of drama', but he is, nevertheless, prepared to assert that Barker 'has shown that he writes better dialogue than almost anyone of his generation; it's sharp, tangy, poetic'.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Nicholas de Jongh refers to progression and regression in Barker's work, but he equally points out that Barker's 'instinct for dialogue has served him from the beginning'.<sup>2</sup> In Like manner, while Steve Grant concludes that Barker's 'style is an energetic mix of comedy and declamatory phrase-making',<sup>3</sup> Eric Shorter finds it difficult not to acknowledge that 'this rhetorical and staccato style is not without theatrical impact'.<sup>4</sup> There is indeed no shortage of comments such as those, but the trouble with them is that they are never fully substantiated. Reviews, from which many of those quotations are extracted, can not, however, be expected to provide much by way of detailed analysis. By far the most comprehensive account available of Barker's use of language is provided by Eric Mottram in an article which deals with 'the vital language of impotence', and focuses upon what Barker 'shares with Burroughs and Buñuel', namely a strong penchant for criticism through 'humour'.<sup>5</sup> The article addresses many

<sup>1</sup> Michael Billington, 'Exit Left the Revolution', *The Guardian*, 1 November 1980.

<sup>2</sup> Nicholas de Jongh, 'Much of Class'.

<sup>3</sup> Steve Grant, 'Voicing the Protest: The New Writers', in *Dreams and Deconstructions: Alternative Theatre in Britain* (Ambergate, 1980), pp. 116-44 (p.139).

<sup>4</sup> Eric Shorter, a review of *No End of Blame*, *The Daily Telegraph*, reprinted in *London Theatre Record*, (4-17 June 1981), p. 285.

<sup>5</sup> Eric Mottram, 'Vital language of Impotence', p. 47. Elsewhere Mottram describes Barker's language as 'poetic', because it is 'very concentrated' and far removed from 'everyday careless speech' (*Refuse to Dance: The Theatre of Howard Barker*). In her dissertation, 'Into the Second Decade: A Study of Howard Barker's Plays for the Theatre', Ruth Shade has a section on language, to which I am also indebted.

other important issues relating to language, but leaves some aspects of Barker's use of poetic language largely overlooked.

This chapter seeks to demonstrate Barker's innovative use of language, emphasising the poetic aspects of his language, its rhetorical nature and dramatic impact. In the process, the chapter highlights the affinity between his employment of language and his thematic concern as well as his general subversive tendency.

Barker pronounces his language as poetic, because it is 'contrived': 'It's not the language of common speech... but also that it contains an emotional charge, an attempt to engage the audience's emotion quite consciously'.<sup>6</sup> This definition is clearly a tentative one; however, together with the quotations above, it suggests that the terms 'style', 'rhetoric' and 'poetic language' impinge upon one another. Formality of diction, syntax and sentence structure seems to be implied by 'concentrated' and 'contrived'. On the other hand, the association between the use of emotionally charged language and the audience's involvement connects with rhetoric, in that language is used as a means of persuasion and to influence the audience's opinion. The impingement of those terms upon one another is here stressed to indicate that they are always important in this chapter. Thus, without in any way implying a disentanglement of the terms, language is here designated poetic on the basis of his extensive use of figurative language and other poetic devices, including rhyme and alliteration. On the other hand, Barker's employment of repetition, accumulation, alternation, balance and parallelism is taken as evidence of his rhetorical style. Discussion of diction, syntax and sentence structure is related to the area of style. Naturally, Barker's use of language improves in all those fields, but this is all the more so in the area of style. This is why my discussion of style in Barker's later works differs from the early ones. Because Barker's interest in politics and class struggle is stronger in the early plays, his style at times tends to signify the class of the speaker, despite Barker's claim to the contrary. No

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<sup>6</sup> Howard Barker, in an interview with Mamdouh Imran.

inconsistency can, however, be traced in his later work, where complexity as well as formality and artificiality of style are manifestations of his tendency towards abstractions and inaccessibility. Indeed, in order to demonstrate the parallelism between Barker's use of language in all those areas and his development both politically and as a playwright, the passages analysed in this chapter are extracted from plays written at different stages in Barker's dramatic career.

In one of the many humorous and highly iconoclastic scenes in one of Barker's earliest plays, *My Sister and I*, figures of members of the Royal Family are shown conversing 'at home':

MARJORIE. Do you know what I nearly said?  
 LIZ *(Sitting down and beginning to knit)*. No, do tell me.  
 MARJORIE. I almost wish I were working class!  
 LIZ. Lots of them are very nice.  
 MARJORIE. I wouldn't know.  
 LIZ. I don't think one should use old-fashioned words like that in any case. There are no classes these days. We're human beings, all of us.  
 MARJORIE. I don't think I can stomach your humanity.  
 LIZ. People are people. If you picked some out of a factory and washed and dressed them properly you wouldn't be able to tell them from us, not unless they speak.  
 MARJORIE. Oh, God, why don't you fuck with one!  
 LIZ *(Calmly)*. You silly, dirty-minded thing. *(Long pause)*.  
 MARJORIE. Well, here we are, the Royal Family at home... I don't know what you think... I think it's pitiful. *(Long pause, MARJORIE yawns. Long pause)*. Did someone fart? (PP. 12-3).

In many ways, this dialogue prefigures the association set between class and language in Barker's early work. As the queen points out, speech is a major barrier separating the higher classes from the lower ones. In this particular case the situation is tinged with irony. No sooner does the queen finish her words than her sister the princess speaks in the way the working class does. Thus, for the queen, to hear her sister pronounce the word 'fuck' is something of an anticlimax. In the queen's eyes the princess is verbally a working-class woman.

Echoes of the princess's language reverberate throughout Barker's work. Crude and vulgar statements pour out of the mouths of ruling-class personalities like the Prince of Wales in *The*

*Love of a Good Man*, *King Charles in Victory* and *the Duke in Women Beware Women*. Barker believes that language in the English society is 'stratified in class'. Thus, by making the princess talk in this way he is implicitly rejecting this stratification of language. The audience is told that as far as the use of language is concerned, the ruling classes are not much different from the working class. They are capable of speaking as vulgarly or colloquially as the working class. In other words, this rejection of stratification of language on Barker's part is in effect a 'political statement', in that it implies a demand for the removal of social divisions in society, of which the stratification is a manifestation.

Barker's removal of class differences in terms of use of language, together with its political ramification, is confirmed by his conscious attempt 'to make sure that working-class characters have the same language as the higher-class characters'.<sup>7</sup> In fact, they are sometimes allowed to speak more eloquently than higher-class figures. Thus, while Riddle is said to have good 'command of English', the Prince of Wales openly declares his inability to articulate himself fully in *The Love of a Good Man*. Similarly, in *The Hang of the Gaol*, Turk, the prison governor's servant, is shown as a linguistic virtuoso. In fact, the most formal, rhetorical and poetic passages in the play are said by him. For example, describing his master Cooper, following the commissioning of the inquiry and Cooper's worries over its outcome, Turk gives rein to his imagination:

Tryin' missus! (*He whistles again, looks at COOPER.*) I have seen decay in men, but you are something special. You are lower than I hoped to see in my blackest moment. (*COOPER goes out, ignoring him. TURK looks across the moors for some moments.*) Turk, you are a very deep hole. You are an old black shaft with flowery brambles hanging on the rim. No sun-light strays more than an inch into a smile of yours... (*The dogs bark.*) Eh, cum on, then, get me bum, ya bastards! Bite my arse! (P. 27)

In terms of its style, this passage is clearly formal, having, on the whole, full sentences with correct tense and form of verbs. There is no use of shortened versions of words, either. This

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

formality of the passage is heightened by the extensive use of imagery. Even the colloquial or vulgar words with which the passage begins and ends are meant to enhance its poetic density. They are not, in other words, meant to characterize the speaker: that is, they are not particularly indicative of his origin. Rather, the words are carefully placed to breathe a new life into an already lively passage. For Barker also believes that originality of language comes from a 'mixture of the coarse and refined'.<sup>8</sup>

As is shown below, Barker's claim about his removal of class differences in relation to use of language is not entirely valid. However, the idea itself is innovative- all the more so to the extent he puts it into practice. This innovation, it should be stressed, is inseparable from fulfilment of his role as a subversive and oppositional artist. For besides making his political comment, Barker seems also to be deliberately reacting against what he considers a 'patronising', even contemptuous, attitude on the part of fellow-dramatists towards the working-class in particular. For him, although such writers are not reactionary, the way working-class characters are made to speak in some of their work undercuts the writers' revolutionary commitment.<sup>9</sup> Edward Bond, a playwright whose revolutionary commitment is well-known, is, in Barker's view, guilty of such a practice. His *Saved*, to which Barker's own *No One Was Saved* is partly a reaction, is a play whereby working-class characters are patronised and treated with 'contempt'. Not only are they made to speak vulgar and colloquial language, but more importantly, they are shown unable to communicate properly. In this respect, it is very significant that Barker himself becomes 'patronising' in his play only when the gang of working-class youths is introduced from Bond's play- perhaps, evidence of a conscious reaction against Bond's style, as the following dialogue shows. The dialogue takes place amongst members of the gang during their stoning of the baby, Eleanor Rigby's son:

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> For further explanation of Barker's position, see his *On 'The Love of a Good Man'*, A Royal Shakespeare Company Publication (1978).

PETE. Come on 'en!  
 COLIN. Yeller bastard!  
 PETE. Arse 'oles!  
 COLIN. I'll smash yer!  
 PETE. You and oo's army?  
 COLIN. Me and meself.  
 PETE. Waiting for Christmas? (*COLIN picks up a brick and threatens with it.*)  
 Come on.  
 COLIN. Yer wan' it?  
 PETE. Hit me! Come on, 'it me! (*He sticks out his chest.*)  
 COLIN. I'll 'urt yer!  
 PETE. Yeah? (*COLIN is about to throw. PETE nips behind the pram, turning it defiantly towards COLIN.*)  
 COLIN. I'll fucking 'urt yer!  
 PETE. Big muff!  
 COLIN. Yeah?  
 PETE. Big muff! Fucking big muff! (*COLIN chucks the brick. PETER ducks behind the pram, the brick goes straight in. A pause. They all crowd round.*)  
 ALL. Ugh... ugh... (pp. 49-50)

The monosyllabic words, the heavy London accent, vulgar diction and informal style in this dialogue are echoes of the language spoken by Bond's characters in *Saved*.

However, to illustrate the difference between Barker's style and that of Bond, albeit to demonstrate Barker's innovation by comparison, it may be appropriate to quote from both plays. The passages quoted here show characters in almost identical situations. Having just made love, Len and Pam, in *Saved*, sit together, speak about Pam's father, who has interrupted their love-making, and exchange jokes:

LEN (*amused*). Yeh. Me. Ha! 'E's a right ol' twit, ain' 'e! 'Ere, can I stay the night?  
 PAM. Ain' yer got nowhere?  
 LEN. Yeh! - Well?  
 PAM. No.  
 LEN. Yer're the loser. - Sure's 'e's goin'?- Why can't I?  
 PAM. Bligh! I only juss met yer.  
 LEN. Suppose 'e's stoppin' 'ome? Got a cold or somethin'. I'd do me nut!- Yer'd enjoy it.

PAM. Big 'ead.  
 LEN. 'Ow many blokes yer 'ad this week?  
 PAM. We ain't finished Monday yet!  
 LEN. We'll take that into consideration.  
 PAM. Saucy bugger! (p. 26)

The following dialogue takes place at the very beginning of *No One Was Saved*, following an attempted rape on Eleanor by her supposed friend Ray:

RAY'S VOICE. Oh, come on. Come over here! What are you doing over there?  
 ELEANOR. I don't like being treated like dirt!  
 RAY'S VOICE. I dunno what you're on about.  
 ELEANOR. Oh, yes you do. What do you take me for?  
 RAY'S VOICE (*sarcastically*). You 're not going to get it the way you 're going on.  
 ELEANOR. I don't know how you 've got the nerve—  
 RAY'S VOICE. You 'll enjoy it! I promise.  
 ELEANOR. I didn't think you were like that. You 're just like all the others. You 're so... you 're crude... you 're like some animal...  
 RAY'S VOICE (*still sarcastic*). Come back now and we'll forget all about it.. I'll overlook it..  
 ELEANOR. This was just going to be a walk— to get to know each other, to have a talk. You might have made it decent—  
 RAY'S VOICE (*emerging, coat over arm*). What's the point of hanging around? We all know what it leads to, don't we? (p. 1)

The first and most important difference between Barker's style and Bond's is the formality of the former. Barker's sentence structure is grammatically correct. So is the use of verbs and tenses. Even the contractions used are pretty normal in formal conversation. Bond's style, on the other hand, is very localized and informal. The nearest he approaches Barker's way of writing is in the line before the last. Len and Pam speak in staccato; their use of shortened form of words is not confined to auxiliaries; and the use of verbs is clearly grammatically incorrect. Bond seeks authenticity: his language clearly identifies the speakers as working-class figures, who are ignorant, dull, uncommunicative- people with arid imagination. As such they are rendered pathetic.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> One can not, however, ignore the fact that Bond wrote *Saved* before the abolition of theatre censorship (1968), and that the play actually contributed to the abolition. It is also worth noting that nearly all Barker's



As a Marxist-oriented author, in *Saved*, like in many of his other plays, Bond shows working-class characters as conditioned by their material circumstances. Therefore, it is almost certain that the language spoken by those figures is meant by Bond to be a manifestation of their dehumanization. Barker would not disagree with Bond on this score. As a matter of fact, Barker does not claim that the working class speaks in the way he himself shows it to speak, but his main contention is that 'the working class thinks as complexly as any other class'.<sup>11</sup> This observation is quite important, and justifies both his own style as well as his attack on Bond's style in *Saved*. For in theatre, one of the most important means available to a dramatist in order to demonstrate a character's intelligence is through its speech, through giving it the ability to express itself freely.<sup>12</sup>

Barker's criticism of Bond's use of language in this play does, however, highlight some inconsistency in his own use of it in his early plays. Barker says of those plays: 'I was consciously concerned to write about class. And my four or five earliest plays were about class warfare'.<sup>13</sup> This concern with class struggle at times seems to get the better of Barker and override his interest in presenting the working class on an equal footing with the ruling class in relation to the use of language. Working class characters are mainly the ones who are shown speaking vulgar and colloquial speech. For example, compared with the following exchange between the Kersh Twins, in *Alpha Alpha*, the language of the princess, in the dialogue quoted above, despite its vulgarity, is truly 'polite and genteel':

MICKEY. I've thought of you, and the end product is, I wanna puke, I wanna throw up, I wanna spew my guts and on the floor! (*He imitates a deep vomit. MORRIE watches with distaste and revulsion.*)

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work has been written after the abolition of Lord Chamberlain Act.

<sup>11</sup> Howard Barker, in an interview with Mamdouh Imran.

<sup>12</sup> In this respect, from Barker's point of view, Bond must be less patronising than, say, Arnold Wesker in *Roots*. For in the figure of Beatie, in that play, Wesker makes the acquisition of the language and culture of the middle class the means of salvation of the working class.

<sup>13</sup> Howard Barker, quoted by Catherine Itzin in *Stages in the Revolution*, p. 250.

MORRIE. You disgusting bugger... You filthy sod...  
 MICKEY. You piss-bucket! You shit-house turd!  
 MORRIE. You filthy, low down-stinking—  
 MICKEY. You bum-licker, you fat-arsed, shitting—  
 MORRIE. Rotten, twisted, farting—  
 MICKEY. Pissing, nauseating, fucking-  
 MOR/MIC. Cunt!<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, despite its obscenity and vulgarity, this dialogue is indicative of Barker's ability to use language skilfully, and the way the words are said must surely capture the audience's attention. In other words, there is some consistency in Barker's claim even when he appears to deviate from it. The Twins' style proves their intelligence. Repetition, balance and rhythm endow the dialogue with a poetic touch. The last word is supposed to be said by the two brothers simultaneously, which further suggests that Barker means to draw attention to the way the words themselves are used rather than to their content. In a way the passage anticipates his use of the 'style of pantomime' and choral exchange between characters in his later work. One can not, however, avoid the conclusion that the use of such terminology is somehow indicative of class origin.

A comparison between the brothers' language and that of Lord Gadsby in the same play proves the validity of the last point. In terms of his social conduct, Lord Gadsby is worse than the Twins, yet he refrains from using that kind of language. Lord Gadsby acknowledges that there is 'a special bond between me and the Twins'- they have a homosexual relationship- but the most vulgar words he is made to say are the following, while watching the twins callously murdering their mother:

*(Lathering, facing the audience.)* I am experiencing the ultimate destructive act! I am a witness to the most outrageous crime! A *crime de la crime* committed by these heartless, soulless, brutal, beautiful, exquisite savages! I am erect with horror, my veins are rigid with anticipation! God help me! (p. 76)

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<sup>14</sup> Howard Barker, *Alpha Alpha* (unpublished), pp. 6-7. The script was kindly made available to the author by Judy Daish Associates. Further reference to this play by page number in the text is to the script.

Clearly, Barker's political views at the time inform his presentation of both the Twins and Lord Gadsby. The latter is condemned, not least because he is 'too squeamish' to watch or do an act of murder he engineers. The Twins' repugnant act and abominable attitude can, perhaps, be better explained in the light of one of Barker's Marxist revolutionaries, Old Biledew's advice to his step-son, in *Claw*: 'In an unjust society, the weak will always be the persecuted. Just as they brutalized you, so they are brutalized by the system' (p. 137-8). The Kersh Twins' abhorrent deeds are, in other words, manifestations of their material conditions. So is their use of language.

Barker concedes that he sometimes resorts to 'convention for class... the dropping of the "h" for proletarians'.<sup>15</sup> A 'sort of London cockney' is used, albeit on a minor scale, by the pair of working-class youths in *Cheek*, the Kersh Twins in *Alpha Alpha*, Old Biledew in *Claw*, and, of course by the gang of youths in *No One Was Saved*. Accent is sometimes used by Barker to signal for the audience the origin of the character concerned. This is evident in as recent a play as *Downchild*. At the beginning of this play a 'rural accent' is used partly to create a comic effect:

OLD BEVIN.	Erd 'un lass night, did 'ee? Screamin' an' what bother not, eh?
YOUNG BEVIN.	Eard 'un? Seen 'un! 'As 'anging off wisteria stark bollocker as ar cum back from Beggars. In motor 'eadlamps. Proper shit me, don't mind tell 'ee, Pop.
OLD BEVIN.	T'is 'im as killed un peacocks, likely.
YOUNG BEVIN.	Likely.
OLD BEVIN.	Bites 'em, don't 'e? 'eads arf?
YOUNG BEVIN.	Seen 'un?
OLD BEVIN.	Not seen 'un. Not seen nothin', thank 'ee, Christ.
YOUNG BEVIN.	Shit on big 'ouse.
OLD BEVIN.	Ditto.
YOUNG BEVIN.	Sez I as shouldna. Sez I as keeps my chevvy tickin' on 'un. Shit on big 'ouse all the same. ( <i>He reaches into his bag for a flask.</i> DOWNCHILD emerges from the wheat)
DOWNCHILD.	Good morning! ( <i>The LABOURERS look at one another</i> ) You till a lovely soil. I can smell Devon from twenty miles off. The passionate air! ( <i>He extends a hand</i> ) Tom Downchild, novelist, poet, beauty addict, priest of wit and slave to scandal. I had my

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<sup>15</sup> Howard Barker, in a letter to Mamdouh Imran, 28 December 1988.

ear to the ground, was listening to the sea burst in the caves below, then heard your lovely accents, up I stood. (*They still appear bewildered*) Come on, you've seen strangers before, I shan't blight the crops. (*A youth, STOAT, stands up in the wheat some yards away. The LABOURERS look at him.*) My great grandfather was a shepherd. On the Cheviots. He drank cold tea. (PP.57-8)

The comic effect arises from the contrast between the colloquial accent of the Labourers and the formality of Downchild's speech. The class differences indicated by the speakers' language are brought to the fore by Downchild's reference to the Bevins' 'lovely accents', a remark that also signifies a patronising attitude on his part and a feeling of superiority. This feeling of superiority may be reinforced by his revelation of his ancestors' origin. But the revelation equally demonstrates Downchild's awareness of the importance of class affiliation as a confidence-building measure. As a gossip columnist, Downchild hopes through this disclosure to extract information from the labourers that would help him to scandalise people.

An accent that is more frequently used by Barker is the Scottish one. It is spoken by, amongst others, McPhee in *That Good between Us*; Jardine in *The Hang of the Gaol*; Flux in *Birth on a Hard Shoulder*; a number of figures in *Passion in Six Days*; Mcconochie in *Victory*; and by McGroot in *The Power of the Dog* (staged 1985). Barker explains that this accent is theatrically attractive, because the 'Scots are outsiders'.<sup>16</sup> The use of Scottish accent could, therefore, be taken as evidence of Barker's oppositional orientation, in that he gives an outlet for voices little heard on stage. That he is able to use 'different versions' of this accent, is also a mark of his skill. Nevertheless, the fact that a 'heavy version' is spoken by proletarian figures suggests that the accent is used as a signifier of class origin as well.

A brief comparison between the accent spoken by McPhee, who is a working-class figure in *That Good between Us*, and Jardine, who is a ruling-class figure in *The Hang of the Gaol*, substantiates the validity of this claim. Mark the accent spoken by McPhee, when, significantly,

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

he bitterly complains about his social position to Godber, a Grammar-school boy:

Okay, yoo have [an idea]. Yoo are fuckin' lucky. Yoo had a proper education, yoo were nae the victim of a rulin' class conspiracy. But I wanna tell yoo what it means to look at mysel' in the mirror an' say, Billy, there are reasons yoo are the worm yoo are. To know tha'! It's like a puppet seein' it's got strings! (p. 47)

It is true that the simile at the end of the passage demonstrates that McPhee is somehow a 'thoughtful figure', but the connection between his heavy accent as well as his class origin and education is inavoidable. In contrast, Jardine, who has had full access to education and is now well-entrenched in the British establishment, speaks more like an educated English person. When he speaks with a Scottish accent, the accent is, therefore, a very light one:

You wanna know what I have in my pocket. I will tell ye. I have the Queen here in my pocket, an' if ye don't believe me you can have a little look. Only a little look, mind you. Only a teeny, weeny little look. Ready? (*He tears open the front of his jacket and closes it again.*) Whassat! (*Pause.*) It's a Queen, that is. I canna show ye too long because she is a r—r— retiring woman... She is a queen for people of good taste... And I need not tell ye that the English people are not fuckin' short on taste. They have *The Guardian*, and they have Queen Elizabeth, and ye can no ask more of human wit and ingenuity than that. (p. 40)

Elsewhere in the play, Jardine's accent is less evident than in this passage. But even here his is noticeably lighter than McPhee's. This leads to the conclusion that, rather than establishing Jardine's class origin, by making him speak in such a bastardised Scottish accent, Barker is probably signalling Jardine's betrayal of both his class and national origins. This suggestive use of accent prepares for Jardine's betrayal in the play itself- the whitewashing of the inquiry.

Barker has a tendency, also in his early plays, to use the 'elliptical construction' as a 'dialect' for higher-class or educated people- a construction in which the first person pronoun is omitted.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps, to signal further Jardine's class connections, he, too, is made to speak elliptically: 'Never wanted to come here in the fist place. Getting too old for this kind of thing' (p.

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<sup>17</sup> Michelene Wandor describes this construction as an 'effective rhetorical style' that 'represents not just the stiff-upper-lip middle class, but also the exclusion of the individual, the subjective, and the notion of psychological or individual motivation' (*Look Back in Gender: Sexuality and Family in Post-War Drama* [London, 1987], p. 127). Curiously though, despite its promising title, this book never mentions Barker or his work.

27). So does his boss, Stagg, the Home Secretary: 'Glad of this walk. Stuck in the car from Whitehall, bunched up innards, veins all cramped. Can't be good for you' (p. 24). But, perhaps, this dialect is best exemplified by the Prince of Wales at the beginning of *The Love of Good Man*: 'Feel sick... FEEL SICK... Want to say something. Want to be apt and truthful... Can make it better... Wish I spoke better. Wish I had an education. Didn't like Sandhurst at all' (p. 3). In this respect, it is significant that Barker allows his working-class characters access to this construction; for even though the use of the construction militates against his general claim about elimination of class difference in relation to language, the general claim is vindicated by giving working-class characters access to this construction. This 'elliptical style' is, for example, used by amongst others, the Caterers in *Credentials of a Sympathiser*: 'Got 'em for the old man's tea... Must have thought they were poisoned. Thought there was drugs in 'em' (p. 87). Similarly, addressing Diver, in *Heaven*, Stoa says: 'Hate cultivated flowers. Vulgarity. God made plenty of flowers. Didn't need to interfere with 'em' (p. 89). Nevertheless, as the example from *Credentials of a Sympathiser* shows, the construction is grafted with a working-class dialect- omission of 'h' as well as the substitution of verb 'were' for 'was'. This juxtaposition of dialects could create a comic effect, and it is not clear whether Barker also means to satirise the elliptical style or the people who normally speak it.

Moreover, if, as suggested, the use of formal and inflated language is 'itself a kind of dialect' of higher-class people,<sup>18</sup> then this is a 'convention' to which Barker adheres from the start of his dramatic career. For example, Sir Harry, in *Skipper*, tells his would-be assassins: 'You had no right to steal our privacy! You have trampled on the finest garden in the world'.<sup>19</sup> Likewise, Churchill, in *All Bleeding*, defines art as : 'the epitome of the endeavour of mankind' (p. 91). He equally pontificates in *The Power of the Dog*: 'Tell Generalissimo Stalin, that it

<sup>18</sup> Ruth Shade, 'Into the Second Decade', p. 68.

<sup>19</sup> Howard Barker, *Skipper* (unpublished), p.14. The script was kindly made available to the author by Judy Daish Associates. Further reference to this play by page number in the text is to the script.

brings tears to my eyes to hear the music of my country echo through the chambers of this august edifice' (p. 3). But it is Ezra Fricker, in *The Loud Boy's Life*, who is modelled after Enoch Powell, a man renowned for, amongst other things, his mastery of language, who excels in his use of pompous style: 'This is an honour now rare within the jurisdiction of the British parliament. It is, unwillingly, a somewhat secret practice where the Royal writ runs'; 'I don't think you understand. It is a matter of principle with me that I am not abroad after twelve o'clock. I believe profoundly in the doctrine of the early night'(pp. 14, 35).

Barker's 'characters are highly individualised and always capable of surprising the audience- and the ability to surprise is part of the technique of creating successful theatre'.<sup>20</sup> One of the means through which characters surprise the audience is the language and style they use. This is why, as mentioned earlier, despite its vulgarity, the dialogue between the Kersh Twins is sure to cause surprise and attract the audience's attention. So is this 'pantomime-like' exchange between Pennells and Stripwell before their fight in *Stripwell*:

STRIPWELL. .. I can't. (Pause) Can I? (Pause.)  
 PENNELLS. Easy. (Pause.)  
 STRIPWELL. I won't.  
 PENNELLS. Oh, yes you will.  
 STRIPWELL. Oh, no I won't.  
 PENNELLS. Oh, yes you will.  
 STRIPWELL. Oh, no I won't.  
 PENNELLS. Will.  
 STRIPWELL. Won't.  
 PENNELLS. Will. (Pause.) Will. (p. 101)

Similarly, at the hands of the grotesque figures of the Fire Inspectorate, in *The Hang of the Gaol*, language itself becomes a game. The figures take the opportunity of writing their scientific report as to the cause of the fire to display their ability to use language skilfully, although somewhat nonsensically. One of them is even determined to use words alliteratively:

<sup>20</sup> Charles Lamb, 'Howard Barker's *Crimes in Hot Countries*: A Director's Approach', in *Contradictory Theatres*, edited by Leslie Bell (Colchester, 1984), pp. 113-131 (p.115).

*The shell of C Block. A table and a chair. BLOON is sitting typing with one finger. DOCKERILL is walking up and down with a sheaf of notes.*

- DOCKERILL. Traces—of—carbonized—dioxin— (*Painful typing.*)— of— carbonized—dioxin— (*Ditto.*) A constituent of benzine— benzine—approx—imately—thirty— milligrams—by weight— enmeshed in—enmeshed in— (*Ditto.*)— woolen fibres—
- BLOON. Want to go to the toilet.
- DOCKERILL. Would seem to indicate—to indicate—a source of combustion—not compatible—
- BLOON. Bursting Bladder Tortures Typist.
- DOCKERILL. In- compatible, make that. Incompatible—with neglect— or accident. Full stop. Full stop. The woollen fibres— by residue— by residue—
- BLOON. Piss Presses Pelvis Punishingly.
- DOCKERILL. Show no admixture— no admixture— of artificial substances, e.g. polyester— e.g. polyester— as is practically universal— in woollen garment manufacture— currently.
- BLOON. Servile Secretary Slavers After Slash!
- DOCKERILL. Currently. We would submit, there— therefore— the inflammable material— at local source— at local source— to be a cardigan or pullover— a cardigan or pullover— of old— or of exclusive make—
- BLOON (*rising to his feet*). Exasperated Expert Exit in Expectation of Expressive Ecstasy!
- BLOO/DOCK. Piss off! (pp. 33-4)

Surprise and fun arise from the fact that the inspectors are not expected to behave in this fashion.

Fun is also generated by the juxtaposition between the formal jargon of the report and the absurd but alliterative, and in this respect, poetic, language of Bloon. The latter's rush of alliterative words acts as a counterpoise to the repetitive but slow motion of Dockerill's dictation. The overall impression about the this scene is that the fire inspectors are not concerned with the report as such, but with the display of their linguistic skills. They probably know that their effort would in any case be a futile one, the enquiry being itself nothing but a game of words, aiming at depriving it of any meaningful substance. The inspectors are, in other words, aware that the inquiry is a whitewash, a game of words played by the system, a game in which they seek to be active participants. In this sense, their behaviour parallels that of the head of the inquiry team, Jardine, who, having already come to the same conclusion, engages himself in a sexual game with

Mrs Matheson. It is also almost certain that, through Bloon's interjections, Barker is parodying the sensational headlines in the popular press.<sup>21</sup>

If parodying is a negative response to language of the press, Barker's positive reply is no less surprising and disruptive of the audience's expectations- a propensity to use imagistic language to alienate common-place assumptions. 'When clichés are true, it must be time to quit' is Erica's maxim in *Crimes in Hot Countries* (p. 47). Barker likewise declares himself to be 'at war with clichés, and when I find myself wandering into a scene that for a moment sounds typical of its time or typical of its culture, I resist it. I have to force myself to create a harder mode of expression for it'.<sup>22</sup> Such new modes of expression abound in Barker's work. For example, in *Stripwell*, while Babs describes marriage, 'living together', as having 'our toothbrushes hanging up together by the sink and our knickers tangled in the airing cupboard', Stripwell, who acknowledges his ignorance of the 'guerrilla aspect' of love, says: 'if you met someone and you both felt- desire, then it happened, you came together like two pieces of a jigsaw'(p. 46-8). Knatchbull, in *That Good between Us*, uses the term 'de-commissioning an agent' to express his intent to murder him (p. 53). The Prince of Wales, in *The Love of a Good Man*, is addressed by Hacker as 'Mr Wales' (p. 63). At the very beginning of *The Hang of the Gaol*, the prisoners are described by the guards as 'bucket-shitters' (p. 9). A surgeon, in *The Loud Boy's Life*, gives a strange definition of the 'female organ': 'warm, wet, and flushed with dying matter at four week intervals. A pocket to be dipped in at your peril' (p. 16). And history is defined by McGroot, in *The Power of the Dog*, as 'a woman bein' raped by ten soldiers in a village in Manchuria' (p. 4). These imagistic expressions are likely to attract the audience's attention and stimulate their imagination as regards the things defined and the associations made. The audience, it is hoped, may be then able to provide their own versions of those things. They are, in other words, invited

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<sup>21</sup> In this respect, this scene anticipates Shade's regime, the Laughing Troy, in *The Bite of the Night*, where a connection is made between suppression of individuality, laughter and speaking in monosyllabic terms. As Greusa puts it, 'this Troy to be in single syllables' (p. 28).

<sup>22</sup> Howard Barker, in an interview with Mamdouh Imran.

and urged to look at reality with fresh eyes. Thus, Barker's persistent call for political change is further evidenced in his alienating of common-place assumptions through language. But so is his approach as a whole.

Both the inspectors' language, especially Bloon's, and those imagistic phrases contain elements, because of the prevalence of which in Barker's work, his language is described as poetic: alliteration, rhyme and imagery. Bloon's extensive use of alliteration is an example of Barker's deliberate use of contrived and rhythmic language throughout his work. For example, this poetic element is used by nearly every characters in *Crimes in Hot Countries*. Pain, who is patterned after Lawrence of Arabia, a renowned military and literary figure, often uses it: 'Oh, God, this is an awful place, and in their bronzed and burning beauty all my sin laps me with tongues of shame' (p. 9). So do Toplis and Downchild in the same play. Toplis: 'My magic will spill continents, set pavements shaking and splash blood in the flower beds, but I will save you, spare you from the pain of painlessness, the half-fuck and the semi-anger' (p. 19); Downchild: 'Tell us about the New England. Where there are no sergeants and no drill. And the grass looks like water waving in a wind' (p. 26). Clearly, in these examples a variety of letters are involved in this alliterative use of words. Internal rhyme is also used particularly in the quotation by Toplis.

Above all, the poetic texture of Barker's work is, perhaps, best exemplified by his extensive use of imagery, and the high degree of emotionality with which the language is charged. Poetry 'exploits the image-value of words, their sensuous structure, associations, and evocativeness'.<sup>23</sup> Howard Barker exploits the image-value of words to the full. This is why he is rightly described as a dramatist with an 'extraordinary visual eye... an artist [who] paints with words'.<sup>24</sup> His 'paintings' are organic. Metaphors and similes take up the themes of the plays concerned and

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<sup>23</sup> Ronald Peacock, *The Art of Drama* (London, 1960), p. 56.

<sup>24</sup> Ian McDiarmid, in an interview with Mamdouh Imran, 4 May 1988.

express the speakers' feeling. For example, Turk's description of his master as a decaying man, in the passage quoted above, suggests the decaying nature of the latter's values and the rottenness of the prison system, of which he is a governor. But the passage is equally an 'objective correlative' of Turk's own feeling of self-disgust. His description of himself as a shaft reflects his sense of his own decaying nature and the moral degradation into which he has sunk. As it transpires later, Turk has allowed himself to be used as a grass, feeding Cooper with information about the prisoners and about his own colleagues. Turk feels that his master's fall is bound to affect him. But it is primarily self-admonition which inspires his poetic outburst. The latter point is evidenced and reinforced by Turk's even more poetic speech to the enquiry team. Turk is then desperate to be named the arsonist in the hope of becoming a hero of his class. That speech is so passionate, persuasive and powerful that Jardine the head of the tribunal responds: 'You have buckets of eloquence, Turk' (p. 66). Given the description of the prisoners as 'bucket-shitters', the use of the term 'buckets' is surely sarcastic. Nevertheless, Jardine's sarcastic comment highlights the extent to which he is taken aback that such a speech comes from a person who is basically working-class and a prisoner.<sup>25</sup>

Even Old Biledew, in *Claw*, has the imaginative power to describe 'the revolutionaries' as 'the tallow in the candle of our dreams', and warns his son that his 'individualist daydreams lead only to the pit of self-disgust' (p.167). Unfortunately, the son does not heed the father's advice, and therefore, finds himself in a position not unlike that of Turk. Similarly, a very expressive image is provided in *That Good between Us*. Knatchbull's success in policing the country is matched by his skill with words. This is manifest in the instruction he gives to his newly-recruited informer, Godber:

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<sup>25</sup> Turk's speech resembles the passages, analyzed below, by Isted and Skinner, but, with its general pattern of repetition and that of the term 'facts' in particular, the speech also strongly recalls Gradgrind's lecture at the beginning of Dickens's *Hard Times*. For an analysis of this speech, in particular, Barker's use of rhetorical devices in it, see Tony Dunn, 'The Play of Politics', *Drama: The Quarterly Theatre Review*, no. 156 (2nd Quarter 1985), 13-5 (p. 14); for an analysis of the political implication of the speech, see Eric Mottram, 'Vital Language of Impotence', p. 51.

Oh, yes, you could. That is a valid point. And take it from me, this screening as you call it does go on. But in the meantime I would like you out there. On a job. We want our people in the field. Like honeybees. Gathering, delivering and gathering again. (p. 19)

The comparison between the informers and honeybees is an excellent image, suggesting efficiency and hard work. The image is, of course, tinged with irony, as unlike bees the informers' industriousness is a mark of their destructive role in society.

As the preceding paragraphs show, Barker has been bent on stylistic innovation, and largely succeeded in achieving such innovation from the start of his dramatic career. In a recent interview, however, Barker seems to imply that his interest in poetic language, 'the crafting of language', as he puts it, is somehow 'novel'.<sup>26</sup> This can only mean that he is now more conscious and deliberate in his use of language. As many of the passages quoted below demonstrate, Barker's intensified sense of the power of language also involves that the interlinkage among the terms style, rhetoric and poetic language, and especially between the last two, is even stronger. The following paragraphs argue that Barker's increased interest in language is concomitant with his new view of the power of sexuality as well as with his recent tendency to formalise the theatrical experience as part of his general penchant for complexity, abstraction and inaccessibility.

Language in Barker's later work is so 'contrived', 'rhythmic' and even 'metrical' that whole passages could be found that one could easily re-shape into 'poems'. The following passage by Ilona, in *The Power of the Dog*, is, therefore here, quoted in form of incantation:

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<sup>26</sup> Howard Barker, in *New Theatre Quarterly*, p. 337.

To anyone who thinks it is a mystery,  
 How we cope with so much history,  
 I say the answer lies in pain,  
 What my mother went through I can again,  
 Swallow the monster and don't strain,  
 Murders from the Bosphorus to the Heberdes  
 Render all compliants absurdities.  
 Don't ask what makes the system, if it is a system,  
 Work, cover your indignation with your foot,  
 Don't think that black stuff is burned bodies,  
 Really it is only soot. (p. 17)

The use of rhyme and stresses which approximate meters, together with repetitive elements, makes of this passage an unforgettable poem on the theme of suffering, pain and war in history.

Barker's language is even more poetic when the subject in question is sexuality or desire. In Barker's later work, sexuality always stands for rebirth and regeneration. Thus, he has, as it were, to find a new voice for sexuality. Barker agrees, but he is keen to relate his poetic treatment of sexuality to conventions, both theatrical and moral. He is disgusted with the way with which sexuality is debased and degraded on the screen. At the same time, Barker is acutely aware that 'physical embrace' does not work in theatre as an act, because of the a 'voyeuristic' kind of relationship between actors/actresses and audience. And in order to bypass this latter constraint, but also to express the truth of the 'sexual moment' between men and women on stage, he is very careful with his language about sexuality; he expresses it in a complex and unconventional way. Such a complexity of expression is evident throughout *The Castle*. One of the many lyrical passages in the play is here provided by Skinner, the champion of the feminist values. In order to illustrate the relationship between poetic language and sexuality, once more the passage is quoted here in form of verse:

First there was the bailiff, and we broke the bailiff.  
 And then there was God, and we broke God.  
 And lastly there was cock, and we broke that, too.  
     Freed the ground  
         Freed religion,  
             Freed the body.  
                 And went up this hill,  
 Standing together naked like the old female pack,  
 Growing to eat and not to market,  
 Friends to cattle who we milked but never slaughtered,  
 Joining the strips and dancing in the commons,  
 The three days' labour that we gave priests  
                         gave instead to the hungry,  
 Turned the tithe barn into a hospital and  
                     **FOUND CUNT BEAUTIFUL**  
 That we had hidden and suffered shame for,  
 Its lovely shapelessness, its colour all miraculous,  
 What they had made dirty or worshiped out of ignorance. (p. 6)

The form of this passage is an accurate embodiment of its content. Repetition, alliteration, as well as alternation and balance among words, phrases and statements visualise 'the utopia' - how it has been created and made to function. The overall image created is one of a group of prisoners, who, having broken free from jail, celebrate the occasion and then get down to business.

The last image in particular is reflected in the form of the passage. The first three sentences are obviously symmetrical, with each of them equally symmetrically divided by a comma into two clauses. The verb 'to be' in the first clause of the sentences stands, as it were, for the 'existence' of a prison. 'To be' is counterpoised by the verb 'break' in the second clauses of the sentences. The three elliptical phrases making the fourth sentence are also symmetrical; thus, in a sense, counterbalancing the three sentences preceding them. Grammatically however, since they are predicates of 'we', the elliptical phrases are more connected with the second halves of the preceding sentences. The connection can be established or is equivalent to the verb 'break-free'. The fact that the impersonal pronoun 'there', in the first halves of the first three sentences, gives way to the personal pronoun 'we', in the second halves, is indicative of 'rebirth', breaking-free. The emphasis on freedom, on movement, is further stressed by the verb 'go', in the fourth elliptical phrase, and reinforced by a succession of present participles in the following sentences.

The reversion to past indicative form of verbs at the end of the passage counterbalances the start of the passage, and enhances the stability and harmony of the utopia. Freedom is also emphasised through the images of naked body and the picture of harmony between people, animals and nature. No wonder that Skinner feels so passionately about the community that she is prepared to go to extremes in safeguarding its existence.

Implied in Barker's definition of 'poetic language' is that he employs it to attract the audience's attention to the skill with which he can handle language, but also to focus the audience's attention to what is being said and debated on stage. What is debated is not necessarily confined to history or sexuality, although all Barker's ideas are metaphorically interlinked. The following passage is by Lord Isted, in *Passion in Six Days*, a play whose very title suggests its emotional, and thereby by Barker's definition, poetic nature. Lord Isted is an aging Labour politician, but very much unlike his peers, the compromisers Jarrow in *Stripwell*, Jardine or Stagg in *The Hang of the Gaol*, and Lord Scadding in *Downchild*. He is a man of conviction, a passionate believer in nuclear disarmament; who is also convinced that disarmament will happen during his life-time, if not by 'argument', then by 'magic'. The manner through which he puts forward his case, is quite arresting and capturing:

You've got no right to be alive. (*Long pause*) Nor has this building any right to stand. Nor the cathedrals. Nor the tower blocks. Nor the beech trees down the rich man's avenue. No right. (*Pause*) By any application of the most unstrict logic, you should be dead, and not just dead, but fine dust... You have only the blank and hideous certainty that when this happens, **AND IT MUST**, your family, and your race, and your culture, and your genes, your entire impression on this spinning rock **WILL BE ERASED**. (*Pause*) Don't run away with the idea you will not be erased. No hope of it. It is erasure. Universal. And all the medicines, and all the kidney machines, and all the literature, and all the love and all the passions are **RUBBISH** against this fact of your erasure. The slave, no matter how flayed, might run, might take his chance. The tortured man might see a child pass his prison cell, and know, after his torturing, times change. But you know nothing except extinction. **THERE HAS NEVER BEEN A SLAVERY LIKE IT**. It mocks this democracy! It laughs in the face of your so-called choice! It hangs over you, and not over you alone, but over what you carry in your blood, and in your semen and in your womb... Try to think about it, even though it drives you mad. It is better you are mad, and can neither sleep nor eat, than that the human thing should perish. We must disarm now. Every minute is a gift, now. It is a piece of luck. Every second an unearned gem. We must disarm **NOW**. (*Pause*) Move

to the doors quietly, and disarm, **NOW**. Do this before some false step sets the rockets off. Remember, you have no right to be here any more. (p. 49)

This passage, it is worth noting, has drawn some of the most favourable and appreciative comments. For instance, Irene McManus unhesitatingly describes the play as the best 'political play' she has 'ever seen... [with] enthralling political rhetoric': 'Lord Isted the pacifist's speech on disarmament has Barker in full flight, with all the rolling grandeur and terrific force of the greatest English writers bearing him upwards'.<sup>27</sup> In like manner, John Bull reveals his admiration for the passage: 'In one of the most moving speeches I have ever heard in theatre, the old man succeeds in capturing the attention of the audience in a way that briefly takes them out of watching a play into experiencing the passion on which his entire political life has been based'.<sup>28</sup> Barker's claim about the theatrical impact of charged and contrived language is thus vindicated by those remarks.

Much of the theatricality of the this passage hinges on the riveting power of its syntax: 'The use of short sentences, frequently containing an underlining repetition, ensures a value for each stage of the argument or description'. Like 'the dislocation of expected forms', it is also 'a literally arresting technique and a useful tool for the actor in his interplay with the audience'.<sup>29</sup> In this passage, there is repetition in form of an alternation and near balance between statement and command or the indicative and the imperative mood. This alternation reflects the strength and certainty of Isted's conviction and his fear of imminent catastrophe, if disarmament does not take place. Equally, his firm belief that destruction is not only inevitable, but also universal is conveyed through alternation between the personal and neutral pronouns, 'you' and 'it', interlinked with the *leitmotiv* in the passage: 'death', 'extinction', 'universal', 'erasure'. In short, repetition in this passage acts like a rhyme in a poem. Statement, restatement and enlargement of

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<sup>27</sup> Irene McManus, a review of *A passion in Six Days*, *The Guardian*, reprinted in *London Theatre Record*, III, no. 20 (24 September 7 October 1983), 866.

<sup>28</sup> John Bull, *New British Political Dramatists*, (London, 1984), p. 218.

<sup>29</sup> Ian McDiarmid, 'Howard Barker: A Personal View', p. 95.

the same idea seem to function like a 'refrain', or 'a background music' in Isted's 'holocaust-film'. The power of the images of destruction, Isted paints to illustrate his argument, is also undeniable and injects more 'poetic blood' into the passage, giving it more vitality and vividness.

In his bid to secure more attention from his audience to what he proposes for debate on stage, Barker stylizes the theatrical experience in general. His recent works, plays like *Passion in Six Days*, *The last Supper* and *The Bite of the Night*, have chorus figures, prologues, epilogues and interludes, very much in the classical tradition of theatre. Many passages in Barker's recent work, including some of those just quoted, are examples of Barker's stylization of dramatic speech in the classical fashion. For example, *tirade*, a well-established convention of the French classic theatre, in which the speaker 'marshals the arguments and ideas that justify his feelings or actions or desires in a given situation and he utters them with all the weight of which his feelings make him capable',<sup>30</sup> is used by Turk in the speech before the tribunal and by Isted and Skinner in the passages just quoted. Skinner also uses it when she lashes at her friend Ann when the latter accuses her of being 'obsessive' in her defence of the feminist community. Similarly, Lvov uses it when he leaps on a chair and gives that lengthy speech, quoted in full in chapter nine.

Another classic convention, this time a Greek one, is stichomythia which derives its force from 'thrust and counter-thrust in the heated argument of antagonists, or the tense eliciting of information.... stylization within the framework of verse'.<sup>31</sup> A typical example of stichomythia is to be found at the very beginning of *The Castle* in the dialogue between Batter and his master Stucley, a dialogue in which they express annoyance and surprise at what they see the women's dereliction of their duties:

(*STUCLEY enters, follows the direction of his finger.*)

STUCLEY. Oh, the faithless bastards...

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<sup>30</sup> Ronald Peacock, *The Art of Dram* p. 175.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

BATTER. Fallow, every fucking thing!  
 STUCLEY. Oh, the disloyal bastards...  
 BATTER. Not one in cultivation!  
 STUCLEY. My first glimpse and—  
 BATTER. And the wood not coppiced!  
 STUCLEY. My first glimpse and—  
 BATTER. And the pond not cleared, and no bugger with the cattle!  
 STUCLEY. **ALL BASTARDS ROTTEN!** (p. 3)

The accumulative alliteration and repetition of words seem to parallel the rising tension of the strong sense of anger felt by the speakers. Moreover, the choral speech is probably employed here to exemplify the feeling of solidarity between Stucley and Batter, and their intention to coordinate their efforts in order to destroy the female community. No wonder that Stucley soon lashes out: 'They have stripped me of every kind thought by this'. The same is true of the choral language of the soldiers at the end of Act One, following the completion of the construction of the castle. In that exchange, words and short sentences collide and smash against one another, heightening the atmosphere of horror created by the imagery of violence and dismembered bodies.

Barker's recent tendency to use 'truncated' or 'broken syntax' is in a way related to stichomythia. In this device, a line or a sentence is deliberately left incomplete by the speaker. In most cases, the sentence or line ends with a dash rather than a full stop. But the device is different from the elliptical construction discussed above, not least, because it does not characterize the speaker or the addressee for that matter. What normally happens is that the addressee supplies a complement or retorts with a truncated sentence of his or her own. However, in some cases no complement is supplied at all. This suggests that Barker uses the device to focus the audience's attention on what is said and, perhaps, even to urge them to supply a complement themselves. The following quotation is from the seventh parable in *The Last Supper*, where aristocrat Ivory meets the bereaved soldiers, speaks with them about his estate as well as his encounter with a woman, and succeeds in persuading them to consider him their friend McStain, whom they just

buried:

*(The MACS are about to walk away when bells are heard. They stop, by instinct. Pause.)*

IVORY *(darkly)*. Shall I become McStain? *(They look at him.)*

McNOY. How could his way of—  
His habit of—

IVORY. I shall become McStain—

McNOY. His old tricks of—

IVORY. I am McStain. *(Pause. McNOY looks at him.)*

McNOY. You are nothing like what I call McStain to—

IVORY. I am sufficiently McStain to be McStain. Later I will be all that he consisted of. *(They are afraid of him. The bells continue faintly.)* This is the way. (p. 49)

Barker's use of broken syntax actually parallels his deliberate use of fragmented narrative and dramatic structure. It is the audience's responsibility to supply the missing links as the Macs themselves seem to have done with their acceptance of Ivory as their dead colleague. Broken syntax also seems to connect with the thrust of the play as a whole. Because Ivory makes the soldiers ashamed, he gains their recognition of his new status.

Thus, encapsulated in Barker's innovative use of language, his poetic and stylized rendering of ideas a number of interrelated points. Barker rejects the naturalistic style in drama; calls for the removal of barriers between classes; reminds the audience of the difference between what they see on stage and what is there in the outside world; seeks to engage them in what they see on stage and thereby force them to debate ideas with which they may violently disagree.

## Chapter Four:

### Visual Imagery and Dramatic Effects

Drama, being a performing art, derives much of its power from the visual in terms of the physical, that is, the presence of people, scenery and settings on stage. Therefore, the ability to construct powerful pictorial images is a measure of a dramatist's mastery of his or her art. Conscious of himself as an artist, Barker is as careful in his construction of pictorial images as he is in his exploitation of the image-value of words.<sup>1</sup> Obviously, the affinity between a writer's political orientation and his or her imagery depends to a large extent upon what the imagery itself purports. Because Barker is aware of the inseparability of the political implication of a work of art from its visual aspect, he is also equally careful with the setting of his plays. The last point also connects with Barker's general revolt against the naturalistic style in drama.

Barker refrains from setting his plays indoors partly because he does not find 'the domestic presents a visual picture',<sup>2</sup> and partly because of the political overtones of indoor settings. 'The room', for Barker, is the 'visual aspect' of 'the explosion of naturalistic speech forms', with all its accompanying political repercussions of reconciliation and stability. The danger of this 'spectre of reconciliation', Barker adds, has intensified with the advance and increasing power of television, with the result that the room has also become the 'focus of another capitalist culture' and a symbol of fragmentation.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, as Barker elsewhere points out, when he sets his plays

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<sup>1</sup> It has recently been revealed that Barker actually draws his scenes on paper beforehand- an indication of the importance he attaches to visual statements as well as his awareness of himself as an artist. In an interview with Mamdouh Imran, Kenny Ireland discloses that in his production of *The Last Supper*, he actually adopted some of Barker's drawings for the scenes.

<sup>2</sup> Howard Barker, in an interview with Mamdouh Imran.

<sup>3</sup> Howard Barker, *Radical Elitism in Theatre: The Responsibility of Imagination*, a lecture given at Cork University (1987); a copy of the lecture was kindly made available to the author by Cork University; a summarized version of the lecture is produced in *Plays and Players*, (March 1988), 8-10.

outdoors, he both achieves a visual impact as well as makes a political comment:

I set my theatre in landscapes, not because I secretly wished to write film but because the Polish swamp or the Flanders plain were manifestations of consciousness, just as the castle in *The Castle* is not set but the outcome of spiritual despair, and the burned out gaol in *The Hang of the Gaol* a massive shade of frustrated longing'.<sup>4</sup>

This chapter briefly underscores the political significance of outdoor settings, and then proceeds to show Barker's visual and theatrical skills, especially his ability to exploit stage space well and to make effective use of stage effects. The large bulk of the chapter is, however, concerned with Barker's skill in constructing visual images in illustration of dramatic conflict in his work. In the process, the symbolical and allegorical value of the images is emphasised.

Barker's view about the need to set plays in the outside is certainly a valid point given the topics his plays deal with. If one is to turn one's attention to public issues and address the state of the nation, as Barker does in plays like *Claw*, *That Good between Us*, *The Hang of the Gaol* and *Downchild*, then one has to set the plays in public places and show riots and murders in streets; madness in hospitals and on marshes; people committing suicide in rivers, spying on one another in pubs and restaurants, revealing their private rottenness publicly or being exterminated in detention camps. Again if one is to dramatize or write about history, one must set the plays in battlefields and show dismembered and decomposed bodies as are the cases in Barker's *The Love of Good Man*, *Victory*, and *The Power of the Dog*. As many of Barker's colleagues similarly argue:

We [new dramatists] need to set our scenes in public places, where history is formed, classes clash and whole societies move. Otherwise, we're not writing about the events that most affect us and shape our future. The Olivier stage is ideally suited to this sort of theatre. It's like a public square or the meeting of several roads or a playing field or factory floor or a place for assembly and debate.<sup>5</sup>

I have quoted this passage partly to highlight a problem with which Barker is faced, or, rather an injustice done to him and his work by the big theatre companies.

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<sup>4</sup> Howard Barker, *Ye Gotta Laugh*.

<sup>5</sup> Edward Bond, 'Us, Our Drama and the National', *Plays and Players*, 26, no. 1 (October 1978), 8-9 (p. 8); see also David Edgar, 'Against Our Will', *Plays and Players*, 20, no. 8 (May 1973), 14-5.

More than any of his colleagues' work, Barker's requires, if its full potentialities to be realised, the space, the facilities, the skill and the financial backing that only a big theatre such as the National or the RSC can afford. A play written on a grand scale needs a grand space for it to exert its impact and convey its message fully. Otherwise such a play is dwarfed, as McDiarmid has practically found out:

We played *The Love of a Good Man* at the enormous Hexagon Theatre in Reading. And the play expanded in every sense. There was a strong feeling of figures on a landscape and it was as if both play and actors had been liberated after a period of confinement. The large audiences, few of whom had any knowledge of Barker's work, responded loudly and enthusiastically, confirming what I had always believed but, absurdly, had never had the opportunity to prove, that Howard Barker is a popular writer.<sup>6</sup>

McDiarmid's remark suggests that the refusal of the National and the RSC to mount Barker's work is based on prejudice and not on the quality or style of the work itself.<sup>7</sup>

Barker's visual sense and his theatrical mind are strong from the start of his dramatic career. His first stage play *Cheek*, even though to a certain extent room-oriented, and therefore, by Barker's standards naturalistic, contains evidence of his awareness of production details and visual effects, as the following stage direction suggests:

A domestic interior, not overburdened with props. For example, two soft chairs, a table, a TV set, a mirror. This should not occupy the whole stage, but leave an area in darkness where a spotlight can isolate actors outside the main action.<sup>8</sup>

This keenness on not overburdening the 'domestic interior' with props suggests an attempt by Barker to denaturalise the setting, which in turn gives signs of his early reaction against the political dimension of interior setting. In fact, in the same play, Barker appears more at ease and his sense of the visual stronger when the scene is set in the outside. This is evident when he later

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<sup>6</sup> Ian McDiarmid, 'Howard Barker: A Personal View', p. 98.

<sup>7</sup> Given that the work of many of his colleagues, including Bond's and Edgar's, has been staged by such companies (on their mainhouse), the exclusion of Barker's work further confirms the point repeatedly made in this thesis that Barker's work is more subversive or disruptive of audience's or companies' expectations and standards than that of his colleagues.

<sup>8</sup> Howard Barker, *Cheek*, in *New Short Plays: 3*, Eyre Methuen (London, 1972), p. 6. Further reference to this play by page number in the text is to this edition.

describes how car-driving is to be acted on stage by the pair of working-class boys on a mission of raping school girls:

On a predominantly dark stage, LAURIE and BILL are sitting in the front of a car, LAURIE at the wheel. At this point the car is stationary, as revealed by dialogue and actions. When the car is moving, sound might help to establish this. At the opening of the scene, BILL is obviously bored, LAURIE is actively observant. (p. 19)

The deeds which the pair are set to commit are particularly bad. Nevertheless, the skill with which they conduct the operation indicates that they are intelligent- a point which indirectly proves Barker's view about the connection between outside scenery and the more subversive nature of a work of art, and also further vindicates Barker's claim, explained in the previous chapter, regarding working-class characters and language. In fact, Barker himself describes the pair as intelligent boys who seek to imitate their exploiters by themselves exploiting members of their class rather than rebel against their exploiters.<sup>9</sup>

Although Barker, in the quotation above, disclaims any secret desire to write film, he increasingly displays a skill in manipulating stage space in a filmic fashion. He employs a device for the use of which Bond is noted: to have 'more than one focal point on stage at once', mainly through proper utilization of space and of lighting effect.<sup>10</sup> For example, Scene Nine in *Fair Slaughter* provides a highly filmic moment generated by bringing Old and Young Gocher face to face on the stage, with spotlights showing the former lying in his prison bed and the latter singing and performing in a London theatre. But a more skilful presentation of such a moment is provided in *That Good between Us* (Act Two: Scene Three), whereby Mrs Orbison's garden is divided into two areas in each of which people are engaged in different activities. In order to clarify Barker's shift of focus from one area into the other, the scattered stage directions in the scene are here quoted successively:

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<sup>9</sup> See Steve Grant, 'Barker's Bite', *Plays and Players*, 23, no. 3 (December 1975), 36-39 (p. 37).

<sup>10</sup> Richard Scharine, *The Plays of Edward Bond* (London, 1967), p. 275.

*The garden is divided into two areas. In one area, KNATCHBULL and VERITY wait impatiently for GODBER. VERITY wanders a little way... In the second area of the garden, GODBER is waiting across when a tennis ball bounces past him. He catches it, is about to throw it back, but stops. RHODA appears, in tennis cloths... The lights go out on GODBER's area and rise on KNATCHBULL's. The tennis ball bounces to them. VERITY, puzzled, catches it... Lights up on GODBER's area. He and RHODA are standing very close... Pause, then she puts her hand out to touch him. VERITY, who has appeared with the ball, watches spellbound... Lights out on RHODA GODBER... KNATCHBULL looks at her for a moment, then shoots out his hand. VERITY takes it and leads him out. RHODA is picking bits of grass from her tennis dress... She starts to go out. They are being watched by KNATCHBULL and VERITY... She stops, then sarcastically... GODBER, sensing he is being watched, turns, sees KNATCHBULL... She stomps off angrily. KNATCHBULL stares at GODBER... Pause. KNATCHBULL contemplates him. (pp. 42-5)*

This scene, as the stage directions and no doubt the dialogue in between indicate, proves Barker's visual imagination and theatrical skill. Much of the powerful visual impact of this scene is created in a filmic alternation of spotlights. This creation of simultaneous scenes on stage is a dramatic strategy, the purpose of which is to elicit an intellectual response from the audience to what they see on stage. With the images presented being unsettling and contradictory, and the spots of lights incessantly shifting from one area into another, the audience is left with no choice but to work on what it sees. The garden is probably meant to represent the whole country as portrayed in the play, and the 'scenic collisions' are subtly used by Barker to show its decaying nature through words and acts of the off-springs of the country's guardians. A supposed calm and relaxed environment suddenly turns into a place of botched copulation and an interrogation cell. Rhoda admits she does not like what she does, but if that irritates her mother, the Home Secretary, then so be it. On the other hand, Verity's persistent questioning of the father about ownership of the garden, together with his unsuccessful attempts to persuade the daughter to stop questioning, strongly recalls his own methods of interrogating political detainees.

Imaginative scenes and incidents indicative of Barker's visual skill abound in other plays. These include: the Mafia's attempt on Noel's life for trespassing on their territories in *Claw*; the cycling scene or the fight between the judge and Pennells in *Stripwell*; the dumb-show by Tovarish or Gocher being carried on Leary's back on the short but hazardous journey from

Wandsworth prison to the railway station, following Gocher's escape from prison, and later their lengthy but very exciting journey by rail to Tovarish's home country in *Fair Slaughter*; cycling or flying a kite in *That Good between Us*; the prison guards defecating at the beginning of *The Hang of the Gaol*, or members of the inquiry team wrestling before they start their formal work in the same play; the still birth of a baby on a lay-by of the Brighton to London motorway in *Birth on a Hard Shoulder*; Downchild lying tied and naked on a floor while Molly is knitting in *Downchild*; Hacker pushing a cart full of coffins or Isted protecting his grass while the women are throwing a ball to one another and shouting slogans of their New England in *Crimes in Hot Countries*; the scene by the Thames in Essex in *Victory*; and the burning of party cards by Red Army soldiers in *The Power of the Dog*.

Naturally, such imaginative scenes are important not just for their visual impact, but also for their functional value. They illustrate the ideas and conflict in the plays concerned. For example, Knatchbull flying the kite for the benefit of his daughter is a stark expression of Knatchbull's hypocrisy. Knatchbull's pretence of being a 'nice and caring' family man sharply contrasts with his public function as a man who is engaged in torture of opponents on a large scale. It is also significant both in visual and thematic terms that the girl stumbles on the deformed body of Hayman, one of Knatchbull's victims. On the other hand, the soldiers' burning of cards may be more difficult to comprehend, in that one is surprised to see soldiers whose materialist reading of history is supposed to be very strong, engaged in a kind of superstitious activity- singing around a ball- at the end of which they destroy their party cards. Nevertheless, this image seems to accord with Barker's general view in *The Power of the Dog*, regarding his attack on Stalinist ideology- its lack of emotional or spiritual dimension.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> What is also noticeable in Barker's work is the use of blood-imagery to a great visual and dramatic effect. Blood imagery is on the whole used to reproduce the horrific effects of a mass murder such as war. In *The Possibilities*, for example, blood is flushed from pipes hung on the wall, and sweeps across the stage creating a terrible image of the battle raging in the background. Similarly, in *The Last Supper*, the ferocity of the battles and the huge scale of human suffering and death are brought home to the audience, when, at one point in the play, the nurse, who has been attending the wounded, comes on stage with hands and robe completely sprayed with blood.

More generally, Barker has a tendency to use a dominant image, in the light of which other actions should be appreciated. In most cases the dominant image is provided in the first scene of the play concerned. This is important, because it helps establish the symbolic value of the image. Like any other writer, Barker's symbols are arbitrary: 'In each case, the context settles the meaning and allows communication to proceed'.<sup>12</sup> The following paragraphs will study the visual impact of imagery in *Claw*, *Fair Slaughter*, *Victory* and *The Castle*, its symbolic and structural value, as well as the role of the first scene in determining that significance.

In *Claw* use is made of the symbolic value of pictures. The play has one of Barker's few obvious and in this sense traditional symbols- the picture of Karl Marx. At one point in the play (Act One: Scene Four) Old Biledew is shown entering Fortnum and Masons and '*holding a large portrait of Karl Marx*' (p. 154). The shop, it seems, is normally frequented by middle-class people, amongst whom are now his wife, Dodie, and step-son, Noel. Following a short but very bitter exchange between Old Biledew and his wife and son as regards the life-style they are leading, the father thrashes the son's head with the portrait. Now, the symbolic value of the picture and this attack is too obvious to be fully explained by the judge at Biledew's subsequent trial and conviction:

You calculatedly and deliberately chose to carry out this deed before the eyes of gentle and inoffensive persons taking tea, and I can only assume you did so in the furtherance of some misguided notion of class conflict, as the blunt instrument employed suggests.  
(p. 156)

The picture does, in other words, represent Old Biledew's political belief, and the attack his revolutionary and 'violent orientation'.

By contrast, the portrait indirectly presents a visual representation of the son's criminality, in that the picture contrasts with the 'coronation mugs' whose own symbolic value is determined by their exchange value- pictures of girls in the showers taken by Noel Biledew. Thus, the image

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<sup>12</sup> J. L. Styan, *Symbolism, Surrealism and the Absurd: Modern Drama in Theory and Practice*, vol 2 (Cambridge, 1981), p. 3.

of the 'coronation mugs' being lined by Noel on a mantlepiece at the beginning of the play stands in sharp contrast to the portrait of Marx being carried by the father. In other words, these two pictures visualise the contrasted value-systems upon which the structure of *Claw* is based- that of the father and that of his son Noel and the latter's master, the Home Secretary.

Similar methods are more extensively used with more success in plays like *Fair Slaughter*, *Victory* and *The Castle*. In *Fair Slaughter*, visual contrast in terms of symbolic imagery is set between art icons and a severed human hand. In this play the first scene is crucial in establishing the symbolic meaning of the imagery. The scene is set inside the prison hospital. There is some interest to be drawn from watching Old Biledew lying in bed, being harassed by his prison-guard Leary; but the theatrical climax of the scene is reached with the exposure of a jar containing a human hand. Because Gocher is described by the guard as 'England's oldest living murderer'(p. 4), one might be inclined to agree with the guard that the hand is a further stark proof of Gocher's 'career of murder'. However, the audience's belief is suspended when the scene ends with Gocher retorting that the hand represents: '**MY YOUTH, MY BLOODY YOUTH**' (p. 63). In terms of time sequence and story line scenes four and five mark the beginning of *Fair Slaughter*; and it is in those scenes that the origin of the hand is made known. In the burial scene, in particular, it becomes evident that the hand belongs to Gocher's comrade Tovarish, the person with whom Gocher could join 'hands across the language barrier' (p. 69). The symbolic value of the function of the 'pickled hand' is made by Gocher while he severs it off Tovarish's corpse:

The thing is, Tovarish, I have got to have you with me. I have got to have you guide me like you guided the great levers of his train. I am asking you to come to England with me, if you would. England, where Marx and Engels and Comrade Lenin sweated over books. (p. 70)

Tovarish is the train driver of Trotsky, the Russian revolutionary. Therefore, by keeping Tovarish's hand, Gocher sets himself to assume a revolutionary role in England.

Almost simultaneously Gocher's officer, Staveley, is shown coming with a packet of art icons. He wants to send them to his wife in England. However, Staveley is not actually sending

the icons in order to satisfy his wife's passion for art, but in order to salvage them from the Bolsheviks who would otherwise destroy and burn them. For Staveley, the icons 'belong to Man', and are the 'legacy of the past to the present' (p. 72), and as such should be kept and revered. The icons are, in other words, for Staveley, partly symbols of his belief in pre-revolutionary Russia. Thus, by sending the icons to England, a capitalist country, he commits himself to ensure the failure of any attempt to stage a revolution in England- a commitment that runs in sharp contrast to Gocher's. Therefore, from the start of *Fair Slaughter*, the hand and the icons seem to be meant to present visual pictures or symbols of two opposing values or ideologies. Moreover, as in *Claw*, these symbols represent the opposing value-systems upon which *Fair Slaughter* is based. The icons may not be actually as visible as the hand is, but as is pointed out below, the audience is constantly made to recall them.

The first scene in *Fair Slaughter* comes near the end of the story. (Young Gocher's story is dramatized through intercutting and flashbacks). The burial scene, which is part of the latter story, is supposed to have taken place some fifty years before. Therefore, when Old Gocher says that the hand has been with him for fifty years, he is not just concerned with the exact number of years, but is making it clear that those years have been spent in vain. His dream has never materialised. The audience is, in other words, informed that Tovarish's bottled hand symbolises Gocher's failure, his failure to realise his ideal. The incessant presence of the hand on stage is thus a constant reminder of a dream and a failure. It is a powerful theatrical image, a visual expression of a person torn between dream and reality. On the other hand, in Old Gocher's story the dream is changed; the changed dream then confirms the shattering of the original one. For Old Gocher's dream is now to take the hand back to where it belongs. Put differently, the hand does not have a place in England: revolution has not happened; neither is it likely to take place during his life time. In this sense, perhaps, the only optimistic note in the play is that the hand is bequeathed to Leary, a younger and more determined person.

Gocher's effort seems, however, to be greatly appreciated by Barker. Tovarish is resurrected, once more to do his train-driving mime, his destination this time is 'heaven', and the passenger is Gocher:

*(Suddenly, with a supreme effort, GOCHER lurches towards the hand. LEARY sweeps it away. GOCHER falls with a groan. At that moment, heavenly lighting floods the stage. Backed by a choir. The sound of a man singing the negro spiritual 'Gospel Train' is heard off stage, growing louder. TOVARISH enters, shunting round the stage in his classic engine mime. He is wearing his driver's outfit, but in a heavenly transformation, and holds a bunch of dahlias in one hand. The other sleeve is empty.)*

TOVARISH. This train—bound for Hea—ven—this train,  
 This train—bound for Hea—ven—this train,  
 All God's chillun got arms and legs,  
 This train—bound for Hea—ven—this train. (p. 105)

The orchestration of visual and sound effects demonstrates Barker's visual and theatrical skill. Tovarish's truncated and repeated words accord with the song, but they are, above all, verbal expressions of the flood of 'heavenly lighting'.

The shattering of Young-Old Gocher's dream, its failure, is ensured by Staveley, because Gocher (especially Young Gocher) is always shadowed by him, whether as officer, theatre manager or factory owner. The icons, as mentioned earlier, are not always physically present on stage, but in a sense they are there; firstly by virtue of the constant presence of their opposite; secondly and more importantly, by virtue of the constant presence of Staveley himself. As a character, Staveley is, of course, a visual contrast to Gocher; but the crucial thing with regards to the visual contrast in relation to symbols is that he, too, appears to be equally clinging to his 'treasure', the 'icons', only he does not seem as keen on exhibiting them as Gocher does. The final moments of the play support this line of argument. For having, perhaps, momentarily, avoided being executed by Leary, Staveley finally reveals his treasure:

*(Pause. Sound of search party calling STAVELEY's name. LEARY goes off. Pause. Slowly, STAVELEY emerges from his immobility, his face develops a guilty, schoolboyish expression, conspiratorial, insane.)*

STAVELEY. Got—the—Pic—asso—Got—the—Pic—asso— (*He carefully takes a tattered, cheap reproduction of a celebrated Picasso from his jacket pocket, and gazes at it gloatingly, looking guiltily from side to side.*) Got—the—Pic—asso—Got—the—Pic—Pic—asso— (p. 105)

Staveley develops a guilty expression, because all along 'the show trial'- which is the last scene, he has been feigning illness in order to rescue himself from execution. Nevertheless, Leary, who by then is a Stalinised figure, actually finds Staveley guilty of being a 'capitalist vampire', and passes a death sentence on him, despite Old Gocher's protestations.

Staveley's immobility sharply contrasts with Gocher's movement and struggle with Leary over the bottle as a mark of Gocher's disapproval of Leary's sentence against Staveley. Barker's own attitude towards the two is conveyed in the difference between 'guilty expression' and 'heavenly lighting'. However, the fact that this expression of guilt on Staveley's part is associated with a 'cheap reproduction' of a Picasso painting rather than an original one, not to mention the icons themselves, is in itself important, and intensifies the symbolic value of icons. Regardless of his or his wife's passion for art, and regardless of whether the revolutionary regime in Russia is truly intent upon destroying works of art or not, Staveley is never entitled to transport the icons from Russia. His act is nothing but robbery. Through Staveley's act, Barker subtly suggests the 'decay of the notion of "property" in general but particularly in art'. Given Staveley's political orientation and class affiliation, Barker attributes commercialization of art to capitalism and the 'philistinism' of the ruling classes: 'So crazed is Staveley by the acquisitive spirit of capitalism that his eventual glee over a piece of printed paper is pathetic in the extreme. He looks guilty because he believes he is the sole owner of a great treasure. The guilt is the secret satisfaction of exclusive ownership'.<sup>13</sup>

*Victory* is richer in terms of use of imagery and its symbolic significance, despite the fact that it has fewer stage directions than *Fair Slaughter*.<sup>14</sup> The play centres on the exhumation and

<sup>13</sup> Howard Barker, in a letter to Mamdouh Imran, 28 December 1988.

<sup>14</sup> Stage directions are, of course, amongst the important means through which an author's sense of visual

public display of the body of regicide John Bradshaw. His displayed head as well as his book *Harmonia Britannia* are central images in *Victory*; they visualise the dramatic conflict and identify the shifting patterns of power in the play. The first scene of the play shows a group of Royalist soldiers digging up the corpse. Thus, the play starts from the point where one aspect of conflict in it is already resolved with the defeat of the Republicans. Following the defeat of the Republican, a new round of conflict develops between the victorious powers, the financial community and the restored monarchy. It all stems from the king's ardent desire to rule by decree. The play is sprinkled with visual images illustrating his frequent attempts to regain the absolute power his ancestors used to have. The first such attempt is undertaken in scene three, but as in Barker's plays the ground work for all important things to follow is laid in the first scene of the play. Exhumation of Bradshaw's body as well as the use of a highly scatological language by the King's representative, the officer supervising the exhumation, provide a further proof of the King's strength and anticipate his forthcoming actions.

Scene three combines these two manifestations of Charles' power, and visually demonstrates how they are used as weapons in order to gain more power. In this scene concrete images are used to clarify the analysis. Barker seems to be drawing upon views similar to those put forward in Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality*. The public display of a tortured and mutilated body, Foucault argues in *Discipline and Punish*, was used to discipline the population. The spectators were thus given a message or warned of the sort of punishment awaiting them, were they ever to defy the authorities and the legal or moral codes. Similarly, pelting Bradshaw's spiked head in scene three in *Victory* is designed by the king to

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impact is dramatized as the first few paragraphs in this chapter show. Recently, Barker seems to have abandoned this method; that is, there is a minimal stage direction in the later plays. This is most certainly related to the abstract and exterior location of the plays. Absence of stage direction from the later plays may also be related to the fact that a dramatist may have little influence, if any on the production. Moreover, it also probably, indicates Barker's desire to leave a room for the other artists- actors, designers and directors- to enrich the plays with their own visual imagination and experience. In fact, both the telescope in *Women Beware Women* and the Da Vinci picture in *The Last Supper* are ideas of the directors of those plays.

intimidate and ultimately subdue his spectators. In making this arrangement the king hopes to produce some kind of knowledge and inspire fear in the minds of members of his public.

One section of the public in whose minds he particularly likes to produce such an effect is the financial community. No wonder then that the king's first words in relation to the spiked head are addressed to Hambro, the president of that community:

CHARLES. .. (*He turns to HAMBRO.*) Is that the head?

HAMBRO (*looking out the window*). Yes. (p. 10)

Hambro does not, however, seem to be impressed or scared by the king's question, although he appears aware of the latter's intention. It is very significant, in this respect, that of all the people present Hambro is the one who does not pelt skittles at the spiked head. More important still, the pelting of the head is accompanied by another activity- a sexual spectacle by the king and his mistress, Devonshire:

DEVONSHIRE.	Charlie, you are hurting my arse...
CHARLES.	Get me then, get me in your hand—
HAMPSHIRE.	I struck! I did, see! Shook on its spike!
DEVONSHIRE.	Look, do you want me to throw or not?
GLOUCESTERSHIRE.	Clipped him! Clipped him on the ear!
BRIGHTON.	Oh, the ear drops off!
DEVONSHIRE.	Because I cannot if—
CHARLES.	Oh, tight in your hand!
DEVONSHIRE.	I am—
CHARLES.	Tighter!
NODD.	Oh, poor little ear! 'is little ear, look!
CHARLES.	Tighter yet!
DEVONSHIRE.	Ouch! (p. 12)

The analogy is crystal clear- the more the head is hit the more sexually excited Charles becomes. This simultaneity of actions vividly dramatizes what Foucault calls 'the regime of power-knowledge- pleasure'.<sup>15</sup> The king's pleasure is equally derived from the exercise of power or

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<sup>15</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I*, p. 11.

discipline, together with the knowledge-effect he hopes it will produce on his subjects. The simultaneity is a further example of Barker's skilful mastery of stage space, his use of 'double focus', which is important both in terms of the creation of a visual impact as well as drawing an intellectual reaction from the audience. With regard to the king's own meeting with Hambro and more importantly the 'the prime-mover speech' with which the scene ends, demonstrate Hambro's strength and self-confidence.

Hambro's rise to prominence is substantiated by a memorable visual image in the Bank of England, the venue also chosen by the King for a second round of intimidation against the bankers. In fact, the imagery in the bank scene visualises how the rise of the banker's authority is paralleled by decline of the king's. The imagery depicting the banker's ascent produces a comic effect, while that delineating the king's descent produces a tragic effect. Much of the comic effect of the former type of imagery arises from the inability of some members of the community over which Hambro presides, to comprehend the new changes in the banking system. Thus, a dissatisfied banker, Mobberly, is shown 'dragging some gold bars on a small trolley', hanging to what he calls his 'bit of England':

HAMBRO.	Frank, I am the Governor of this place!
MONCRIEFF.	Leave him.
MOBBERLEY.	Leave me, Billy. I am hanging to my bit. <i>(He sits at the empty chair.)</i> Did I miss anything?
UNDY.	You missed the oath.
MOBBERLEY	<i>(putting the gold bar on his lap).</i> Fuck the oath. <i>(He turns to his neighbour.)</i> I am keeping my gold indoors.
PARRY.	You can't.
MOBBERLEY.	'oo says so?
PARRY.	You can't because we lend it to people.
MOBBERLEY.	I don't wanna lend it.
STREET.	You've got to. It's the system.
MOBBERLEY	Who's system? Not my system!
UNDY.	I thought Frank was au fait with economics.
HAMBRO.	No...

- UNDY. Frank, I thought we had a civil war to get this straight. I spent four years on horseback chasing over garden fences to sort this out. Four years! And now you want to take your gold home and rip up the floorboards. **I have a wound five inches long in my groin says England's got to have a bank!** (*Pause. MOBBERLEY looks confused.*)
- MOBBERLEY. I keep getting bits of paper.
- HAMBRO. They are not bits of paper, they are credit notes...
- MOBBERLEY. It's still paper, ain't it?
- HAMBRO. **It's got my signature on!** (p. 31)

Besides the comedy generated by the sight of Mobberley holding on to his brick of gold, almost hugging it, the image brings to the fore the symbolic significance of what is verbally expressed. Issuing paper notes to replace coins and gold is used here to represent the shift of the centre of power in society. The God-like power alluded to in the 'prime-mover speech' is now bestowed upon the bankers. It is now the banker Hambro's signature that matters and not the king's decree. The king may be the 'head' of the country, but he can no longer have a say over its 'body'.

Since the play is Barker's reaction to the election of a right-wing government in this country, a government with a monetarist policy, it is clear that Barker means the Bank scene to be taken allegorically as well as literally. In other words, the hegemony of the financial bodies and insurance companies in present-day Britain is equally brought to the audience's attention through that visual and largely comic imagery.

This comic visual scene acquires a new dimension, especially if compared with the one immediately to follow. The new image actually substantiates the point just made with regard to the waning of the king's political power. Rather like Mobberley, unaware of the the change in her master's political fortune, Gwynn, the king's mistress, who at the time is accompanying him on a visit to the bank, asks that she be given a 'a gold brick'. Her request is naturally turned down by the bankers, despite being supported by the king. When Gwynn, together with Nodd, another companion of the king, protests and threatens the bankers, the king quickly intervenes and reminds his companions: 'I can't save you'. But he does not despair of trying to achieve the real

purpose for which he comes. He orders that Bradshaw's head, ('now the king's treasure') be revealed and kissed by Gwynn:

Mobs, no, show 'em the look that stops their hearts! (*He leans on the table, intimately.*) You will like this, I know you will, and you Billy, you will love this— (*He turns to NODD, who is feeling in a bag.*) **Hurry up, we're waiting!** Give it to Nell, she can handle flesh, Nell, show the gentlemen the way you kiss, there is no kissing like her, you would think all the kissin' I done there was nothing left to be discovered, but there is, there is! (*GWYNN takes the head of BRADSHAW from NODD and holding it in both hands, kisses the mouth.*) Watch her lip now! Can yer see, Ralph? Do come nearer, and you Mobberley, she has a kiss a long as the coast, oh, she makes yer faint, she does! (*He goes close to HAMBRO.*) Was he ever done like that, I ask yer, Billy, was he, do yer think? (p. 35)

The king is well aware that he can achieve what his companions imagine him to be- an absolute king- only by consensus. Therefore, kissing Bradshaw's rotten head is a tragic moment, a chilling image that runs counter to the comic one of Mobberley holding his ingot of gold. The image may also strongly recall the king's public masturbation with Devonshire; but it clearly forms the basis of his consensus-building argument.

By ordering Gwynn to kiss Bradshaw's head, the king makes a number of points, the most important of which is his desire to re-assert his authority. On the one hand, the king brings to the banker's attention that Bradshaw was too preoccupied with politics, with writing of his book *Harmonia Britannia*, and planning 'new commonwealths', to engage in any sexual act or even kissing. Charles even quotes from *Harmonia Britannia* a passage to the effect that property and money are to be abolished in the planned commonwealth. The king, in other words, refers to what he shares with the bankers- enmity to 'utopia'- and thereby stresses the need for unity in the face of a possible resurgence of Republicanism, the common enemy. On the other hand, the king subtly draws a similarity between Bradshaw and Hambro. The latter's excessive concern with money-grabbing, the king points out, also manifests his disregard for sexuality. The king's problem, in this regard, is that in refraining from sex, Hambro makes the king's plan to achieve the desired unity even more difficult. Therefore, from the king's point of view, in adopting such an attitude, Hambro makes the resurgence of Republicanism a likely possibility. Put differently,

the king makes of sex the means through which to achieve defeat of utopianism. He is after all the undisputed master of eroticism in the play; therefore by indulging in sex, Hambro naturally falls within king's domain, and consequently places himself under the king's control. The whole idea is, therefore, an attempt to regain absolute control. It is no surprise that when the king senses that such control is on the verge of becoming a reality through the marriage he engineers between his own pregnant mistress Devonshire and banker Hambro, the king presents the couple 'a sad present' - the deformed figure of Scrope, a stubborn believer in utopianism.

Scrope's belief is asserted by his defiant shouting of the mottos of the Commonwealth then, but in terms of imagery the belief is signified by the presence of a '*massive copy of "Harmonia Britannia"*' around his neck. Taken together, the deformity of Scrope and the hugeness of the picture, suggest the heavy price one pays for standing to one's belief at a time when an opposite and repressive regime is in place.<sup>16</sup> In contrast to Scrope's defiance Susan Bradshaw, as also shown in the chapter on history, submits. Her submission is visually illustrated by some wonderful theatrical moments, however unpleasant they may be: she crawls on all fours like an animal; 'expertly' steals a wallet of a follower of her husband; is raped by a cavalier whom she later marries; is wooed by the king following the murder of Hambro; and is shortly afterwards beaten by a servant whom she had displaced. All these theatrical moments of degradation are of course undertaken in order for Bradshaw to recover her husband's head. Thus, those images counterbalance Scrope's open allegiance to Bradshaw symbolised above all by his clinging to *Harmonia Britannia*.

However, the fact that the king, together with his entourage, clings to the head and the *Harmonia Britannia* with equal vigour, although for different purpose, suggests that the head and

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<sup>16</sup> Ball's intervention- his murder of Hambro- does, however, spoil the king's plan. This is why Ball is punished severely by the king. Like Scrope, Ball's tongue is ripped off, an act which in visual terms suggests, as shown in the chapter on history above and is further shown in the chapter on characterization below, the similarity between those two characters. It is also worth noting that the same image recurs in *The Bite of the Night*. Fladder's is cut by Shade, because the latter thinks of Fladder as a 'compulsive apologist'. Fladder is Helen's husband, and this savage punishment of the husband seems to be also in part directed at her.

the book are used not only as symbols of contrast between the value-systems upon which *Victory* is based, but also allegorically. It is indeed to Barker's credit that he manages well to use these two images as symbols in order to dramatize current attitudes to the English Revolution. For, allegorically speaking, Bradshaw's head and his book, as kept or claimed by the king as well as by Bradshaw's wife and secretary, stand for the English Revolution as it is nowadays being perceived by both right and left-wing groupings respectively.

*The Castle* has been described as 'a play of immense strength', because it 'carries its meaning through imagery rather than through narrative structure'.<sup>17</sup> In fact, in *The Castle*, Barker displays more of his visual skills by way of providing a more complex but coherent set of imagery. For example, while *Fair Slaughter* and *Victory* are imagistically rich, almost the same image keeps reappearing. This reappearance of the same image naturally accentuates its symbolic function. In *The Castle*, however, there are a variety of images, but their symbolic value is no less accentuated. The accentuation is a result of accumulation of different images, having the same symbolic import. Once more the play is based on contrast between two sets of values; although they are again more well-defined than their counterparts in the plays just discussed. Much of the drama in *The Castle* arises from the conflict between male and female values; or, from the attempt by the former to impose their authority or superiority over the latter. The imagery used accurately reflects the state of the conflict and the shifting pattern of power between those two systems or their representatives. The two central images are the castle and flowers, representing male and female values respectively. Allegorically speaking, amongst the other things the former also stand for is nuclear weapons, while the latter symbolise the position adopted by these Greenham Common women. Resolution of the conflict or change in the balance of power between these two groups is visually foregrounded in two images, at the centre of which is the engineer Krak. And it is upon those two images that the following analysis of *The Castle* focuses.

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<sup>17</sup> Terry Hands, in *Refuse to Dance: The Theatre of Howard Barker*.

The first image is in Scene two Act One, where Krak is shown sitting at a table drawing a plan of the castle. Following that most of the images show construction of the castle in progress. The construction is paralleled by ascendancy of the male values, and by implication the decline of the female ones. The ascendancy is reflected in violent pictures, amongst the many of which is the image of the priest, Nailer, being forced to the ground- almost at gun point, and ordered to re-write *The Bible*, so as to assert 'the maleness' of Christ. But, apart from the image representing a nuclear holocaust, perhaps, the most violent image in the play is presented in the punishment of the arch-defender of the feminist utopia, Skinner. For her assassination of the builder, Holiday, Skinner is forced to parade the streets with '*the decayed body of HOLIDAY... strapped to her front. She leans backwards from her burden, a grotesque parody of pregnancy*' (p. 35).

Like many other images in the play, this one would not endear Barker to some sections of the audience, who may argue that Barker is 'exploiting sex and violence under the guise of condemning them'.<sup>18</sup> Unlike British tabloid papers (whose sensational language, as shown in the previous chapter, is vehemently attacked in Barker's *The Hang of the Gaol* and *The Bite of the night*), Barker never sensationalises the issue. In his work, presentation of such a crime is always dramatically and socially mediated. This is why his condemnation of the root cause of such an inhuman practice is never in doubt. In *The Castle*, it is the authoritarianism of the male regime that is denounced. The nasty effects of such authoritarianism, as predicted by Skinner, are further underscored by her comments during the trial about the change in Ann's hair. In fact, the purpose of this image is not unlike that of displaying the spiked head in *Victory*. It also parallels Foucault's argument in *Discipline and Punish* with regard to the symmetry between the crime committed and the punishment to be inflicted on the perpetrator. However, a lighter and more exciting visual image, although no less ominous, is provided upon the completion of the construction of the castle. To celebrate this accomplishment, Krak is ordered by his master to

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<sup>18</sup> Joan Goodman, 'The Taboo Busters', *The Guardian*, 8 February 1988.

make it snow; and promptly 'flakes of snow flurry over the stage' (p. 25). The snow falling is, however, a very clear visual statement of a nuclear winter, especially because at one level the castle itself symbolises nuclear weapons. The appearance of armoured figures shortly afterwards is a further visual expression of the destructive effects of the castle and all that it represents.

The analogy between the castle and nuclear-arms race in particular is emphasised when in Act Two Stucley expresses worries that another and probably bigger castle is being built by people on the other side of the hill. It is, however, the explosion that is heard during Skinner's trial that suggests to Stucley that such a castle exists and poses a true danger. Naturally he seeks to respond by enlarging his castle, even by building a new one. But thanks to Ann's effort, and that of women in general, Krak refuses to draw a plan for another castle. Instead, he actually signals his support for the demolition of the existing castle. The first indication of a change in Krak's position is when he appears kneeling at the feet of Skinner, the representative of the feminist values, who is still 'festooned' with Holiday's corpse. Krak kneels down to what he calls 'The Book of Cunt' (p. 37). This reverence is further emphasised later when he is shown again 'sitting at a table', this time drawing 'cunt... in 27 versions' (p. 38). This visual image contrasts with the earlier one of Krak drawing plans for the castle; it demonstrates a renunciation of science in favour of sexuality. Krak's 'conversion' is brought about by sexual encounters with his master's wife, Ann, although she herself does not seem to be sure about his change of heart. For detecting that his conversion is not yet complete or rather half-hearted, the then pregnant Ann rather overhastily 'plunges' a knife 'into herself', taking her life and that of her baby. Ann may be overhasty, but the act provides yet another powerful visual statement of the harmful effect of nuclear weapon- extinction of the human race, especially if the arms race is allowed to continue. Moreover, this image makes the one with which the play ends- destruction of the castle- all the more credible. It hastens the the decision to demolish the castle, and pushes her 'lover' to declare himself more openly in favour of peace and harmony. It is a mark of her success that his last

words in the play are: 'demolition needs a drawing, too' (p. 43).

## Chapter Five:

### Characterization

Methods of character definition vary, but are necessarily interconnected. Generally speaking, characters are defined by what they do, say and the way they say it, as well as by some material details with which they are associated, including their physical appearance. In a play characters are shown engaged in activities such as talking and acting, which means they are incessantly defined for the duration of the show. But above all, characters are characterized by the relationships that exist amongst them, and the position they occupy in the overall structural design of the play concerned. The methods of defining them do not necessarily have an equal status; neither are they supposed to follow a defined order. In practice the methods can not be isolated either; they should be appreciated in *Gestalt*, because during the performance, presentation of characters ultimately depends upon interaction between various devices of character definition: 'Each effect these devices produce is modified by its juxtaposition to others, and a single moment of action incorporates several devices that may simultaneously establish impressions of many different characters'.<sup>1</sup>

A good example of a single moment in which impressions of different characters are simultaneously established is here quoted from *Fair Slaughter*:

YOUNG GOCHER. Home. Old England. The Brixton High Road, 1924. Waiting for the rising which must come. Says Lenin. Daily expectation in the Soviets. Meanwhile I am **FUCKING STARVING!** With my record no employer wants to look at me. Street corner layabout. Watching the traffic. Getting mesmerized. **SNAP OUT OF IT!** All right, but do what? Who am I? (*Pause.*) In Capitalist society a man is what he owns. A man is what he stands up in. (*Pause. He looks at himself, opens his*

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas F. Van Laan, *The Idiom of Drama* (Ithaca, 1970), p. 90.

*jacket, looks at a mouldering shirt underneath. His eyes travel to his shoes, the soles of which are flapping off. He walks a few paces, the soles flap noisily. He stops, takes off a shoe, looks at it. He is barefoot. He shakes the shoe. It flaps like a castanet. He removes the other shoe, and shakes them together. They make a primitive rhythm. He starts to shake a tune on th shoes, then stops, full of disgust. He looks at the bottle, as if reproaching it.) A man must eat! First, he has to eat! (He hesitates, as if embarrassed by the bottle, but then, overcoming it, he bends down and rolls up his trousers as far as they will go. Then he pulls his jacket up over his head, leaving it buttoned and the sleeves empty. Finally, with a grimace, he starts slapping the shoes together in a crude, tap-dancing manner, and performs a sand dance round the bottle. He stops in a paroxysm of humiliation. Then he continues. An occasional coin is flung on from the wings. Encouraged, GOCHER performs with more polish. A few more pennies roll in. Taped laughter as from a theatre queue. He dances on until he is too tired to continue. He sits down wearily and collecting the money.)*

*(Enter unobserved, GOCHER'S former officer, STAVELEY, in evening dress. He watches as GOCHER crawls around collecting up the pennies. Casually, he lets a pound note flutter to the ground. GOCHER is about to reach for it, looks up).*

STAVELEY.

*Got guts, Gocher. Got guts. (Pause. GOCHER slowly recognizes him.) Got awful shellshock. After you left. Got banged on. Bugged me. (Pause. He manages to smile. GOCHER resting on his knees, picks up the note, then pulls the coat up again, and starts another performance. He is even better this time. STAVELEY watches.) Needs a song though. Like everything nowadays. (pp. 75-6)*

Gocher's words and the way he says them, together with the gestural movements accompanying them, provide insights into his character. Gocher is in effect soliloquising, voicing his inner feelings and the debates within his mind. He is revealed as a pretty destitute and impoverished fellow. He assesses himself, recognises his failure, and emerges with a strong sense of despair over the future. This verbal expression of destitution and hopelessness is visually reinforced by his physical appearance as well as by his looks of embarrassment and shame both at himself and the bottle beside him on the ground. His 'mouldering shirt', his 'flappy shoes' and his 'bare feet' do reflect his poverty. Thus, the dance around the bottle, using the shoes as a musical instrument, is not one of joy and celebration, but an expression of melancholy and impoverishment. The

dance may further be considered as an emblem of the huge gap between Gocher and the realization of his dream. Watching Gocher behave as he does, one can not but burst with laughter; however, it is a laughter that is mixed with pity, and even with horror at the extent of this man's deprivation.

Almost concurrently Gocher's character is further defined and his deprivation is further accentuated by the appearance of his former officer, Staveley. For in sharp contrast to Gocher's 'mouldering shirt', Staveley wears an 'evening suit'. The stark difference between them in class terms is, above all, visually stated, with the image of Gocher crawling to collect a few pennies, while Staveley casually throws a pound note. Indeed, throughout the play Staveley is shown diametrically opposed to Gocher in every respect: in terms of his views on art, his political orientation, as well as his social position. The fact that Gocher is always shadowed by Staveley does indicate that *Fair Slaughter* is in part structured upon contrast between these two characters and what each one of them represents: 'The design resulting from the grouping of characters is, indeed, one of the most important elements of a play's structure'.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter examines Barker's style of characterization, focusing upon the chief devices or methods through which he tends to define his characters, and foregrounding the relationship between grouping of characters and the thematic and structural design of his plays, including some of the ones discussed in the last two chapters, in order to underline the intertwining between verbal and visual methods of character presentation. Although the devices are sometimes 'isolated' from their 'dramatic context', the chapter presumes that the overall images of the characters are shaped by the the interaction and coming-together of all the methods employed in the plays concerned. The chapter further points out that Barker's style of character definition

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 224. Van Laan also mentions that Restoration drama makes extensive use of character grouping as a structural device. This is important to note, because Barker equally seems to use it as structural device. As shown below, Barker also shares with Restoration drama the use of 'charactonym', which, as Van Laan further explains, is an important characterization device.

tends to be affected by his 'temperament', notably in his early plays.

The geneses for Barker's work, especially 'the earlier plays', are 'almost always a character'.<sup>3</sup> This revelation entails that characters have a significant thematic value in Barker's work, but it equally points to a major facet of his style of characterization. In this respect, it is interesting to find that Barker specifies his 'earlier plays' as the ones especially inspired by characters or ideas about characters. For most of those plays are about 'real-life' characters renowned for some reason. For example, the Kersh Twins and Lord Gadsby in *Alpha Alpha* are based on the Kray brothers and Sir Francis Chichester respectively. Sir Harry in *Skipper* is also modelled after Chichester; *My Sister and I* is about the Royal Family; *Edward, the Final Days* is about the then Tory Prime Minister Edward Heath; and the character of Jarrow in *Stripwell* is about the Labour politician Emmanuel Shinwell, who 'sparked off the whole idea of the play'.<sup>4</sup> Barker presents those characters in an unfavourable light with the aim of degrading them and demolishing their prestige. For instance, Sir Harry in *Skipper* is shown so dissatisfied with the general conditions in England that he sets sail in order to take his life peacefully at sea rather than allow himself to die in an England which is no longer able to accommodate 'heroes', 'pioneers' or 'men of courage', and whose 'utopian society', as he knew it, has fully disintegrated. Even the Queen (herself equally irreverently portrayed), who makes a last-minute intervention on radio to dissuade him from sailing, fails, because the maximum she could now offer him is 'tea at the palace':

THE QUEEN.	Do you refuse?
SIR HARRY.	What can you offer me?
THE QUEEN.	Tea at the Palace.
SIR HARRY.	Exactly.
THE QUEEN.	Look! I don't like this country any more than you. We were born too late, I suppose. At least, I was... I've got quite accustomed to mediocrity.

<sup>3</sup> Howard Barker, in *New Theatre Voices of the Seventies*, p. 187.

<sup>4</sup> Howard Barker, quoted by Steve Grant in 'Barker's Bite', *Plays and Players*, p. 39.

SIR HARRY. There was a time when England thrived, when England pulsed with energy, when men went out and seized with both hands and tore the world up by the rocks!

.....

THE QUEEN. Sir Harry, please—

SIR HARRY. Men were hoisted, women loyal? Servants loved their masters, masters were akin to gods.

THE QUEEN. Oh, God, this is a bloody rotten age. *(Pause.)* Nevertheless, I meant to appeal to you—

SIR HARRY. With all respect, don't waste your time, M'am, let a sailor choose his course.

THE QUEEN. Good luck, Sir Harry.

SIR HARRY. Thank you M'am, I'll run the Jack up to the mast head straightaway.

*(Pause. SIR HARRY has tears in his eyes. He leaves the wheel and goes to the mast. A Union Jack is lying crumpled at the foot. Slowly, he pulls the rope and raises it to the top of the mast. He stands back a few paces, and salutes. He hums the National Anthem loudly. Then he goes to the bunk.)* (p. 3)

The humorous verbal exchange between the Queen and Sir Harry is magnified by the latter's subsequent gestural movements and sound. If nobody is there to provide him with full military honours, Sir Harry can do it himself, and in the most decent manner.

Similar military spectacle is later performed by Sir Harry before he gives orders 'to abandon ship' and throws himself into sea. Barker does not, however, content himself with this satirical presentation of Sir Harry. In between these two incidents, Sir Harry is allowed to display his 'heroic credentials'. Suddenly, Sir Harry finds himself the target of of an assassination attempt by a working-class pair. While on their way to America, Albert and his grandson, Kevin, come across Sir Harry and see the chance to avenge themselves upon 'the aristocracy'. A grotesque situation then ensues, and the attempt seems to backfire. Ironically, instead of being murdered himself, Sir Harry persuades Kevin to murder his grandfather and then to eat his flesh. Watching this cannibalistic display, Sir Harry cheers England, 'looks at the flag', and says: 'Your enemies are chewing one another with tomato sauce' (p. 18). The purpose of this whole exercise is, of course, to demonstrate the contrast between the higher classes and the lower classes. Sir Harry's treachery and cruelty are brought to the fore by juxtaposition with Kevin's naivety and kindness

(to Harry). Similarly, Lord Gadsby in *Alpha Alpha*, who, like Sir Harry, is based on the same real-life figure, is made to behave like a thug: a point which is tackled below.

In like manner, diminutively addressed Eddie (perhaps, in parallel to his real-life diminutive name Ted), Edward Heath is strongly lampooned in *Edward, the Final Days*. The play is biographical in that it traces, mainly through flashbacks, Eddie's life from childhood until his final days in power. The focus of attention is upon his family upbringing and his relationship with his parents; his grammar-school education; his military training; and 'his achievements' as a Prime Minister. Barker's satirical intention is evident from the start of the play, where Eddie is shown vomiting moments after he has taken his breakfast, and just as he sits at the piano to play his music:

EDDIE. Morning sickness! (*He vanishes behind the screen and we hear him vomiting. He reappears, a towel to his mouth.*) Morning sickness, psychological in origin, not unknown among men pregnant with a grand design! (*His voice rises as if he he were going to vomit again, but he stops.*) If that's the price you have to pay, I'll pay it, I'm not afraid to pay the price. (*Shouts.*) Will you get this filthy rubbish out of here? (*He flings the tray bodily against the wall. Enter STANELY who kneels down and begins picking it up.*)<sup>5</sup>

Eddie does, however, seem more irritated by his parents' strict upbringing, and their persistent demands from to work even harder. At one moment, he even tells his mother 'fuck yourself', only to declare ashamedly that he has picked up the term in school. It is also implied in this remark that Eddie is an Oedipal figure. Indeed, during his military training, Major hits him on the buttocks and calls him, amongst other things, 'effeminate' and 'you Oedipus'.

The worst of his deeds is, however, committed in his final days in power. Then, he makes love to Pearl under the watchful eye of her father Stanely, who is also Eddie's servant. Based on such 'hard experience', Eddie introduces a bill to parliament, part of which is designed to curb what he terms unacceptable sexual practices amongst the population. In an address to the nation

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<sup>5</sup> Howard Barker, *Edward, the Final Days* (unpublished), p. 2. The script was kindly made available to the author by Judy Daish Associates. Further reference to this play by page number in the text is to the script.

on television, he further explains that 'individuals wishing to relieve themselves may obtain doctors' certificates' (p. 23). However, Eddie's hypocrisy, together with the repressive and exploitative nature of his legislation, precipitates his political ruin. He loses a general election. Ironically, his father, who comes to rebuke him for his sexual misdemeanour, and also to inform him of the figures of the latest opinion polls, himself copulates with the then pregnant Pearl on the election day. Eddie does not, however, take electoral defeat quite easily. First, he declares a 'nuclear attack'; and then he hands over a revolver to Pearl and asks her to shoot him- which she does, while he is playing on his piano.

Presentation of such characters is clearly cartoon-like and caricatural; the characters' words and deeds are grotesquely exaggerated in order to make of them subjects of ridicule, and to produce maximum amount of derisive laughter. This type of character presentation is, as Luigi Pirandello points out, 'unquestionably motivated by the writer's satiric or simply burlesque intention'.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Barker himself acknowledges that he made such characters 'as subjects of lampoon', because 'I hated them and was offended by them'.<sup>7</sup> Clearly therefore, this kind of character presentation is tendentious. In those plays, Barker is near to an agit-propagandist, who presents his enemies as types, villains intent upon wanton outrageous acts against the population, notably the poor. This tendentiousness does not seem to worry Barker as much as the danger that characters 'may be taken over by their symbols', by which he means the real-life figures upon whom they are based: 'I think that if an audience says, "Ah yes, that character is Sir Francis Chichester or Ronald Kray, or Reginald Maudling" then they don't really try to penetrate beyond that, and I think that's why I am trying to write more naturalistically'.<sup>8</sup>

However, if by 'naturalistically' Barker means that he intends to refrain from modelling his

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<sup>6</sup> Luigi Pirandello, quoted in *Analytical Sourcebook of Concepts in Dramatic Theory*, edited by Oscar Lee Bronstein and Darlene M. Daubert (Westport, 1981), p. 80.

<sup>7</sup> Howard Barker, in *New Theatre Voices of the Seventies*, p. 187.

<sup>8</sup> Howard Barker, quoted by Steve Grant in 'Barker's Bite', *Plays and Players*, P. 38.

characters on living personalities, then he does not seem to keep his promise fully. A number of characters in his later plays are actually patterned after real-life people. But if by 'naturalistically', Barker signals his intention to avoid satirical caricature in characterization, then he seems to achieve a considerable degree of success, as is clear in his portrayal of the Prince of Wales, in *The Love of a Good Man*, who is patterned after the Duke of Windsor; Ezra Fricker, in *The Loud Boy's Life*, who is modelled after Enoch Powell; and Downchild and Lord Scadding, in *Downchild*, who are based on the Labour politician Tom Driberg and the former Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson respectively. Even though like Eddie, the Prince of Wales is shown at the beginning of *The Love of a Good Man* in a 'stooping posture' and starting to vomit; and later before the ceremony of the unknown warrior, shouting, much to the embarrassment of his companion, Gentleman, it is not the person himself that is the target of Barker's criticism or satire. The fact that the Prince thanks 'God for kilts' is, in this respect, very significant. It makes his other pretensions- 'shit myself... left my pants off' (p. 53)- more ridiculous. But because kilt is a dress that is particularly associated with formal ceremonies, Barker's attack centres on the ceremony; he exposes the absurdity and vulgarity of public events:

The English, we are often told, have humour if they have nothing else. Yet what nation possessed of humour, could tolerate the pretensions of monarchy, the absurdity of ceremony, the fatuous routine of the House of Commons, without laughing them away? Is there anything more essentially ridiculous than a Queen in a crown, a judge in a wig, or a mayor in a nickel chain, parading their comic costumes in the happy expectation (alas, fulfilled!) that we shall be overawed?<sup>9</sup>

Barker's subsequent portrayal of authority figures in general, whether based on real-life personalities or not, confirms a considerable lessening of the satirical impulse of his writing. Figures like, Mrs Orbison in *That Good between Us*, Stagg or Jardine in *The Hang of the Gaol*, and Lord Scadding in *Downchild* are never themselves the subject of lampoon. Their acts are very much socially mediated, and Barker is always keen to show them as products, even victims of the system of which they are representatives. Such figures are shown morally dubious partly because

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<sup>9</sup> Howard Barker, *On 'The Love of a Good Man'*.

it is impossible for them be otherwise. Mrs Orbison tries to be good, and in fact warns her security agents against excesses: 'There is a danger we are making an obsession out of conspiracy. We don't want to end up like Brazil, do we' (p. 23)? But because her agent knows how to manipulate the system he is able to persuade her to introduce the emergency measures he deems necessary to deal with 'the threat'. Her peer Stagg in *The Hang of the Gaol* is not worried about anything except securing another electoral victory for his party. He believes that since the 'Westminster model' is imposed rather than chosen, real success for a politician or a party is 'to get the hang of it' (p. 77). Mrs Matheson, in the same play, relays the same idea, albeit in different terms, in her description of the man who heads the inquiry team of which she is a member, as 'partially complete', whose aim, as she further explains to the inexperienced and thereby a bit disoriented Ponting, is 'to take the piss out of it [inquiry]... Shit all over the job. And yet persist in doing it. It's a sort of grand machismo' (p. 31). Nevertheless, one can not but admire Jardine's genuine attempt to get to the bottom of the truth as to the cause of the fire, and his apparent insistence that justice be allowed to take its course: 'The crime. The truth. The punishment' (p. 76).

However, just before Mrs Orbison makes her 'provocative' remark, Jardine provides a kind of self-assessment that in a way predicts his subsequent compromise, despite his apparent firmness and impartiality:

When I joined the Communists I said what will you do with barrators and nepotists? They said shoot 'em. I said here's my subscription. Five years afterwards I asked again, what will you do with barrators and nepotists? They said re-educate 'em. I said have your card back. There is not enough education in the world, let alone re-education. I say shoot a man who abuses office. (*Pause.*) Mind you, I am an old man desperate for retirement. I will have my knighthood and the pension, shan't I, Elizabeth, and run everywhere in the hope of dying quick. (p. 29)

The 'pause' is an important marker in this anecdote. While the first part, which is actually the anecdote, gives the impression that Jardine is a man of principle, the second part, which acts as an aside or a comment upon the anecdote, does indicate that when it comes to the crunch- in this

case receiving a 'knighthood'- Jardine is prepared to compromise his principle. Jardine has already learnt 'the hang of the gaol'; and therefore, Stagg's intervention is nothing but a formality. In this sense, Mrs Matheson's assessment of Jardine and his attitude towards the inquiry is an impartial one.

Barker's tendency to resort to caricature, in the early work, is, perhaps, the main reason why his style of characterization is sometimes described by some as traditional. It is likened to the literary style of Charles Dickens or to that of Restoration drama.<sup>10</sup> Related to, although not exactly caricature, is Barker extensive use of 'charactonym': 'label name, which provides a shorthand method of epitomising the character's nature, function, or both'.<sup>11</sup> Barker disagrees; he indicates that he does not mean such names to be 'identifications': 'It is much to do with non-naturalism, the desire on my part to remove my characters from the world of the outside, to announce their theatrical nature, as much as to myself as to anybody else'.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, his plays are peopled with characters whose names do, in fact, seem to present a 'foreknowledge' or anticipate the characters' behaviour or conduct throughout the plays concerned. Sometimes the behaviour of a character or the general theme of a particular play coalesces to such an extent with what the character's name suggests that an audience may justifiably think the name signifies something about that character. For example, out of forty-four characters in *The Loud Boy's Life* the name of the hero, Ezra Fricker is 'practically the only non joke name in the cast'.<sup>13</sup> an exception that further proves Barker's movement away from satire of real-life people. Others include Clench, Leathers, Devoid and Wiper. Amongst the many such names in other plays are: the eponymous heroes in *Claw, Stripwell* and *Wax*; Bleach and Telling in *That Good between us*; Deeds and Diver in *No End of Blame*; and Pain, Music and Struggle in *Crimes in Hot Countries*.

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<sup>10</sup> See Charles Lamb, 'Howard Barker's *Crimes in Hot Countries*: A Director's Approach', p. 115; Steve Grant, a review of *Victory, Plays and Players*, (May 1983), p. 32; Ruth Shade, 'Into the Second Decade', p. 52.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas F. Van Laan, *The Idiom of Drama*, p. 76.

<sup>12</sup> Howard Barker, in a letter to Mamdouh Imran, 27 October 1988.

<sup>13</sup> Irving Wardle, a review of *The Loud Boy's Life*, *The Times* 28 February 1980.

To concentrate on *Stripwell*, Barker seeks to explain why ‘the moral role of the middle-classes was exhausted’. This aim is achieved by stripping Judge Stripwell of all ‘values of compromise, wit, objectivity and reasonableness’.<sup>14</sup> Stripwell ‘strips’ himself or is stripped of his job, his wife, his mistress, his son and finally of his life. At the end of the play Stripwell is gunned down by Cargil, the man he sent to prison during his brief court appearance at the beginning of the play, despite a passionate appeal by Stripwell for compromise. But, perhaps, what emphasises the suggestiveness of Stripwell’s name is his self-assessment during the party, which is, funnily enough, held by the wife in honour of husband Stripwell and his mistress Babs:

I’ve spent my whole life at a distance. I’ve always been above it all. And now I think there is an awful immorality in being so detached. Only by being that detached have I been able to do this ghastly job of shifting people from one custody into another, because I have always told myself it was no more grotesque than any other job, and only by being that detached have I been able to live here, because although it seemed grotesque it didn’t seem any more so than living with other people in another place. I always thought I had no illusions, but I never had any hope either, and I haven’t any now, only I’m sick of sarcasm, and cynicism and belittling. I’m sick of everything that made it possible for me to stick here for so long. And I’m going to be moral, as far as it is in me to to be moral. (pp. 82-3)

Clearly, Stripwell assesses his life and concludes that he has been behaving immorally both publicly, as a judge, and privately, as a husband. He ‘strips’ himself morally at both levels.

‘Charactonym’ does not necessarily have something literal about it. In most cases strange names in Barker’s plays seem to provide a fore-knowledge of the characters’ idiosyncratic nature and strange behaviour. The fire inspectors in *The Hang of the Gaol*, Bloon and Dockerill, are cases in point. So, too, are their predecessors Hoogstraten and Dockerill in *All Bleeding*. In the latter play, the characters are members of the Metropolitan River Police, who behave even more grotesquely and disgracefully than the inspectors. The discovery of a woman’s body in the Thames provides them with an opportunity to reveal their eccentricity:

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<sup>14</sup> Steve Grant, ‘Barker’s Bite’, *Plays and Players*, pp. 39 & 36 respectively; the first part of this quotation is Barker’s.

PC HOOGSTRATEN. Here she is. Bum upwards. Always floating with their  
arses in the air.

PC DOCKERILL (*nose twitching*). Pregnant.

PC HOOGSTRATEN. Give us the hook.

PC DOCKERILL. Pregnant.

PC HOOGSTRATEN (*dipping into the water*). How long?

PC DOCKERILL. I'm not a bleeding gynaecologist.

.....

PC DOCKERILL. Bra and knickers.

PC HOOGSTRATEN. Take the legs.

PC DOCKERILL. He knows what I like.

PC HOOGSTRATEN. Up with her.

PC DOCKERILL. And down. (*They lay the body on a canvas sheet, carry  
out a cursory examination.*) Own teeth.

PC HOOGSTRATEN. Married. And engagement ring. (*He moves down a foot  
or so.*) Knickers... St Michael... bra... unknown... (pp.  
73-75)

The voyeurism clearly displayed by these characters demonstrates their their idiosyncrasy and the immorality of their behaviour.

In Barker's recent work, he explicitly embraces a parabolic technique, and preoccupies himself with debate of ideas. While his are not parables in the strict sense of the word- they do not offer very clear stories- his way of introducing his characters is akin to parables. A play like *The Last Supper* can without exaggeration or simplification be called an 'allegory of ideas'. The thing about characterization in this kind of play is that, while the names may not offer any clues as to the nature and function of the characters as is the case with 'charactonym', the characters are in a sense similarly defined by their assigned professions. In other words, 'the image' of each character 'is simplified to a dominant aspect or generic idea'.<sup>15</sup> In *The Last Supper* characters are abstract in the sense that each one of them represents an abstract or generic idea pertaining to its distinctive nature and function. Besides their distinctive names the *dramatis personae* are further introduced as 'A Thinker', 'A Nurse', 'A Salesman', 'An Aristocrat', 'A Cook', 'A Carpenter' 'A

<sup>15</sup> Ronald Peacock, *The Art of Drama*, p. 205.

Widow' 'A Diaryist' [*sic*], 'A Teacher', 'A Prostitute', 'A Scholar', 'A Poet' and 'A Student'. Through his or her 'speech and activity', each of the characters embodies his or her assigned profession or generic idea.

'You are no gaoler, Leary. You are only in the clothes' is one of Old Gocher's most impassioned pleas for his release from prison in *Fair Slaughter* (p. 75). This is an appeal to Leary as a fellow human being rather than as a prison guard. Gocher means that Leary is corrupted by his 'sodding uniform'. As a character, Leary is, in other words, partly defined by his clothes. Indeed, physical appearance is a device frequently used by Barker to define his characters. Generally, it is employed to comment upon the character's position and his or her relationship with the others in the play concerned. For instance, in *The Hang of the Gaol*, Ponting's madness is indicated through his physical appearance: '*PONTING comes in, as a green-man, in shreds of clothing. Round his waist a string of dead blackbirds*' (p. 77). Significantly, Ponting is introduced in this way moments after Stagg finishes the speech about the 'Westminster model' of government. Ponting's madness originates in his inability to comprehend and cope with the system. Similarly, at the beginning of *No End of Blame*, Bela is shown naked partly, it seems, to anticipate his growing disorientation and isolation from the rest of the characters in the play. In *The Possibilities* the removal of Alexander's military uniform visualises his weakness and in particular his defeat in the battle.

Physical appearance is not simply a device suggestive of characters' behaviour: sometimes Barker seems to use it in order to comment on relationships amongst characters in the plays. For instance, the discord between Stripwell and his wife, Dodie, is from the start made visible through their different styles and attitude to dress: '*Enter left, DODIE. She is about fifty-five, slim and attractive. There is a trace of chic about her, which has not been entirely obliterated by a deliberately careless attitude to dress... Enter left with a small tray, STRIPWELL. He is wearing a white sunhat, short-sleeved shirt, slacks*' (p. 16). Dodie's careless attitude to dress is further

emphasised when she is shown dancing with her son Tim: '*As the lights rise, DODIE, in a long and perhaps eccentric dress dancing round the room with TIM, who wears a perfectly tailored modern suit*' (p. 31). Although the contrast is basically between mother and son, it can equally be extended to husband Stripwell, as the latter always wears tidy and fashionable suits. During a picnic with Babs on the South Downs, Stripwell has a funny fight with Penells, an icecream vendor, as a result of which Stripwell has his eyes blackened by a punch. Thereafter, every care is taken to make 'the blackened eyes' appear incongruous with Stripwell's smartness and elegant dress. This is why at time he finds himself the object of laughter by a waitress, significantly, at a time when he is explaining to his wife the reasons why he has decided to leave her in favour of Babs. Stripwell is further embarrassed and made to look more ridiculous, when, moments later, the waitress comes back, '*kneels and fires off a flash photograph of STRIPWELL with an instamatic camera*' (P. 63). Given Stripwell's moral conduct, it seems that Barker uses the black spot as a symbol of Stripwell's dark nature, his hypocrisy and immorality. The waitress's deed, which is in itself a very nice visual image, is probably meant to 'visualise' and 'eternalise' Stripwell's dark side.<sup>16</sup> This dark side is similarly underlined by character grouping in the play.

The essence of drama is conflict. Conflict is generated by dialogue amongst characters, their actions and, above all, their relationship with one another. Barker's drama, being 'predominantly a drama of juxtaposition and exposure'<sup>17</sup> achieves this effect through juxtaposition, contrast, parallelism or counterpositioning of characters. In other words, grouping of characters in Barker's work is not just used as a characterization device, but also as an effective one to present his views forcefully as well as a structural device.

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<sup>16</sup> Other visual details like possessions can define characters, but are ignored in this chapter, partly, because they are, in a sense dealt with in relation to the symbolic function of the bottled hand in *Fair Slaughter*, and the head in *Victory*.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Lawley, in his article on the playwright in *Contemporary Dramatists*, edited by James Vinson, third edition (London, 1983), 66-8 (p. 67).

In *Stripwell* characters are grouped in such a way so as to achieve maximum resemblance and similarity amongst them. In this sense, the encounters at the beginning of the play between, on the one hand, Stripwell and Cargill, and the former and Babs, on the other, are absolutely crucial in defining Stripwell's character. The criminal Cargill is, above all, a visual symbol, 'an incarnation of the integrity that the judge lacks'.<sup>18</sup> Apart from anything else, 'the mere presence of a second character provides valuable insight for the audience's understanding of the first'.<sup>19</sup> In this respect, the immediate switch from the courtroom into a pub where Stripwell meets Babs, is intended to complement the insight provided for the audience's understanding of Stripwell's character. Babs's exposure of her body may be dictated by her profession, but it is almost certainly meant to be symbolical of Stripwell's moral 'nakedness'. On the other hand, the disappearance of Cargill, following his trial, does not in any way imply that Stripwell somehow regains some amount of integrity. On the contrary, the lack of it is exposed even further. This is because the symbol of his moral corruption is then taken over by somebody closer home. Stripwell's son, Tim, the drug dealer, replaces Cargill in that role. What makes this suggestion all the likelier is the fact that Cargill never appears while Tim is around. He reappears only when Tim is on his smuggling mission abroad. Furthermore, it is also significant that re-introduction of Cargill coincides with the absence of Babs as well. There is no need for her to be present any more, no need for more stripping of Stripwell, because in actual fact Cargill re-appears in order to kill Stripwell. Thus, as a characterization device, character grouping is also an effective element in the thematic and structural design of *Stripwell*.

Indeed in Barker's plays much is accomplished in the way of character definition by means of parallel and contrast between characters. This pattern, suggesting 'the effect of resemblance' through character grouping, as explained in relation to *Stripwell*, is also adopted in *Alpha Alpha*,

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<sup>18</sup> Ronald Hayman, *British Theatre Since 1955: A Reassessment* (Oxford, 1979), p. 104.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas F. Van Laan, *The Idiom of Drama*, p. 82.

*Claw, That Good between Us* and *Downchild*. In each case, 'a high public figure' is shown in 'contact with low, near-criminal elements'.<sup>20</sup> This suggests that Barker uses the device not simply for characterization purposes, but also an effective means of making certain comments, political or otherwise. For example, in *Alpha Alpha*, resemblance between characters from different walks of life is stressed throughout; but it is important to note that it is achieved through a simultaneity of characterization devices, of which character grouping is an important one. Actually, much of the theatricality in the play in terms of arousing the audience's attention, arises from the the close similarity between the Kersh Twins in terms of their physical appearance, dress, gestures and, above all their verbal expressions and actions. Physical resemblance between the Twins is emphasised from the first moment they appear on stage. The following stage direction describes them while listening to their mother, who is at the time reading a 'biography' of their life:

*MRS KERSH is sitting in an armchair which has been placed on the table. She has an open book on her knees. MICKEY and MORRIE are seated at the table, looking up at her. They are dressed in identical black suits, white shirts and patterned ties. Their hairstyles are identical... MICKEY and MORRIE rise simultaneously: MICKEY goes to the left-hand armchair, MORRIE to the right. They lift their trousers at the knee, bend down, and sit, simultaneously. They stretch their legs simultaneously, take out packets of cigarettes, light up, and expel smoke together. (p. 1-2)*

This similarity through physical resemblance and identical gesture is paralleled throughout the play by resemblance in their deeds and language, including their relationship with Lord Gadsby.

The latter is characterized by his association with the Twins. However, he seems personally keen to define himself, and does so through a number of direct, and very often abusive addresses to the audience, in which he explains the motives for his friendship with the Twins. In particular, he admits to being 'a slave to the rough trade'. He adds that his trips to prison are not intended to enquire about the social being of the Twins, who are there for a murder they have committed, but mainly to satisfy his sexual desire. Fearful that the audience might, like Mrs Kersh, misinterpret his visits to the Twins, or, for that matter to the latter's home, Lord Gadsby

<sup>20</sup> Oleg Kerensky, *The New British Drama* (London, 1977), p. 237.

points out:

What I feel as a man, a man with certain irrepressible, physical desires, is not necessarily distinct, not fully differentiated, from my intellectual commitment to certain a priori social and political beliefs. (*Pauses, gazing at the audience.*) Does that mean anything to you? (*Pause.*) I mean this trip to this disgusting hovel isn't motivated by my social conscience, you bloody idiots!(p. 29)

Later something tangible- a sexual act- is presented on stage so that the audience can not mistake Lord Gadsby's intentions. He takes off his robes and '*throws himself at the TWINS' feet, grovelling, flat on his face*'. The Twins in turn take off their trousers and '*go simultaneously towards GADSBY, who is on all fours and climb onto his back, sitting astride*' (p. 32).

But Lord Gadsby's desire is not purely sexual. He has a strong passion for the destruction of his political enemies and the Queen's. In order to satisfy this passion he also hires the services of the Twins. An Irish MP Bernadette (modelled on MP Bernadette Devlin), is kidnapped by them, abused, tortured and murdered in cold blood under the watchful but squeamish eyes of Lord Gadsby. Actually, the murder of Bernadette presents a moment whereby a number of characterization devices operate simultaneously. Lord Gadsby is at once both verbally and visually defined. Turning his back at the Twins, when the murder is being committed by them, in itself confirms what Gadsby reveals about himself in his soliloquy-like address to the audience:

I could not look. I wanted to, but when it came down to it, I averted my sensitive, refined, delicate, cowardly eyes! (*He stamps his foot.*) I missed my chance! They murder someone in cold blood and where am I? Looking the other way! What kind of week-willed slop am I? (p. 74)

More importantly, the fact that Lord Gadsby is present at all in itself provides an insight for the audience's understanding of his character. After all, he is himself the instigator of the murder. (An identical pathetic spectacle is shown when Mrs Kersh herself is murdered by her sons with the full encouragement of Lord Gadsby). Taken together, all those things prove beyond doubt the similitude between Lord Gadsby and the murderers. And that is basically the moral lesson of *Alpha Alpha*: 'There is nothing to choose, morally, between the supposedly respectable Gadsby and the two gangsters, or rather there is more excuse for them, because of their deprived

upbringing and because they perform the acts that Gadsby is too squeamish to do himself'.<sup>21</sup>

The effect of resemblance is frequently produced through counterpositioning of characters with violently opposite views. This type of character definition is evident especially in plays with a main plot and a sub-plot; plays like *Fair Slaughter*, *The Hang of the Gaol*, and *Victory*. Viewed sequentially, Gocher's in *Fair Slaughter* is but one story; otherwise, it is composed of two stories, the first about Young Gocher, and the second about Old Gocher. As Young Gocher is a complete failure, the first story can be described as tragic, while the second story can be described as comic because Old Gocher scores a symbolic success. This tragic-comic effect in Gocher's story as a whole forms an integral part of his relationship with both Staveley and Leary. The relationship between Young Gocher and Staveley in the first story is juxtaposed with and paralleled by the relationship between Old Gocher and Leary in the second story. Staveley is Young Gocher's oppressor, while Leary is Old Gocher's supporter. Thus, Staveley is basically a contrast to Leary. After all, the latter is the one who sentences the former to death. The only resemblance he bears to Leary is in the position he occupies in relation to Gocher. The parallelism between the two relationships is further emphasised by the fact that Gocher is not separated from his companion. Hence, the validity of the point that character grouping is an important element in the structural design of a play. In a sense, *Fair Slaughter* is based upon juxtaposition and contrast between Staveley and Leary, and by implication between what each of them represents.

A similar pattern exists in *The Hang of the Gaol*, although, generally speaking, the situation in this play is more complex than *Fair Slaughter*. This is partly due to the increase in the number of characters in each plot, and partly to the indistinctness of the plots themselves. For the sake of

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 233. As Barker himself puts it, his aim is to 'show that by carrying acts of violence, running a criminal syndicate, they [the Kersh Twins] were performing a mirror image of the ruling class' (quoted in Itzin's *Stages in the Revolution*, p. 252). In fact, in the play itself they declare their intention to say goodbye to life in the 'East End'; and they are promised to join the aristocracy and be received by the Queen if they do acts on behalf of Gadsby. But Gadsby reneges on his promise, and the Twins are left at the end of the play contemplating how to cover their crimes, including the murder of their mother, the crime of murder with which the play ends. Earlier in *Skipper*, Biven is deserted by Sir Harry in similar circumstances.

brevity my attention is focused upon the protagonists in each plot and on the relationship among them in terms of contrast and counterpositioning.<sup>22</sup> The relationship between the pairs the Coopers, on the one hand, and Jardine and Mrs Matheson, on the other, is characterized by contrast. After all the Coopers are be interrogated by the other two. However, in terms of counterpositioning the characters greatly resemble each other.

Differences between Mrs Matheson and Jane (Cooper's wife) are very stark at the political, sexual and professional levels:

Jane... found her sexual significance in the tropics and in the play she is pre-occupied with a cunt which is as 'dead as a purse'. Her sorrow is that she is thus; Matheson, in contrast, is sexually inactive and tolerant of being so. It is significant that Jane, who has no professional context, is acutely aware that the political gulf which divides the two women is of a greater importance than their sharing of the same sex. Ironic, then, that Matheson, who has achieved much professionally, should believe so naively that politics is less important than sexual domination.<sup>23</sup>

This gulf between the protagonists in relation to sex involves the existence of tension, on the one hand, between Cooper and his wife, and between Jardine and Matheson, on the other. This tension produces the effect mentioned above- similarity between characters in terms of contrast, which in turn suggests that, while Cooper is a counterpoise to Matheson, Jardine occupies similar position in relation to Jane. Thus, *The Hang of the Gaol* acquires its overall structural unity through such an arrangement of characters.

The parallelism between Jardine and Jane is particularly interesting, because it is brought about by a combination of verbal and visual characterization devices. Jane's attitude to sex, as she confides, hinges upon a precarious view of morality. In general, her husband is too preoccupied with his work- in Malaya killing communists and in Maddenhurst educating the prisoners- to nourish her sexually. But as this self-revelation makes it clear, Jane could not care less:

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<sup>22</sup> The main plot is here taken to be the one that deals with the inquiry, together with the relationship and tensions amongst members of the enquiry team. On the other hand, the sub-plot is taken to be the one that tackles the relationship between the Coopers themselves as well as among them and the prison inmates. The decaying nature of the family relationship between the Coopers is echoed by that of the inquiry itself: private and public.

<sup>23</sup> Ruth Shade, 'All Passion is a Risk: Howard Barker; Sex and Sexual Politics', p. 102.

He's honourable, and I've always rather fancied honourable men. It's become a fashion to like cheats, crooks and swindlers, but I got as much pleasure from his honour as a thief's tart from his thieving. I was a mannequin when mannequins existed. All the others wanted to be fucked by weight-lifters and blacks. I alone preferred English officers. (p. 56)

The prevalence of English officers in Malaya allows her to strike a fine balance between her view of morality that is attached to her husband's honour and the need to satisfy her sexual urge. In Maddenhurst, however, no such balance can be struck. It seems that her husband is the only officer in the vicinity. She admits she fancies the gardener. His 'buttocks are so round... you could eat them' (p. 56). Despite this express admiration for the gardener, Jane remains untouched by him, because she is 'the Governor's wife'. She does not want to impugn her husband's honour. But with somebody as enamoured of sex as Jane is, this kind of situation can not continue: a new form of compromise has to be devised. She makes a last ditch attempt to awaken her husband sexually, but that proves to be a fruitless exercise. Cooper is as busy as ever- too busy even to talk to her. Under the circumstance, the only outlet for the expression of her sexuality is for her to masturbate:

COOPER. Oh, God, the futility of this—

JANE *(standing, furiously)*. I have stuck by you! Through all your shudderings. Through all your blacknesses and sheer arctic silences. I have gone dry because of you. And I do not even think that it was love. Maybe it was honour. I only know I had no nourishment from you. *(Pause. COOPER stares at her.)*

COOPER. Jardine is here. How can I listen to you? I love you, but Jardine's here! *(He hurries out. JANE slowly collapses back into her armchair. Her hand goes to her crotch. Slowly, in the fade, she masturbates.) (p. 60)*

Jane's masturbation explains as much about her husband as about her. It is a visual statement that epitomises everything that has just been explained about moral principles and about relationship with others especially the husband. In this sense, the image is probably the most expressive device through which her character is introduced.

The fact that Jardine is characterized in similar fashion, albeit in reverse, does vindicate the suggestion that in terms of the overall structural design of *The Hang of the Gaol*, he is a

counterpoise to Jane. His appetite for sex is no less strong than Jane's, only unlike her, he neither inhibits it nor allows it to be inhibited by his partner's views or attitude. Matheson explains: '[Jardine] thinks it effeminate to be romantic. His idea of considerate is to carry a handy box of kleenex round with him. His latest concession to my feelings is that I should tell him when I want to fuck. When I refuse him he gets violent' (pp. 56-7). Thus, Jardine's wrestling with Matheson earlier is a form of sexual assertion.

However, Jardine allows himself to be inhibited by, or, rather he adheres to a moral code according to which, as mentioned above, offenders should not be left unpunished. As an ex-communist, Jardine sees himself a man of principle. Nevertheless, partly under pressure from Stagg, the Home Secretary, Jardine is forced to make exceptions, in this case exonerating Cooper from responsibility for the fire. Cooper's acquittal, and by implication Jardine's moral inhibition, are celebrated in the most spectacular fashion- 'a piss for Socialism':

- STAGG.       Join me, will yer? Piss for socialism. Piddle Martyrs we shall be.  
(*JARDINE goes to him, stands at his shoulder. They urinate.*) Well,  
son? What's it to be?
- JANE.         He is urinating on my Harry Whitecrofts...
- JARDINE.     I am laying down my honour. For your honour.
- STAGG.       Good. You are a hero of the English people. I mean that. Christ, all  
this piss! I haven't had so much fun since I hung a sheep's guts on the  
altar! (p. 80)

Clearly, the image of Jardine pissing parallels that of Jane masturbating. Thematically, the key word is 'honour'. It is in this sense significant that the word is addressed to Jane by Jardine himself. It is 'honour' that attracts Jane to her husband in the first place; and it is her attempt to safeguard 'his honour' that leads her to a perverse expression of sexuality. Similarly, Jardine's failure to retain his moral integrity is visually expressed in such a grotesque act.

Both in terms of character grouping and structural design *Victory* is more complex and coherent than *The Hang of the Gaol*. The characters are well categorised, and 'the plots' are distinct and well defined. However, as contrast or counterpositioning of characters is implicitly

dealt with in the analysis of images and symbols in the previous chapters, the following discussion of *Victory* is concerned with demonstrating how grouping of characters is skilfully accomplished at the symbolic level. Indeed, the structure of the play is, perhaps, better appreciated by understanding the symbolic function of the characters in it.

In the main plot, the conflict is between 'capital' and 'genital', represented respectively by Hambro and Charles. Other secondary characters are nothing but shades of these two. Like the king, Ball, for example, certainly, represents 'genital'. On the other hand, John Bradshaw, who is, of course, not present in the play as a character, but, nevertheless, dominates it, whether through his head or his book, represents 'mind' or 'intellect'. Given his political views, he is at the same time a contrast to 'capital'. In the sub-plot, his function is taken over by Scrope. This is why, as mentioned before, Scrope is a contrast to Ball, who stands for everything the king represents.

Much of the dramatic conflict in *Victory* arises from the opposition and disharmony amongst these symbolic forces. Restoration of the conflict would seem to entail a reconciliation at least between two of the forces. It may not be wrong to suggest that Barker agrees with the king that a re-alignment of forces is urgently required. However, Barker certainly does not approve of the king's own plan. Barker is against re-alignment of 'capital' and 'genital'. Barker's sympathy seems to lie basically with Republican 'utopia'. It is clear, however, that he wants it revitalized. The encounter between Bradshaw and Ball, its effect on her in particular, is suggestive of Barker's implied 'new utopia'. In short, Barker's aim in *Victory* is to call for a re-appreciation of the Republican utopia, a re-appreciation that would accommodate sexuality, amongst other things. Allegorically, as he points out in the programme to *Women Beware Women*, this is partly a criticism of the Left for their neglect of the 'body'.

This reading of the play and its symbolic design by way of character grouping is given much credence by the other last-minute symbolic gestures in the play. First, Bradshaw returns home with the remains of her husband, including the head. Secondly, she returns with a husband

and a baby. The latter seems to be symbolic of the continuity of the re-appraised utopia. (This baby's symbolism contrasts with the death of the king and Devonshire's baby, which was itself meant to symbolise the continuity of the king's plan.) Thirdly and most importantly, Bradshaw comes back to find out that her daughter, too, has made a marvellous contribution towards re-appreciation of the socialist tract, *Harmonia Britannia*. Cropper has translated it from Latin into English, from a dead language into a living one. The new generation can, therefore, read it. This act also implies that socialism should also adopt itself to new realities of life.<sup>24</sup>

In Barker's recent work, starting with *Downchild*, Barker enriches the implication of character arrangements as those between the Twins and Lord Gadsby in *Alpha Alpha* or Noel and Home Secretary Clapcott in *Claw*. Rather than simply emphasise the umbilical connection between the higher classes and criminal elements in the working classes, such a relationship is used in *Downchild* to affirm Barker's growing interest in education as well as in demonstrating the complexity of power relationships. Stoot may be the weaker partner in the relationship, but he is by no means a docile person. On a number of occasions he challenges Downchild- indeed at the end the latter feels outsmarted by Stoot. As Rabey points out, 'both need and want the other as well as resisting them, testifying to Barker's recurrent interest in the dynamics of the mutual challenge involved in education'.<sup>25</sup> A similar dynamic governs the relationship between Toplis and Music in *Crimes in Hot Counties*; Pool and Gaukroger in *Pity in History*; Lvov and his disciples in *The Last Supper*; Savage and Hogbin in *The Bite of the Night*; and Starhemberg and Orphuls in *The Europeans*. Each of those characters, at one time or another, exchanges the role of a teacher/pupil with the other.

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<sup>24</sup> Moreover, it is worth noting, that the methods used by Barker to define characters as 'groups' are in principle similar to methods employed to define individuals; that is, contrast or parallel (or both) is amongst the devices used to characterize characters. For example, the relationship between the group of women and that of men in *The Castle* is characterized by contrast. The same is true of the relationship between the Democratic Movement and the security agents in *That Good between Us*. On the other hand, the relationship between the Writers' and Artists' Union and an RAF left-wing cell in *No End of Blame* is one of parallel rather than contrast.

<sup>25</sup> David Ian Rabey, 'Barker's Theatre of Education'.

Barker's sense of character grows even more complex in his recent work. His characters tend to have sharply opposed qualities simultaneously existing within themselves. This type of characterization parallels Barker's growing belief in the irrational to affect and shape people's reactions and thought. But it is equally another device of Barker's, aiming at introducing his audience at new possibilities of life, or as he puts it in the programme to *The Possibilities*, it seeks to show how people frame themselves under oppression. In fact this style of characterization is especially true of characters in, amongst others, *The Possibilities*. The playlet 'Reasons for Fall of Emperors' or 'Kiss My Hands' provides typical examples. The former features Alexander the Great and his groom, following a military defeat. The emperor listens agonizingly to the moaning of his tortured soldiers. Suddenly however, the emperor regains his sense of authority and power by deciding that his groom be flogged for no apparent reason except the groom's failure to beat him. The groom does in fact seem to behave irrationally, for that is his chance to take some revenge on his master. The Second playlet features a woman who has been tricked by terrorists into betraying her husband. The terrorists kill the husband, and within the space of few seconds the woman responds to this atrocity in a multiple of contradictory images. First she attempts to smother her child, then she abandons that, undertaking, instead, to do the very act that has led to the death of her husband- opening the door. This type of characterization parallels Barker's growing belief in the power of the irrational to shape behaviour and pattern of thought.

## Chapter Six:

### The Violent Dialectic: Relationship between Verbal and Visual Language

This chapter is in many ways a summary, incorporating, as it does, many of the issues tackled in the previous chapters in this part by focusing upon the relationship between verbal and visual language as well as upon silence and speech in Barker's plays. In particular, the chapter contends that violence is one term of this relationship. Violence is always a visible expression of a character's status in relation to language, a status which in turn is socially rooted. The dialectic Barker sets among language, social status and violence is at times ambiguous, but on the whole, he seems to be saying that, beside being a reaction to violence by the state or ruling classes, the violence committed by the working classes is partly due to their inability to express themselves properly. By contrast, the violence of the ruling classes parallels their power as well as their mastery and skilful manipulation of language. However, in the plays where artist-figures play major roles, a triadic relationship exists, whereby visual language functions as a synthesis, a resolution of a violent opposition between speech and silence or the powerful and the weak. In most cases, this resolution involves a kind of trial. The question is then not whether the oppressed are able to express themselves or not, but whether that expression would be of any validity, whether they would be allowed to win any argument against their oppressors. Judging that winning is an unlikely eventuality, oppressed figures observe silence.

Barker believes that 'the poor and oppressed are not only oppressed in their material conditions, but they are also oppressed because they can not articulate their position: because if they can articulate it, then they are free'.<sup>1</sup> Failure to articulate their position leads them to express it by way of violence, which in turn ends up in them being thrown into prison. In his early plays

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<sup>1</sup> Howard Barker, in an interview with Mamdouh Imran.

Barker seems to equate his working-class characters' position in relation to language with 'education' or 'political knowledge'. Thus, their violence, or as Barker terms it, their 'drift into crime' is the outcome of their lack of 'political knowledge'.<sup>2</sup> At issue, then, is the question of 'political knowledge', proper education or language that would help such characters air their grievance and channel it legitimately. In *Claw* Noel Biledew, one of such characters who 'drift' into criminality and violence, goes further than his creator in placing this criminality or violence in its proper context. In the final scene, making a passionate plea to his warders to save his life, Noel admits to having made mistakes, but emphasises their pettiness in comparison with those made by his jailers:

I'm not an angel but I have seen things, and I 've seen things that make the mugging of old ladies unstinted generosity! Because our little squabbles and our playground fights and little murders in the entrances of flats are hardly crimes compared to that crime they are working on us, all of us driven mad by their brutality and no coppers to protect us against their claws! Their great claw, slashing us, splitting our people up, their great claw ripping our faces and tearing up our streets, their jaguars feeding on our lazy herds! *(Pause)* And we have nothing except each other. Our common nothingness. And our caring for each other. And our refusal to do each other down. Like a class of schoolboys we won't tell who is the thief. *(Pause)* Defend me. Don't murder me. (p. 229)

Unfortunately for him, Noel's plea falls on deaf ears, for no sooner does he finish speaking than Lily and Lusby start to drown him. Ironically, Noel is murdered by people as misguided as he himself has been all along. In killing him, the pair do exactly what he has been doing, promoting the cause of people in authority at the expense of members of their own class. Thus, belated as it is, Noel's plea is in effect a moment of self-recognition and of self-assessment, leading to a renunciation of his previous style of life. What intensifies the sense of reversal is that Noel is stimulated to express himself and put his case in such a convincing and highly emotional language not just by fear, but by words of advice from his step-father, whom he used to despise and chide for ignorance. In other words, Noel's speech implies that the philosophy the father

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<sup>2</sup> Howard Barker, quoted by Catherine Itzin in *Stages in the Revolution*, p. 252.

embraces and the course of action he has been following, despite their shortcomings, are basically correct and worth imitating.

In terms of the thematic structure of the play Old Biledew's story is a foil to his son's. The latter's policy could be termed as 'entryist'. It is summarized by him during one of the moments when he pours scorn at his father and his approach:

I have had acquaintance with the works[Marx's]. It seems to me the point of old weirdbeard's diagnosis was to hasten the corruption, not run after it with a dustpan and broom. Which confers on me the status of a hero, so sit down and shut your gob. (p. 155)

The problem is that, as just mentioned, Noel's hastening of corruption results in great suffering for his own class. Noel's drift into criminality is counterbalanced by Old Biledew's persistent efforts to acquire the language and vocabulary, the political knowledge and skill that would allow him and his fellow workers to present a unified front in the face of exploitation and oppression. Old Biledew's position is made abundantly clear, even though somewhat belatedly, in the exchange between him and Noel just moments before the latter delivers his fiery speech, quoted above:

BILEDEW. I tried to tell you, keep your anger for your class. They could not have murdered your whole class...

NOEL. Biledew... I want to die in bed...

BILEDEW. It's nothing marvellous... the stinking sheets laid on the rubber... it's no privilege.

NOEL. Tell me how to die then!

BILEDEW. I have only just begun myself.

NOEL. Well, I won't die!

BILEDEW. Win them, Noel. Win them with your common suffering. Find the eloquence of Lenin, lick their cruelty away.

NOEL. I'm not a speaker. I haven't got vocabulary.

BILEDEW. Find it. Your brain will work overtime in your extremity.

NOEL. They're thick as shit!

BILEDEW. Don't despise them, win them, Noel!

NOEL. Give me a start—

BILEDEW. (*His light fading*) Be cogent, earn their love—

NOEL. Don't go! Give me a phrase! Biledew! (pp. 226-7)

Noel, as shown above, finds the words but to no avail. Nevertheless, Biledew seems to say in unambiguous terms, and indeed Noel's words similarly imply, that language or education is a viable alternative to violence on the part of working-class characters.

In fact, Biledew's experience, as put by him earlier in the conversation with his son, underlines this linkage. Biledew admits frankly, but bitterly, that before then he 'hadn't got the language' to explain to his son 'the truth' he had discovered, namely that the 'world was not some divine miracle, but was a machine' (p. 225) designed to oppress the poor. At an earlier point in the play, however, Biledew comes near to expressing his position clearly, when he asks his son not to 'waste his anger' but to 'use it... for the workers'; and further by explaining to Noel that if his friends 'brutalized you, so they are brutalized by the system. But when the system falls, so will all forms of cruelty, and boys with bad eyesights will be loved, even by their cuckolded step-fathers' (pp. 137-8).<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, Noel does not at the time heed his father's advice. But in Biledew's case this flash of light, as it were, takes place only once during his long journey in the dark.

The exchange between Biledew and his son serves to confirm in the audience's mind what they should have concluded almost from the start of the play. At the beginning of Scene Two, Act One, Biledew delivers a moving soliloquy in which he tells of his first attempt at educating himself. He reveals how 'this feller' told him to read Marx's *Das Kapital* in order to know about 'the oppression of the working man' (p. 133). Biledew went to read the book, but to his great surprise and disappointment he could not grasp a single line of the first page. 'Barker accurately charts the bafflement of a suspicious common-sense confronted by concepts'.<sup>4</sup> Ignorant as he was

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<sup>3</sup> The words 'boys with bad eyesights' and 'cuckolded step-fathers' refer to Noel and Biledew. While Biledew was in prison, presumably for a violent offence, his wife had a sexual relationship with a man as a result of which Noel was born. Biledew expresses his disapproval of his wife's conduct by deciding not to speak to Noel (this is the first time he does), which further demonstrates Biledew's ignorance.

<sup>4</sup> Tony Dunn, 'Howard Barker: Socialist Playwright for Our Times', p. 62.

Biledew could not understand the language of the book or the concept of 'exchange-value' with which it starts. Biledew's episode is, however, very significant to the dialectic set in *Claw* between language or education and violence. In the words of the First Red Soldier in Barker's *No End of Blame*: 'There must be killing in this world, because we're angry and we 've our rights' (p. 7). Biledew feels not just angry and right but also unable to have a voice with which he can make his right heard. It is, therefore, almost inevitable that he would resort to violence to make himself heard. Biledew's subsequent violent attack on his son with Marx's picture should be viewed within this context. In other words, the attack on the son is meant to be a visual expression of his 'political impotence'. Thus, the picture itself stands at once for his innate political orientation, his 'political impotence', as well as for his response to that impotence.

The attack is equally a response to the violence of the state, because his son aligns himself with the representative of the state Tory Home Secretary, Clapcott. The latter's violence is brought to the fore in the scene in which he is shown reviewing paroles, and, of course, in the way Noel is arrested and subsequently murdered. It is similarly conveyed in his ability to use language. As a man of authority and perpetrator of violence, he is correspondingly shown to be in full control of language. No wonder that prior to his arrest by a special branch detective Noel addresses Clapcott: 'You phrase-maker. You trickling liar, spewing your poison out' (p. 204).<sup>5</sup> Further explanation of this type of relationship between language and violence will be offered later in relation to the security agent in *That Good between Us*.

In subsequent plays, Barker is more forthcoming in his analysis of the dialectic between language or education and violence on the part of the working class as paralleled with or opposed to language, violence or power on the part of the ruling class. For example, the prison officer in *The Hang of the Gaol* marvels at 'the power of vocabulary' (p. 12). Flowers, referred to as 'the

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<sup>5</sup> Noel's threat to Clapcott then further emphasises the point, made above, regarding the connection among class, language and violence: 'I'm not some shop steward who you can mock because he can't finish his sentences. I'm on the inside. The filth confronting the filth. I can destroy you' (p. 204).

common soldier' in *The Love of a Good Man*, expresses his admiration for language: 'Our picturesque language. Our funny songs that kept us faithful in the midst of death. Us cockney sparrows. Us criminals and layabouts made decent for a royal kiss'. His letter to *The Times*, in which he calls for the dirty and difficult job of clearing the dead to be undertaken by immigrants, is phrased by Riddle 'with 'is command of English' (p. 9). Erica in *Birth on a Hard shoulder* defines 'language' as 'the sledgehammer of social conformity'(P. 83)! And Mrs Orbison In *That Good between Us* warns her security agent not to 'do violence to language or you will end up doing violence to people' (p. 24). The following paragraphs will concentrate on *The Hang of the Gaol* and *That Good between Us*, because one of Barker's major concerns in both is to show the parallelism between characters' acts as well as their relationship to one another in terms of their social/linguistic position.

Starting with *That Good between us*, one could suggest that Mrs Orbison's statement is tinged with irony, because she herself is actively engaged in violence both to language and to people. Put more accurately, through being Knatchbull's first victim she becomes his first loyal ally. Mrs Orbison claims that she believes in consensus, and is scared of 'mayhem'. She may be right, but tricky and manipulative of language as he is, Knatchbull leads her to conclude that mayhem will prevail unless she introduces a special emergency regulation to deal with what he calls a 'left-wing conspiracy'. Reluctantly she agrees to introduce the measure suggested on condition that it will be 'temporary and exceptional':

**KNATCHBULL.** Naturally. Nobody likes extraordinary powers. Except when the situation is extraordinary. And it is. It is getting more extraordinary every minute. This power of arrest without the nuisance of a trial is an extraordinary law. But for an extraordinary situation. It is a law against mayhem. It is a law for civil war. Which we have now, don't we? In a word. Though I hate to say it. We must be frank (p. 40).

Knatchbull's 'violence to language' suggests a mastery of language, because it involves assigning new associations to existing terminology. It also means his ability to use language as an evasive

tactic with the aim of securing his political ends.

In the passage above, Knatchbull deliberately leaves the question open-ended. He avoids making any commitment, clearing the way for himself to ask for further widening of the emergency powers in the future. His language, one might suggest, is that of military dictators. Significantly, Mrs. Orbison herself alludes to this possibility when she tries to justify her consent for the emergency powers to be introduced. In particular she is worried about the possibility of being accused of acting like a 'fascist'. Therefore, in order to forestall any such charge against her, she resorts to the language of justification. Mrs Orbison tells a story of a savage murder of a woman in a crowded street in Santiago, the capital city of Chile, whereby the woman is murdered by security agents in an unmarked car under the nose of a traffic warden: 'And the Minister, having this drawn to his attention, denies it ever could have happened because it is an offence to drive a car without the proper registration in his country. (*Pause.*) That is fascism. And when people talk about fascism in this country, I tell them that story' (p. 41). But the truth about Mrs. Orbison and about her type of country is told, and the audience's judgement on her system of emergency is passed, long before she tells this story, with the revelation of the murdered body of Nick Hayman, a member of the Democratic Movement of the Army. The similarity between the Chilean minister and Mrs. Orbison is further highlighted during that surrealistic moment when Hayman's corpse is allowed to talk to Verity, Knatchbull's daughter, whose name and physical deformity are significant. Hayman draws a graphic and horrifying picture about the way he has been interrogated and executed. In other words, the story, like Knatchbull's justification of the emergency situation, is damning evidence of Mrs Orbison's and Knatchbull's violence both to language and to people.

Having justified her action, Mrs Orbison actually tries to emulate Knatchbull's language. For example, when members of the Democratic Movement are rounded up at Hayman's funeral, she describes the operation as an 'excellent piece of ... arresting' (p. 52), and draws attention to

the need for a proper investigation to be conducted. To her surprise, Knatchbull discloses that an agent, with whom he had a problem, needs to be 'de-commissioned':

ORBISON.            You mean you want to kill him?  
 KNATCHBULL.      ME? I don't.  
 ORBISON.            Not personally, but you want him killed.  
 KNATCHBULL.      I hate this 'killed.'  
 ORBISON.            **KNOCKED OFF! MURDERED! PUT TO DEATH!** (*The COUNCIL EMPLOYEES look up, slowly return to work.*) There is so much abstraction in this business. We have to get back to the personal pronoun. Stop hiding in the semantic wood (p. 53).

Ironically, she, too, hides in the 'semantic wood'. Her style echoes that which her agent uses to prove that the state of emergency is urgently needed: 'Proof, suspicion, call it what you like—the point is, we have got to have the information or there will be mayhem, as you call it. Real mayhem, which you are quite rightly bothered about. (*Pause.*) And that's what I am after stopping, and that's what you have got to tell 'em, when they niggle you at Question Time' (p. 24). The language used by both the security chief and his boss is a 'preliminary power game before murderous enforcement'.<sup>6</sup> Mrs. Orbison's 'semantic creativity' predicts her authorization of the 'de-commissioning'. However, to her credit and discredit the authorization is accompanied by or forces her moment of recognition, a recognition that is not unlike that of Stagg or Jardine in *The Hang of the Gaol*: 'I firmly believe that honesty and power are not compatible because the people one is ruling are themselves not honest. That is not pessimism or manicheism, it is a fact' (p. 53). The problem is that this recognition is not accompanied by any attempt to check her agent or even to resign in protest. But then the language used to express the recognition is in its own way a form of violence. It is one of justification, enforcement and evasion on the minister's part. Mrs. Orbison is quick to add by way of further justification: 'But we carry on, stained as we are, muck-ridden as we are, us social democratic politicians in our rags of rotted promises, stinking of compromise, lousy with graft, because in the last analysis we are actually **BETTER PEOPLE**

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<sup>6</sup> Eric Mottram, 'The Vital Language of Impotence', p. 55.

than the people posing the alternative' (p. 54). These words seem to express Barker's view as much as hers, that parliamentary democracy can be a total sham.

Biledew's suggestion, posed in *Claw*, of education and language as an alternative to violence is disputed in *That Good between Us*. Indeed, the overall kind of relationship set between language and violence points to some ambiguity on Barker's part. The point tackled in chapter three above with regard to Barker's conscious decision to allow his working class full range of language does not seem to apply here. For it is mainly because they do not have full access to language, as the higher-classes do, the lower-class characters resort to violence. Certainly, even Biledew gives some wonderful passages, and his description of the 'truth' he discovers as a light illuminating the shaft of his ignorance is among the many such images he offers. But that happens after what one may call his 'conversion' or rather his politicization. Consequently it is probably more true to say that working-class characters are allowed to articulate themselves possibly partly to underscore some form of political recognition on their part. Apart from McPhee, whose case is to be discussed later, the oppressed and the poor do not experience further suffering because they can not express themselves politically. In fact, the opposite is the case. For there is no reason for Knatchbull to persecute the members of the Democratic Movement other than their persuasive articulation of their position. Knatchbull's claim that his suppression of them is in response to their violence is nonsense. In fact, tensions erupt amongst the members of the Movement, because of the resistance of its leader to calls for adoption of a secret organizational structure and for armed struggle. Such calls are made by Telling, especially after the murder of their comrade Hayman by security agents.

Nevertheless, the tensions between Cadbury and Telling serve a good purpose, because they actually counterpoise the relationship between Mrs. Orbison and Knatchbull as regards both violence and language. Telling uses the language of renowned freedom fighters and revolutionaries, something which his leader seems to dislike. Cadbury: 'I hate this text-book

phraseology! I am sick of the Soviet example and the Algerian example. Let us do this our way' (p. 35)! Cadbury may be right to reject Telling's recommendation, because it would give Knatchbull further ammunition in his attempt to suppress the Movement. The problem is that doing it their 'own way', as he puts it, equally plays into Knatchbull's hands. By following a non-violent course, Cadbury credulously allows himself to play a cat-and-mouse game with Knatchbull, a game which, given Knatchbull's position and skill, Cadbury is sure to lose. But it is the loss of the game which finally persuades him to revert to Telling's option.

Following the arrest of members of the Movement, including Cadbury, other members of the Movement assassinate Godber, a spy who grassed on the Movement, together with Rhoda, the Home Secretary's daughter. The formal policy of the Movement seems to favour Telling's line, which is basically that Knatchbull's violence should not go unanswered: one form of violence against another. For the assassins to be 'masked' is pretty normal, given the nature of their act, and given the efficiency of Knatchbull's security apparatus. However, in this particular case, masks seem to acquire an added significance, hinging upon the interrelationship between language and violence in *That Good between Us*. Covering their faces with masks means that they are anxious to cover their identities, but it also suggests their understanding of the language of violence. In other words, theirs is a gesture designed to counteract Knatchbull's. Thus, if the assassination of Godber is in itself a response to the murder of Hayman, then covering the faces with 'masked hoods' is an appropriate counter-measure to Knatchbull's hiding in 'the semantic wood'. This in turn indicates that Cadbury is somehow wrong: the 'text-book phraseology' he hates can win after all.

It can not, however, be argued that this recourse to traditional revolutionary socialist tactics is marked with Barker's seal of approval. Indeed, he is on record as rejecting this kind of approach; and similarly, as mentioned above, the existing socialist parliamentary democracy, as practised by Mrs. Orbison in this play. In cases such as the one in *That Good between Us* Barker

is merely drawing attention to the danger of violence in all its forms. He warns that violence can in most cases breed violence: therefore, it should be rejected altogether.

However, Cadbury's brand of struggle is not totally discredited; in fact, it produces the most positive aspect in the play. In this regard, one should also place it within the dialectic set in the play between language and violence. It would also seem appropriate to emphasise the similarity between characters in *Claw* and *That Good between Us*, and in particular Mrs Orbison's remark about the 'semantic wood' and 'the personal pronoun' in the latter. The only character in *That Good between Us* to stick to the first personal pronoun is McPhee: first because of his ignorance and second because of his new political commitment. This new political commitment is acquired through contact with members of the Democratic Movement, especially Major Cadbury on whom he is supposed to be spying. Cadbury's relationship with McPhee resembles that between 'this feller' and Old Biledew. McPhee's change is, however, even more spectacular than Biledew's. A combination of ignorance, drift to criminality and blackmail forces him to become a government spy. In some respects, McPhee is like Noel's murderers in *Claw* because it is immediately after his implication in a particularly nasty act of violence, participating in a repeated rape of a woman, that he is recruited to join Knatchbull's network of spies. In this regard the image with which the play starts is quite significant. The image of naked McPhee being dumped at sea by Knatchbull and Bleach amounts to a clear visual statement of an act of 'political rape', especially because he seems to be unwilling to undertake the required mission of spying. However, unlike the pair Lily and Lusby, and for that matter, unlike Godber, McPhee is not a hardened criminal nor does he identify with the system. He is an honest, but very naive and simple-minded person. For example, although he makes his hatred of spying known, he is prepared to do it 'honestly and in good faith'. To Godber: 'When I say yoo are my mate, it's no half fuckin' serious. It's life or death wi' me, I'm tellin' yoo. It's blood brotherhood' (p. 20); 'When I first saw him, for wha' he called me, I cud ha' jammed a bottle in his face. Yoo saw me, I cud ha' carved the bastard, but noo I am full

of respect for him. I ha' been very careless wi' respect. I ha' respected pop stars and fuckin' footballers, I ha' even respected blokes for fuckin' women, but I am havin' noo more of tha'. Now I respect mysel', an' yoo, and the Major. Tha's the lot' (p. 46). The extent of McPhee's change can only be appreciated by showing just how ignorant he was . Asked by Cadbury to state what he has against the government, being unable to express himself, McPhee keeps repeating the personal pronoun 'I'. Finally when he says something, though not directly against the government, it turns out to be quite revealing: 'I'm nae at fuckin' school, I'm not' (p. 38)!

McPhee may be unable to express himself, but he 'can think'. When Cadbury voices what he himself has against the government, McPhee finds that Cadbury also speaks for him. McPhee, therefore, says: 'Thank yoo for these few kind words. Yoo must take me for a fukin' idiot' (p. 38). This dormant political awareness on McPhee's part is further felt in his definition of the concept of freedom and of a free man: 'Fuckin', sleepin', dressing' good, tha' freedom ....It is a man wi' a bellyful of grub, an' a room, an' a few quid in his pocket to go dancin' wi' the tarts with. Tha's what a free man is' (p. 38)! No wonder that when the level of discussion is raised to become slightly more conceptual, especially with the intervention of Godber, who has been listening to the conversation, McPhee soon feels rather like Old Biledew did, when he attempted to read *Das Kapital*, confused and baffled:

- MCPHEE. I am sorry Mrs, I feel free. I do.  
 CADBURY. You are not . They have you. And you can't say no. Freedom is saying no. (*MCPHEE hesitates, drinks deeply, looks around.*)  
 GODBER. At this moment. (*They look at him.*) Later, freedom will consist of saying yes. Is that not right? (*MCPHEE is confused.*)  
 MCPHEE. I am sick of the word. I do not want to hear the word again! (*He slams down the glass, goes.*) (39)

Ashamed as he clearly is, McPhee does not despair. A few days later he comes back and although he once more admits his ignorance- 'I can't! I canna talk'-(p. 45) he displays a zeal for learning. His analysis of a story told by his father about the latter's pleasure in punishing a black man in Africa for his refusal to apologize to his white lady is an important moment in McPhee's

political education: 'Ma poor ol' man! The scum beatin' the scum' (p. 47).

Following this 'conversion', McPhee puts his finger on the root cause of his ignorance and relates it to his social position. To Godber: 'Yoo had a proper education, yoo were nae the victim of a rulin' class conspiracy' (p. 47). More importantly, he tries to convert Godber to the cause of the Democratic Movement. Godber, of course, flatly refuses this kind of suggestion. He is, after all, thrilled by spying, and more importantly, Knatchbull is very satisfied and pleased with his performance and language: 'I love your words. I think you string together lovely words' (p. 45). Instead, Godber reports McPhee's change to Knatchbull. But as an honest and newly politicized man, McPhee does not shy away nor shrink from what he sees as his duty. Indeed, when members of the Movement are rounded up he asks for himself to be arrested, too. And it is then that Knatchbull takes the decision to 'de-commission' him. The play, however, ends with the failure of the operation of 'de-commissioning'. McPhee emerges from sea yelling the personal pronoun 'I' a number of times. Instead, as mentioned above, Godber, Knatchbull's loyal spy meets his end at the hands of the Movement. Thus, taken in relation to one another, the two incidents reveal that the 'personal pronoun' is capable of surviving the pressures of 'the semantic wood'. Moreover, Biledew's proposition seems to stand some ground with respect to McPhee. Education helps him get a much needed political insight.

The relationship between language and violence is approached from a different angle in *The Hang of the Gaol*. Rather than being deprived of education, the oppressed are given education. But it is an education of a special kind: one that aims at teaching them how to obey rather than revolt or argue against exploitation. The aim of this type of education is given by the prison governor, Colonel Cooper:

There is a way of governing the human animal. It is to club him, to concuss his head. By bruising and rupturing, to fog it with persistent aches. There is two thousand years of history in that, of useless whimpering in African groves and frosty German villages. But deep inside the bloody head flickers the feeble light of service, the will to joyfully obey. It burned in our first ancestor and it does

now in every raping Kurd and flaming Irishman. I wanted to blow on that feeble light until it burned strong and pure as gas, to feed it with culture until every snarling, blaspheming thing that launched its head against our bars and made the cell floor run with its saliva, rose to silence of its dignity (p. 72)!

The governor wants to achieve hegemony and dominance by education and culture rather than by violence as Knatchbull does. Thus, the language of 'de-commissioning', 'knocked off' and 'killed' in *That Good between Us* is replaced by that of 'culture', 'feeble light' and 'joyfully obey' in *The Hang of the Gaol*. However, as the play is partly intended to show 'the contradictions of the liberal stance, the impossibility of personal morality in an immoral political system', Cooper's experiment misfires.<sup>7</sup> The failure of the experiment seems to reveal Cooper's secret feelings towards the prisoners as well as the truth about the powerful effect language and education can have. The prisoners riot, and in desperation Cooper sets fire to the prison.

Nevertheless, Cooper's concept of the 'feeble light' of education and culture turns out to be an extremely powerful weapon. It becomes a raging and unextinguishable fire, whose effects are felt way beyond the damaged prison. During the investigation, the heat of 'raging fire' is felt: 'THE INQUIRY', the prison officer, Udy tells his colleague Michael Whip 'protects you. Never was so much distance placed between a grievance and its object. Wrath dies from lack of nourishment, and revenge is withered by delay. Learn to love inquiries, Michael, for they love you. No one ever died from injuries received from two hundred pages of H. M. stationery' (p. 12). By alluding to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Hamlet's delay in taking revenge for the murder of his father, Udy draws attention to himself as an educated man, thus anticipating the role he is going to play in aborting the inquiry. But his definition of the latter in itself underlines the purpose for which his language and education are to be mobilized: to 'wither' questions and to 'delay' giving answers. Furthermore, Udy's definition actually anticipates Jardine's description of him as a 'winkler-out of truths', and his testimony as 'an example of evasion such as would do credit to the chairman of a secondary bank at an emergency meeting of shareholders' (p. 47). In other

<sup>7</sup> Howard Barker, quoted by Catherine Itzin in *Stages in the Revolution*, p. 256.

words, 'the enquiry into the burning of the gaol turns into a display of defence language of those under interrogation, of evasion tactics'.<sup>8</sup> Questioned, Udy uses his linguistic skill to avoid giving any shred of evidence that might lead the investigating team some way toward their aim. Instead, Udy deftly repeats their questions back to them. When Jardine, who seems to understand Udy's tactic, tries to face up to him by challenging Udy to be more elaborate in his description of the atmosphere in Middenhurst, Udy simply says 'good'. Pressed further, Udy evades the question by once more revealing his educational background:

JARDINE. Now, Mr Udy, how would you describe the atmosphere at Middenhurst?

UDY. As I just indicated, it was good.

JARDINE. Good. A good fight. A good fuck. A good apple.

UDY. You are indicating the absence of validity in the word good. I am a bit of a philosopher myself. *Principia Ethica* was on the reading list for my language class. I have thirty copies, still in mint condition I regret to say. (p. 45)

Udy's colleague Whip may be less educated but is no less evasive. He admits things 'were getting out of hand', but would not say how: 'Just this an' that .... Now and again, you know' (p. 49). Needless to say, the purpose of avoiding giving direct answers does also entail an attempt to obstruct any attempt by the team to incriminate them or their boss. They want the inquiry team to go empty-handed, and thereby make sure that nobody is injured by their stationery. In any case Jardine himself, with a knighthood to look forward to, and a sexual game to play with Mrs Matheson, looks after the result of the inquiry himself. No wonder that the fire inspectors spend their time playing games with language rather than concentrate on writing their scientific report on the fire.

Turk is in some respects like McPhee, a newly educated working-class character desiring to be 'a hero'. Because of his ignorance, or, probably because he is bribed or blackmailed, he accepts to spy on the inmates. It seems, however, that although the education he receives in

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<sup>8</sup> Eric Mottram, 'The Vital Language of Impotence', p. 50.

prison is intended to ensure his submission and not revolution, he learns how to think and argue. He seems to have a debate within himself as a result of which he concludes that the prison needs to be demolished, a 'colony' that needs to be liberated. Turk does take upon himself the right to be its liberator. In other words, Turk also sets fire to the prison, because of political reasons:

- MATHESON. You would like to see all prisons burned to the ground?  
 TURK. Why stint ourselves? Prisons are the start of it.  
 MATHESON. England?  
 TURK. Fire spreads.  
 MATHESON. That's rather a commonplace remark for you.  
 TURK. Liberty is catching. How's that?  
 MATHESON. And yet in the last five minutes you have effectively deprived yourself of it. I see you were due to be paroled in seven weeks.  
 TURK. Madam, liberty is the product of action. It is not walking about sniffing the street....(pp. 66-7)

As Mrs. Matheson remarks, Turk could be the only one to be incriminated.

Turk's 'revolutionary act' is, nonetheless, nothing but a minor gesture. It is likely that he will end up in another prison. The fire he starts in the prison is nothing to compare with Cooper's. So is his newly self-acquired education in relation to Cooper's. Turk is different from Old Biledew and McPhee in the sense that he achieves his insight unaided. Further, he achieves it via a different route. Having become fully informed of Cooper's type of education, Turk discovers the extent of degradation he and his likes are subjected to, and he decides to act against the oppressors. Moreover, Turk's development somehow contradicts Biledew's prescription. Unlike Biledew, acquisition of language and vocabulary leads Turk to indulge himself in violence. Nevertheless, his violence is a response to Cooper's violence and to the oppression which he sees in his society.

On the face of it Turk's development may be taken as a further example of the ambiguity on Barker's part, regarding the affinity between language, class and violence. But, in fact, it marks the start of a more defined approach. Barker now believes that language is both 'suspect and liberating'. It is liberating when given to those whom one would not normally expect to have it,

characters like Biledew, McPhee and Turk. But it has the opposite effect: that is, it is suspect when it 'allows spurious and deceitful characters to obtain, to achieve power'.<sup>9</sup> Besides Knatchbull, chief amongst characters in the last category are Pain in *Crimes in Hot Countries* and Downchild in the play of the same name. For example, much of the mystery and power surrounding Pain are gained through language. Indeed, the fact that he is patterned after Lawrence of Arabia is in this respect quite significant. Lawrence of Arabia is, according to Barker, the only renowned English character, apart, perhaps, from Sir Philip Sidney in the 16th century, to achieve 'the impossible in English culture.... the idea of a soldier being a cultured man'.<sup>10</sup> And in fact, from the very first moment Pain appears on the stage he seeks to present this image of himself as both a poet and sensitive man as well as as a soldier:

PAIN. I have a chit for china. (*They look blank*) Ex-London docks. (*They gawp*) Collect, deliver Government House. (*and gawp*) Were there no boxes from the boat? (*They shake their heads*) China—non—apparata—est. (*He scrawls on the chit, turns to go*)

PORCELAIN. Excuse me. I wonder if your chit says porcelain?

PAIN. That's right. China.

PORCELAIN. I'm Porcelain. Ronald Porcelain. Of Beckenham, Kent.

PAIN. (*examining the chit casually*). They forgot to tick the livestock box. Sign here, will you? (*He holds it out for PORCELAIN to sign*). It's typical of a modern army to issue forms of such rigorous specificity, but equally typical that the men employed to service them are barely literate. The common soldier is both the greatest obstacle to efficiency and the ultimate condition of it. He has to be driven take a bath. He reads comics. His vocabulary consists of stale abuse. Yet these are the very factors that enable him to lay down his life by numbers. An army is a fallacy sustained by contradiction. (*He climbs on the motorcycle, turns to PORCELAIN*) Will you hold on very tight? I am inclined to be reckless (p. 5).

Pain's language does, it is evident, produce the desired effect of impressing upon his audience: the three women, Hacker, Porcelain and even Toplis, the latter himself a master of language. All of these characters are made to feel their inferiority by Pain's 'mystifying language'. Their

<sup>9</sup> Howard Barker, in an interview with Mamdouh Imran.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

gestures, silence and gaping reflect their embarrassment and bafflement at their inability to grasp Pain's words. Most embarrassed of them all is, of course, Porcelain who expects that Pain is coming to fetch him. Porcelain's embarrassment and sense of shame are most evident when he pulls himself up to ask if his name is mentioned on the latter's chit. Poor Porcelain does not know that 'china' means 'porcelain', and that Pain's change of the word is deliberate: 'As a poet and devotee of language, he is currently toying with the word 'chit'; naturally he alters the word 'porcelain' to 'china' because it alliterates'.<sup>11</sup> Pain's use of Latin is also meant 'to impress' through language and education. At the same time the change of words is also meant to express Pain's disregard for Porcelain- a point further underlined by the subsequent remark: 'livestock.' Indeed, the whole idea behind Pain's speech about the army is intended to project himself as a unique soldier, being cultured and poetic. The speech also seems to have some class overtones. Using the word 'common' to describe soldiers, he, therefore, expects them to use common and stale language which he would not himself use.

Pain's persistent attempts to achieve power through language and to show himself as a sensitive soldier are foregrounded throughout the play, notably in his relationships with soldier Music and with the Governor's daughter, Erica. He only feels apprehensive about Toplis, because the latter's only 'currency' is language. And indeed, Toplis succeeds in toppling the existing regime by the sheer power of his language. He manages to persuade the soldiers to join him in his rebellion by using flashy phrases like: 'Show me a joy like the joy of disobedience!'; 'magic is setting free your dreams. No one is free unless his dreams can breathe' (pp. 26-7). No wonder that at one stage in the play even Pain himself reports Toplis's activities to Erica. Pain feels threatened both socially and linguistically by Toplis.

Tom Downchild's attitude to Stroat in the play *Downchild* is largely identical to Pain's in his desire to impress and dominate through language. Commenting on the language used in prison in

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<sup>11</sup> Charles Lamb, 'Howard Barker's *Crimes in Hot Countries: A Director's Approach*', p. 120.

*The Hang of the Gaol*, the 'philosopher' Udy describes it as 'pitifully thin': 'There are less than twenty words in the average con's vocabulary, and nearly all of them related to the functions' (p. 12). Here in *Downchild*, Stoa expresses his position in identical terms: 'Words are like dicks and muscles, perish from lack of use' (p. 68). Just out of prison, Stoa feels the brunt of his shortage of words to cope with life outside. Downchild exploits Stoa's weakness to the full. He takes advantage of it to oppress Stoa both socially and sexually. Downchild in fact does everything he can to prevent Stoa from acquiring language through contacts with other people. For example, when Downchild discovers Stoa in the church trying to learn the word 'tympanum' (on the occasion when Stoa makes the remark just quoted), he contemptuously comments: 'The delinquent English boy. His fatuous endeavour to communicate' (p. 69). Downchild appoints himself Stoa's sole 'language instructor' and wants to ensure that the task of 'educating' Stoa is left to him alone in order to preserve the 'immense power... he has over' Stoa.<sup>12</sup> As a matter of fact, Downchild addresses Stoa by saying: 'You are just a baby, wandering in the great big noisy fairground of my character'(p. 77). Thus, faced with this kind of oppression and exploitation, Stoa gives up words. He recognizes that no matter how hard he works to learn and acquire new words he will never be a match for Downchild; and who could blame him? Downchild is after all a gossip columnist: words are his speciality. Stoa, however, has his own method to counteract Downchild's power in words, a point that will be dealt with later.

As a play, *Downchild* occupies a transitional point in Barker's work. It also marks a kind of 'new phase' in the dialectical interrelationship set in his plays between language/education and violence/power. In the plays discussed so far, violence on all sides is largely a visible expression of the character's position with respect to language or education: lack of it leads to violence, and possession of it also leads to violence and exercise of power, largely depending upon and corresponding with the social position of characters or their place in the power structure shown to

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<sup>12</sup> Howard Barker, in an interview with Mamdouh Imran.

be existing in the plays concerned. Thus, when unqualified, the word 'language', as used so far in this chapter, largely refers to 'verbal language'; and 'violence' largely correlates with 'visual language'. Therefore, in terms of the relationship between visual and verbal language the visual is largely a manifestation of the characters' 'position' in relation to the verbal. Visual images of murder, torture, drowning, fire and assassination simultaneously convey the perpetrators' and the victims' social position as well as the degree and quality of their education or language. But whatever the position is, none of the characters seems altogether to despair of the verbal.

In later plays, however, and *Downchild* is the start of a whole range of them, some characters have a deep mistrust in verbal language. Most of the characters who come to hate verbal language are artists, visual artists in the majority of cases. Stoa is one of them, although he is the least educated. Education should, in fact, be stressed, because with the exception of Stoa all such characters are highly educated, and never fail in their ability to express themselves, but rather consciously choose not to articulate themselves. The crucial issue then is power, which those characters come to associate with the verbal. They do not speak their mind, because they know that they are at the lower end of the scale of power. They are sufficiently aware that to argue their case would probably render them physically deformed. They could end up as both Scrope and Ball do in *Victory*. Therefore, they observe silence.<sup>13</sup> Silence is their typical response to power in form of the verbal.

Nevertheless, as far as the visual artists are concerned silence itself then seems to be at once both a form of power as well as resistance to it and its manifestation, the verbal. This is because in the first place their silence means that they are not prepared to change a clear-cut position they have already made in their visual art. For example, Galactia's interrogators in *Scenes from an Execution* get more irritated by her silence, because by her silence she makes it clear to them that

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<sup>13</sup> The ripping of the tongues of Scrope and Ball are visual expressions of imposing silence on them. *Victory* is overlooked in this chapter, mainly because these images were expounded in the previous chapters.

she stands by the position she makes in her drawing. In other words, characters like Galactia trust in their own kind of visual language, their art to argue for them. In fact, in most cases, a significant moment in the development of such characters is suggested by their giving up words in favour of pictures. Barker does not claim, even in relation to characters like Galactia, that he means to emphasise 'the the superiority of the visual image over the verbal image', because as Bela in *No End of Blame* says, a picture can also lie.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, it interesting to note that the moments when his characters declare their preference for the visual present very exciting visual pictures on the stage.

Stoat's liberation from Downchild is indicated by: 'Fuck words. Picture's best' (p. 104). The freedom which Stoat finds through pictures entails Downchild's loss of control, a loss which in turn entails the failure of the verbal, not just because Downchild has just promised Stoat to 'teach you words', but because Downchild is a journalist, whose weapon is, of course, words.

It is partly because of a development in Stoat's character, signified by a movement away from the verbal to the visual, that *Downchild* is judged as a transitional play in Barker's work. His reply to his patronising educator, 'fuck words. Picture's best', is echoed by Bela at the beginning of *No End of Blame*. In the first scene Bela, a poet and cartoonist, is forced at gun point to compose a poem, whose rhyme, it turns out, does not suite the officer's whim . Therefore, Bela has to change the rhyme according to the officer's wish. Following this humiliating experience Bela changes his position about rhyme and by implication about the verbal by declaring, rather as Stoat does: 'I shall never write a poem again.... He went on about rhyme. Fuck rhyme. I hate it' (pp. 6-8). Later this incident and especially the word 'rhyme' acquires a new dimension in relation to Bela's experience. It comes to stand for oppression and humiliation. This is why he devotes all his energies to cartoons. His pictures do, however, bring him into trouble with the authorities wherever he goes. The incident of the poem is strongly recalled when Bela is asked to

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<sup>14</sup> Howard Barker, in an interview with Mamdouh Imran.

appear before a Committee of Writers. Then what he is asked to do is to alter his pictures. Bela refuses to do that but he also refrains from defending them, because, for him, a picture must be able to defend or speak for itself:

- FOURTH COMRADE. You mustn't shelter behind a fog of anti-intellectualism. That is a posture, a calamitous affectation, isn't it?
- FIFTH COMRADE. Carry on, Bela. (*Pause. He seems unable to speak.*)
- BELA. It's oppressive in here, all this—
- SECOND COMRADE. It can be oppressive, I agree—
- FOURTH COMRADE. It's not oppressive. It is not a persecution. We aren't the inquisition, are we? This is not the middle ages. Argue with us, please. (*pause.*)
- SECOND COMRADE. Yes. Defend your cartoon, please. (*BELA shuts his eyes.*)
- BELA. There's something wrong somewhere.
- SECOND COMRADE. Where? Tell us where. (*Pause.*) Fight for your work. It won't speak for itself.
- BELA. It should do! (p.22)

It is clear these comrades seek to make Bela change the views he presents in the cartoons. But he neither argues for nor defends the pictures, for they should speak for themselves. Thus Bela's silence is a reflection both of weakness as well as of strength: weakness in that he is forced to be silent, and strength in that the power of his pictures is already proved by the amount of the comrades' anger. Put differently, the exchange with the Committee members shows that 'power is assigned a compulsive verbalising. The clash with the Writers' Committee is between endless saying and silence'.<sup>15</sup>

Galactia in *Scenes from an Execution* is faced with a similar dilemma. Commissioned by the state of Venice to draw a celebratory picture of the battle of Lepanto, she chooses instead to draw what she feels she must draw: violence, horror and ugliness of war. Enraged by 'her insensitivity' to the state (the Doge is in particular incensed by the portrayal of his brother, an admiral, as ruthless), the authorities require her attendance before the Committee of Inquisition. Like Bela, she is asked to re-draw the picture, but, again like Bela, she refuses to budge or argue.

<sup>15</sup> Tony Dunn, 'Howard Barker: A Socialist Playwright for Our Times', p. 69.

She almost echoes Bela's words:

- PASTACCIO. ..Yes, all very good, that is your strength, who can quarrel with you on that territory? You are supreme. But behind the painting we are all equals. What are you saying? It seems to us you are saying you revile the State of Venice. Do you want to argue with that?
- OSTENSIBLE. Argue if you want. *(Pause)*
- GALACTIA. What are you going to do with me?
- PASTACCIO. Please, argue the point.
- GALACTIA. No.
- PASTACCIO. Why not?
- GALACTIA. Because you will only win the argument.
- PASTACCIO. How do we know until you have offered your defence?
- GALACTIA. No. I am not going to you give you the satisfaction of proving me wrong. If the surface of the painting is my territory, the back of it is yours. You are specialists in arguments. I hate arguments. What are you going to do with me?
- OSTENSIBLE. I have never heard of an artist who did not want to engage with his opponents, there is nothing they love more than expostulating about their genius, what is the matter with you? Defend yourself or we will become irritated.
- GALACTIA. You see, you must win. ( p. 79)

And irritated, they become. Galactia is sent to prison for her refusal to comply with their demand to re-do the painting. Unlike Bela, however, Galactia emerges from her experience unscathed. Her painting proves to be a popular success. The authorities, therefore, come under heavy pressure to release her, which they do.

Characters who are faced with similar cases but are not themselves artists tend to resort to violence in response to the violence directed against them. The three women's reaction to the decision of the officer of the invading army to destroy their village in a playlet of *The Possibilities* is a case in point. They kill the officer because they know they can not win an argument with the officer. He has power, so he must be the winner.

The women's 'violent' attitude recalls Biledew's, except unlike Biledew, the women do not seem to be ignorant or unable to argue their case successfully. In this case, and indeed in all the instances discussed in this chapter, Barker seems to be suggesting that unfortunately violence is

probably always going to be one aspect of the language through which people relate to one another.

### Part Three:

#### Presentation of Art and Artist-Figure

This part is devoted to Barker's concern with art and the artist-figure.<sup>1</sup> The relationship between the fictional portrait of the artist and his or her creator is well established in literature. For example, Beebe suggests that such a portrait 'can be seen in much the same manner as the writer's letters, diaries, notebooks, prefaces, or memoirs'. Moreover, although Beebe cautions against making a 'one-to-one equation between a work of art and an autobiography', he, nevertheless, asserts that the fact that such a work is 'a product of the imagination, in which the experience it uses is distorted and transcended, makes it often more revealing than primary documents, for writers frequently tell more about their true selves and convictions under the guise of fiction than they will confess publicly'.<sup>2</sup> Barker is no exception, neither is he very reticent in this respect: 'Later, I found in the study of the artist himself... the cause that was neither wholly self nor the rattling egotism of entertainment, (which I also owned but was suspicious of)'.<sup>3</sup> In the same place, Barker actually identifies 'the study of the artist' as the latest of three distinctive features in his work, the others being 'English socialism' and 'history of emotion'. No disavowal of Barker's 'chronological ordering' of the features is intended, but this part assumes that 'the study of the artist' inevitably encompasses analysis of both 'English socialism' and 'history of emotion', because the part contends that the artist-figure in Barker's plays represents 'an image' of himself: that is, his depiction of the fictional artist's struggle to come to terms with his or her identity as an artist largely reflects Barker's own strife to come to terms with his own identity as a

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'artist' is designated here to refer to any character that is engaged in the creation of a work of art, be it literary, musical or pictorial.

<sup>2</sup> Maurice Beebe, *Ivory Towers and Sacred Founts: The Artist as Hero in Fiction from Goethe to Joyce* (New York, 1964), pp. 4-5.

<sup>3</sup> Howard Barker, *Ye Gotta Laugh*.

dramatist. In other words, this part argues that Barker's portrayal of the artist-figure is to a large extent shaped by and correlates with changes and developments in his own political position and attitude to art, as implicitly expressed within the plays and overtly stated outside them, as well as by his evolution as a dramatist. This is why many of the ideas raised in the previous parts are reinforced in this part.

However, the fact that Barker refers to his interest in the artist as a 'later' development, and especially that he cites both *No End of Blame* and *Scenes from an Execution* as examples of his study of the artist, does in its own way lend support to the contention of this part, for it is with artist-characters like Bela in the former play and Galactia in the latter that Barker would most certainly like to be identified. 'I still think of the artist as subversive,' declares Howard Barker, 'but I don't believe of him as offering programmes'.<sup>4</sup> Both Bela and Galactia are amongst the most subversive artist-figures in Barker's plays. Moreover, the reservation Barker makes at the end of this quotation is important. As chapter eight below shows, Barker makes fun of some 'subversive artist-figures' who seek to provide programmes.

The most distinctive aspect of Barker's mode of characterization is, as was shown in chapter five above, to define characters by 'their contradictions'. This is particularly pronounced in the case of artist-figures. Barker tends to present those figures in pairs, normally, but not always, opposed to one another in style and in relation to the role of artist in society. This tendency accords with an idea rooted in literature- that of the artist 'as a divided self'.<sup>5</sup> In fact, Barker himself speaks of such opposed figures as 'reflections of quarrels in my own development as a writer' - a revelation that further supports the thesis of this part.<sup>6</sup> However, despite this 'personal' touch, the opposition is evidence of Barker's observance of 'the requirements of his form': 'A play proceeds by dialogue, and dialogue implies debate and conflict'.<sup>7</sup> Naturally, the conflict in

<sup>4</sup> Howard Barker, in an interview with Mamdouh Imran.

<sup>5</sup> See Maurice Beebe, *Ivory Towers and Sacred Founts*, pp. 21-22.

<sup>6</sup> Howard Barker, in a letter to Mamdouh Imran, 27 October 1988.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Brustein, *The Theatre of Revolt* (London, 1965), p. 13.

which the artist-figures in Barker's plays are involved makes the position of each more clear-cut and defined. The presence of an opposite also has the effect of a 'mutual existential challenge or validation'.<sup>8</sup> Each of the artists seems to need his or her opposite in order to assert his or her identity and artistic integrity or position. More importantly, Barker's revelation does not imply that his portrayal of the artist-figure is psychologically based. On the contrary, the portrayal is, above all, socially and politically mediated.

Every subversive artist-figure is opposed or contrasted by at least a non-subversive one.<sup>9</sup> Thus, for example, the subversive nature of both Bela's and Galactia's artistic activity in *No End of Blame* and *Scenes from an Execution* is made starker by both the escapism and perfectionism of Grigor and Carpeta respectively. However, artist-figures like Grigor and Carpeta are condemned by Barker regardless of the presence of Bela and Galactia. The former do not satisfy Barker's above-mentioned standard for the role of the artist: that is, they are not 'subversive' of the status quo. In not opposing it, Barker seems to suggest, these artists do support it.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, just as Barker disapproves of the attitude of some of the artists classified as subversive, he seems to find something admirable in the approach of non-subversive artists. For example, while he condemns Grigor, in *No End of Blame*, 'for his insistence on the idea of beauty, or his flight from reality', Barker admires Grigor's 'struggle to assert the virtue of the human form as inspiration'.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> David Ian Rabey, *British and Irish Political Drama in the Twentieth Century: Implicating the Audience* (London, 1986), p. 211.

<sup>9</sup> 'Subversive' is a general term that applies here to any artist-figure who calls or works for change such as an educator, a visionary or a sensualist. On the other hand, the term 'non-subversive' applies to any artist who, whether actively or passively, contributes to the stability of the existing status quo around him or her: an opportunist or a populist is an active contributor, while an escapist or a perfectionist is a passive one. My working definition draws upon the distinction between 'committed' and 'disengaged' writer provided by Jean-Paul Sartre in *What Is Literature?*

<sup>10</sup> In this respect it is also significant that Barker describes his interest in the figure of the artist as a recent one. Barker's work is from the start sprinkled with artist-figures: therefore, the description seems tacitly to suggest that many of the artists in his early plays are of the type with whom he would loath to be associated. They are, on the whole, 'non-subversive' artists who seek to accommodate themselves within the existing status quo rather than revolt against it. Their aim is mainly to further their personal interests.

<sup>11</sup> Howard Barker, in a letter to Mamdouh Imran, 27 October 1988.

This part is divided into three chapters. The first deals with Barker's presentation of non-subversive artists, and the second is concerned with his portrayal of subversive artists. (Cross-references are, obviously, necessary in view of the mutual relationship and challenge between artists in each category within a single play). Each chapter seeks, in the process, to demonstrate how Barker's evolution is reflected in his depiction of each artist. The third chapter pursues the aim of the second chapter, although it is primarily concerned with Barker's recent tendency to use the plays themselves as vehicles through which to propagate his own views on art and theatre in general.

## Chapter Seven:

### The Artist-Figure: From an Opportunist to a Populist

The purpose of this chapter is to study the whole breed of 'non-subversive' artist-figures and further to demonstrate that in portraying them, Barker negatively defines his own political orientation, his attitude towards art and the role of the artist in society, as well as his own development artistically.

#### A. Opportunist

The first stage play in which the artist-figure is studied is *No One Was Saved*. The play has two artist-figures, John Lennon and Indian. As the role of the former was investigated in the first chapter of this thesis, it is largely ignored in this chapter. However, ignoring the role of Lennon is not going to affect the conclusion to be reached in this chapter as regards the presentation of the artist-figure in *No One Was Saved*, for his conduct is mirrored by that of the other artist in the play, the poet Indian. The latter is less successful in his relationship with Eleanor Rigby, the heroine of the play, than Lennon, but his aim is similar- to exploit her sexually. *No One Was Saved*, Howard Barker points out, 'is also about the way people use each other because their personal interests are always, inevitably paramount'. Eleanor Rigby is a down-trodden working-class young woman in search of an ideal, in this case love. As his name indicates, Indian is an immigrant, so he can be expected to be as down-trodden as Eleanor. Actually, the conversation he holds with Eleanor Rigby in the park centres on his explanation of the difficulties he encounters in trying to fit in with the social order. The amount of prejudice against him, Indian further explains, is so great that he finds himself always being shunned by people, despite making

genuine attempts to make friends. Eleanor discloses that, though she herself feels extremely low, he has made her feel that he is 'worse off'. Rather opportunistically, Indian uses this favourable response from Eleanor to win more favours from her in form of sexual contact. When she declines he attempts to rape her.

This opportunistic attitude on Indian's part as an individual is mirrored in his conduct as an artist. Having heard of the savage murder of Eleanor's baby by a gang of youths in the park, Indian offers his condolences to her in form of a poem, or as he calls it, 'Elegy for Scott Rigby':

Little Scott, the tiny lot,  
           hardly a summer's swallow,  
 Flew o'er his sleepy head,  
 He scarcely knew a tulip from a daisy!  
 But now he walks the chambers of the dead,  
 The fools who slew him must have been crazy. (p. 55)

Clearly, this verse is of a low quality, which in itself suggests the banality of his behaviour in general. Moreover, the verse shows a total disjunction between Indian's experience and the way it manifests itself in his art. Indian does not reflect upon the motive for the murder. He merely describes the act as foolish. Undoubtedly, the murder is a foolish act, and the perpetrators are not in their normal frame of mind, but Indian could have endeavoured to explore the circumstances which drive such youths crazy and thereby breed such callous acts of violence and murder. In the event, Indian's 'elegy' turns out to be another devious attempt intended to endear him to Eleanor with the further aim of seducing her. However, idealistic and naive as she is, Eleanor is moved by the poem. Therefore, Eleanor wilfully has sex with him.

Barker's view is that this kind of artist is not worthy of being imitated, and should be condemned. In behaving as he does, Indian brings suffering to people he should do his utmost to help. Indian is in this respect like Noel Biledew in *Claw* (who incidentally displays a touch of the artist in that he is reported to photograph girls in the showers at school). Unlike Noel, however, Indian is not short of the words or even the knowledge to help channel his grievance legitimately. But, in portraying him as an opportunist, Barker reflects his own thinking at the time: 'The people

in my plays tend to practise the same degree of exploitation on each other that is practised on them. Maybe it's because I've got a working-class background and I've emerged from that'.<sup>1</sup>

The relationship between art and experience is developed in *Stripwell* in the character of Babs, a go-go dancer, who introduces herself as a novelist. Babs displays a pessimistic attitude to life. As she explains to Stripwell when the latter reveals his intention to leave his wife in favour of Babs herself, 'life', for her, 'is a bugger'. She does not care if she soon becomes 'rose tree fertilizer'. Babs's pessimism is rooted in her 'artistic philosophy'. She projects herself as a disciple of Samuel Beckett:

I'm here because I'm here ad infinitum... The arguments in favour of pessimism are overwhelming if you ask me. Look at Beckett— really gloomy, but on the nail. I spent all my terms at Reading reading him, he was my bible, he thinks we're just small-minded vermin falling down into oblivion, and he's got my vote on that. All our little frettings and anxieties don't matter because the great wheel of life is rolling on and is about to crush us. (*Pause*) So I don't think it matters whether you leave your wife or not because it's all much of a muchness (*Pause*). Do you see that, or am I being too intellectual for you? ... Is it vital? Is it life or death to you? That's all I'm asking. (pp. 43-4)

Babs further identifies herself with Beckett by making an ironic allusion to *Waiting for Godot*. But 'the tramps', in this case Babs and Stripwell, are not kept waiting: a few moments later 'Godot' appears in form of an ice-cream vendor called Pennell. The latter comes to spoil their picnic and interrupt their conversation. Babs addresses him: 'Look, Godot, I don't need you. Clear off or I'll stick a rape on you' (p. 54). However, Pennell does not leave. Instead Babs and Stripwell are forced to go, following a fight between Pennell and Stripwell in which the latter loses.

Babs's allusion to Beckett's play seems doubly ironic, because it appears to point to certain discrepancy in Babs's position. She may be 'too intellectual' to Stripwell, but the audience are from the start aware (end of scene one) that she is a novelist engaged in writing an 'autobiographical novel', based on her erotic experience with Stripwell. In other words, Babs is

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<sup>1</sup> Howard Barker, quoted by Steve Grant in 'Barker's Bite', *Plays and Players*, p. 38.

an artist who believes that art is a re-creation of private experience. However, the fact that she almost equates experience with art does indicate that the 'philosophy' outlined above is pretence. Babs does care for life and is not in any way the pessimistic artist she projects herself. She is an opportunist who is prepared to switch sides at the drop of a hat. Following Stripwell's offer, Babs voices aloud the ending of chapter seven of her autobiography, in which she reveals that she is weighing the 'pros and cons' of his offer. The contradictions in her position and her opportunism are further exposed when she later breaks her promise to go with Stripwell, and elopes with his son, Tim, instead. She recognises that Tim offers more 'in terms of life-enhancing possibilities' (p. 97).

To be fair to Babs she makes her position clear to Stripwell- that her relationship with him is solely based on material gain:

BABS.            You have to keep reducing this to language! When you say love you have this great baggage of associations tied to it. When I say love it's clean and hard and shiny-clunk! (*She clicks her fingers*) Like a brand new decimal coin

STRIPWELL.    And with about the same purchasing power, I see... (p. 46)

Stripwell seems to understand Babs, but because he himself also appears to conclude that the pros for leaving his wife outweigh the cons, he decides to press on with his efforts to secure Babs as a life companion.

Babs's real motivation notwithstanding, she seems emotionally vulnerable to Stripwell's son, as her reporting of her first encounter with him suggests: 'And I came in, and he was there, looking at me with those eyes that seemed to consume me, melting my defences like twin laser beams, as I was to write later. Chapter 14 ' (p. 74). However, as she reveals herself in the last remark, Babs is a pulp romantic novelist, whose work is banal and decadent. Later she agrees to accompany Tim on his smuggling trip abroad, 'because I don't think anyone who really does believe in art rejects experience' (p. 86). Unlike his father, however, Tim is a match for Babs. Tim is also a university dropout with an artistic background( he studied directing), but unlike her,

he makes no bones about art. Only smuggling, he believes, yields him the qualifications he needs to be knighted or to become a 'manager of ICI'. The experience of both Tim and Babs does, however, turn out to be a failure: Tim fails, because of his father's contact with the police, and Babs because she recognises that 'experience is a false concept'. In *Bongol* she fears that she will die in 'total obscurity', as she puts it (p. 108). She therefore destroys her 'autobiographical notes', and yearns for her time with Stripwell and in the pub.

Commenting upon the characters of both Tim and Babs, Howard Barker condemns 'the kind of cynicism which they exhibit [as] a disease, a real sign of decadence'.<sup>2</sup> Both characters behave like many characters in Barker's early plays: rather than rebel, they imitate. Barker seems to imply that there is nothing basically wrong with using personal experience as a material for art. It is the sense which the artist makes of that experience which matters. Babs does not endeavour to achieve anything beyond an accurate reflection of a bastardized kind of experience. Her discovery of the failure of her concept of interlinkage between art and experience does not lead her even to question her role as an artist any further. Neither does she attempt to change or modify her style of life or relate it to her material condition. Instead, she returns to her pub, and the last that is seen of her is when she adopts a dancing posture, signalling a return to where she started.

Unlike Barker's later plays, *No One Was Saved* and *Stripwell* do not have other artist-figures acting as foils or contradictions to the non-subversive ones. This is important to note, because it may suggest that Barker is interested in the presentation of those figures as individuals rather than as artists. More importantly, it probably means that Barker himself is not yet clear as to the qualities he would like to see in an artist. In turn, this may partly be attributable to the fact that at the time Barker himself is a dramatist with little experience. In fact, with regard to *No One Was Saved*, Barker acknowledges 'I was groping blindly towards some description of the

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

parasitic relationship between art and experience'. It is in this respect legitimate to suggest that his depiction of this relationship, 'parasitic' or otherwise, parallels his development and growing confidence in himself as an artist. This suggestion seems to be endorsed by Barker when he further adds 'after *The Love of a Good Man* I was confident that I was popular enough as a writer to manage... filling a big house'.<sup>3</sup> But despite this confidence of popularity as a writer Barker admits to feeling insecure, 'partly because of the welter of critical hostility' he faces.<sup>4</sup>

This curious conjunction of confidence and critical hostility, including refusal of theatre companies to mount his work, seems to be paralleled by increased awareness on his part of the role of art and the artist in society. In other words, Barker's interest in the artist-figure stems partly from his concern with his own dilemmas as an artist. Those dilemmas are highlighted in the next chapter, but it is significant that *All Bleeding*, one of the first plays to be written after *The Love of a Good Man*, is peopled with artist figures.

Bela, a cartoonist whose dilemmas are not different from Barker's, is the hero of both *All Bleeding*, which is a television play, and its stage version *No End of Blame*.<sup>5</sup> One of his contrasts is a typical opportunist called Mik. Here is how the latter explains his 'artistic inspiration or philosophy' during a television interview in *All Bleeding*, following his appointment by the authorities to replace Vera on one of the popular papers:

MIK. How do I draw? How do I draw? That is a tricky one. I mean, I could say I just get the pencil and I go... (*He laughs.*) Couldn't I? No. I have no training. I'm self-taught. I picked it up in the services, sitting on my backside defending the British Empire at Catterick. I'm not an intellectual artist. I don't think it's a cartoonist's job to be an intellectual. Too many of them about already. I just reflect the general mood. I interpret, humorously, what ordinary people think. For example- (*He turns to face the drawing board, takes a pencil.*) I'm sitting here, I say- this is how I do it- I say, Mik, what is bugging you this week? What's got up your nose, old mate? And something will have done, of course, like there has been a strike which is particularly

<sup>3</sup> Howard Barker, in *New Theatre Voices of the Seventies*, pp. 186-193.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195.

<sup>5</sup> Because these two plays are versions of the same play, they are here discussed together.

stupid, and I think, okay, I'll make that the crux of it. And fifty cups of coffee later, off I go. (*He begins drawing, on a large scale.*) I do my striker, see? My working man. Bit on the sick side. Tiny little piggy eyes. Some people say to me, that's not fair, you know. I say it is fair, because that is how people see him, and my job is to reflect the popular mood, which is, that strikers are a bloody anti-social species. I'm a man of the people, you see. (*Pause. He works on.*) But seriously, I don't tell people what to think. They tell me. I interpret it. (*He turns the board round.*) How's that?

(*The cartoon is a crude caricature of a striker pocketing social security money while wiping his feet on the Union Jack. MIK grins into camera.*) (p. 79)

Mik's opportunistic attitude, his staunch pro-establishment stance and his hostility towards the working class are too obvious to need further comment. Juxtaposed with Vera's dignified attitude of resistance, Mik's opportunism is certain to draw contempt from the audience.

Contrary to his claim that he merely reflects the current mood in the country, Mik is more of an establishment figure than a cartoonist. He is basically a judo instructor who stresses to the trainees that every second wasted is a time given to the 'communists' both inside and outside the country. This 'patriotic' stance has certainly helped him to secure his new job, and he does not disappoint his masters. Following his replacement of Vera on *The Daily Mail*, Mik pronounces himself ready to fight for democracy, and makes themes of sacrifice and patriotism subjects of his cartoons:

I hate demos. I don't think they are necessary. People talk about the right of protest. Okay, write a letter, if you have a grievance. That's the way we do things here. Protest equals petition, according to my lights. Get a million signatures. That's democracy, isn't it? If you've got enough votes you can have your way. Otherwise shut up, all right? I think that's fair. What I'm trying to say is, I think Britain is a great place. I do. I really do. And my cartoons express that. I'm a patriot (p. 82).

Clearly, the greatness which Mik's cartoons express is based upon shabby democracy and, above all, exploitation of the working people. Later, Mik lays all his cards on the table: before he draws any cartoon, he waits for a telephone call instructing him what to depict.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> As mentioned above, Mik's opportunism, his prostitution of his art, is highlighted by Vera's uncompromising approach. In Barker's work, however, Mik's conduct, and the conduct of Babs and Indian for that matter, looks all the more contemptible if compared with that of columnist Downchild in *Downchild*, mason Gaukroger in *Pity in History*, and the Turkish weaver in *The Possibilities*. Although Downchild, Gaukroger and the weaver act in an opportunistic fashion, education, and by implication, liberation is part of

A similar opportunistic approach is followed by the daughters of the subversive artist Galactia in *Scenes from an Execution*. The daughters want to enlist their mother's support in furthering their somewhat misguided 'feminism':

GALACTIA. What are you trying to say, Supporta? The preamble is very comforting but what exactly-

SUPPORTA. You have this vast commission in front of you, which will prove beyond all argument what you are, and I am frightened you will waste it. *(Pause)*

GALACTIA. Waste it.

SUPPORTA. Yes. You will offend, and when people are offended, they cannot see the brilliance, only the offence.

DEMENETIA. I feel I am being burned here. Burned by eyes. I am going out to mix some paint. Look at it, sticks to you, sticky little Albanian thing! *(She goes out)*

GALACTIA. Go on.

SUPPORTA. Give the people what they want, and they will love you. They will exclaim over you. And after that, no woman painter here will have to struggle against prejudice, because you will have proved us. You see, I think you have a responsibility- not to the State, but to Venetian women. Paint your feelings, by all means, that is your power, but let the public in, share with them. The drawing of the Turk insults them.(pp. 58-9)

The daughters are right in their attempts to improve the position of the Venetian women but they can not achieve this aim simply by 'giving the people what they want'. In the first place, the daughters effectively ask their mother to give the Doge what he wants, and not the people. However, assuming that Galactia responds favourably to the daughter's request, there is no guarantee that her concession will lead to improvement for artists in general, let alone the women-artists. Real change can occur as a result of an arduous process, an essential element of which may be offending people. Their mother's example is probably the best way forward both to improve the conditions of women and people in general, and not just those of the women artists.

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their aim. Moreover, it is worth noting that novelist Devoid in *The Loud Boy's Life*, and poet laureate Clegg in *Victory*, fit into the category of opportunistic artists in Barker's work. The fact that Devoid (appropriately named) is shown as a drunkard, always acting like a clown, in itself reflects Barker's view of him. Similarly, as the poet of the Palace, Clegg is expected to act in the way Mik does.

The daughters' effort to get their mother to change her mind is paralleled by critic Rivera's struggle to achieve the same aim. In like manner, she (Rivera) fails in her mission. One would expect that a meeting between an artist and a critic to be preoccupied with discussion of an artistic topic. Instead, the discussion is centred on politics. Rivera, it turns out, is sent by the Doge to monitor the progress of Galactia's painting. Therefore, all that she does is to convey the Doge's worries:

- GALACTIA. Yes. He visits me, and he feels sick. He is frightened I will paint some awful truth. So he walks up and down, and looks. And feels sick. *(Pause)* No fun being a Doge.
- RIVERA. Are you interested in politics?
- GALACTIA. No.
- RIVERA. May I tell you a little about politics, or would it spoil your concentration?
- GALACTIA. Yes.
- RIVERA. I'd like to anyway. *(Pause)* The Doge is actually a highly responsible patron of the arts. Dilettante, of course, and slightly vulgar. But then, to someone of your sensibilities, all patrons are vulgar, I expect. He loves artists, and the harder he loves them, the more vulgar he becomes, it's all rather pitiful, really, but—
- GALACTIA. Bang goes the concentration. *(Pause)*
- RIVERA. Sorry. The point is this. The Doge is insecure. It would not take a great deal to have him removed from office. (p. 66)

However, having failed to dissuade Galactia from pursuing her course in painting, Rivera manages to persuade the Doge to release Galatia from prison: 'Now, listen to me, and I will tell you what I know, as a critic, and a loyal supporter of your party and your cause. In art nothing is what it seems to be, but everything can be claimed. The painting is not independent, even if the artist is. The picture is retrievable, even when the painter is lost' (p. 84). Rivera does, in other words, side openly with the Doge, but as a critic recognises that the best way to absorb, even stifle Galactia's work is by displaying the picture rather than by suppressing it and thereby making it a focus of attention. Moreover, since she knows that Galactia's work is unstoppable, she reckons the best she could do is to reconcile it with old art. In fact when Rivera goes to prison in order to inform Galactia of the decision to discharge her, Galactia becomes all the more angry

with Rivera and she accuses her of being a 'reconciler'. Rivera counters by confirming her suspicion: 'Listen, it is art I am interested in. I have saved your art' (p. 88). But one can be confident that this critic's real interest lies in seeking to accommodate art and the views of artists within the existing political and artistic trends.

The original hostile position adopted by critic Rivera towards Galactia's painting does in a way reflect that of the critics towards Barker's work. It is only recently and with great reluctance that critics have begun to comment favourably on his work. Barker is now a dramatist to be reckoned with, and his work is appreciated by a sizeable section of theatre audiences, despite claims that work like his has no popular appeal in Britain nowadays:

However, this continuing hostility from managements coincides with a more interesting phenomenon. As the work has changed, become more complex, more contradictory, its politics subordinated to crises of character and social fracture... a public has appeared for my theatre which does not appear to suffer in the way its guardians do, or perhaps more precisely, and this is the interesting aspect, it is prepared to study its offence.<sup>7</sup>

Interestingly, the change in Rivera's attitude seems to stem from realisation that there actually exists a following for Galactia's kind of art. In fact when the painting is exhibited it proves to be a huge popular success. Rivera rightly concludes that to leave Galactia in prison would make a martyr of her, and to suppress her painting is to make a sacred document out of it. Therefore, she recommends that the painting be displayed in the hope that its effect will gradually diminish-hence Galactia's irritation with her.

## B. Escapist

More important to the development of story line in *All Bleeding* is the contrast between Vera and his Hungarian compatriot, an artist called Gregor, for Mik is nothing but a stooge propagating Churchill's policy of harmony and social solidarity.<sup>8</sup> Gregor is an escapist, but, it

<sup>7</sup> Howard Barker, *Radical Elitism in the Theatre*.

<sup>8</sup> Seizing on a hobby of real-life Churchill, Barker presents the latter as a painter. In so doing, Barker pro-

appears, he is a changed artist. Basically Gregor is a 'subversive' one. However, having been penalized in his own country, he seems to have decided to disengage his art from any involvement in social or political affairs:

*(Against a black background, the figure of a young man comes nervously towards the camera. He is shabbily dressed, and as he comes near, his face is seen to be badly beaten. One eye is practically closed by bruising. He stops.)*

GREGOR: Veracek? *(Pause.)* I am not drawing any more cartoons. Never. I am sorry but I will never draw another cartoon. *(Pause.)* From now on I am painting nature. Flowers. Fruit. Landscapes. You know. *(Pause.)* **I THOUGHT THEY WERE GOING TO KILL ME!** *(Pause.)* I would like it if we could stay friends...*(p. 82)*

Gregor and Vera stay friends at the personal level- indeed, together they emigrate to England, only for a bitter enmity to develop between them there at the artistic level.

During one of the painting sessions the model Dot expresses her sense of boredom with every picture of her being called by Gregor 'NUDE', and suggests that for a change the latest picture of her be called 'Unemployed Telephone Assembly Worker' (p. 85). With bruising and beating still fresh in his mind, Gregor vehemently rejects this suggestion. He rightly guesses that the title is loaded with political implications, and therefore, is bound to cause him trouble with the British authorities. Vera, who is present at the time, tries to bring home to him that art can not be but political. But Gregor, insisting that 'art is neutral'(p. 85), rejects Vera's argument. Gregor affirms his belief in neutrality of art by persuading Dot to join him in a 'wood somewhere and get lost in it'(p. 86). Gregor's goodbye to Vera is said by way of denouncing the latter's political as well as artistic approach: *'(forcing the suitcase lid). Veracek, when I think of life, I think of trees, flowers and women. You think of knife-fighting on the underground. You must forgive me for not sharing your priorities. (He locks it, looks up, smiles extends his hand.)* Goodbye. See you after the war, perhaps'(p. 87).

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vides another contrast to Vera. However, what seems more important to note in this respect is that the figure of Churchill does not appear in *No End of Blame*, which may explain why the latter play was produced, while *All Bleeding* was not.

The two do meet after the war, and Gregor seems reluctant to speak about his experience in the wood. Gregor simply shows a picture of himself and Dot lying together naked. Dot never appears, which suggests that the experience has not actually gone well, and it is plausible that Dot has gone missing or has been killed in the wood.<sup>9</sup> In other words, escapism does not offer Gregor the safe haven he searches for: escapism turns out to be 'a false concept'. Even where he thinks he is most secure and can exercise his hobby, Gregor finds himself faced with the problems he has sought to avoid. Barker's point is that in ignoring the social reality, Gregor tacitly approves of the social evils. Put differently, Barker probably agrees with Vera's view that Gregor is mistaken to think that 'he simply shows the world as it is by painting nudes and flowers. But he is merely expressing his approval' (pp. 85-86). Barker's accord with Bela is implied by, amongst other things, his showing Gregor fully contented with a council flat in London. Gregor is rewarded by the authorities for his passivity, escapism, and the distance he keeps between his art and social problems. But appropriately enough, from Vera's and Barker's points of view, Gregor is also given a job as refuse collector. In this way Gregor is not just cut off from art, escapist though it may be. The point that Barker seems to emphasise is that Gregor's acceptance of this reward- a very banal place to live- incorporates him into the the social order of post-war Britain (when much of the council housing went up).

Viewed in terms of the development of Gregor as an artist, *No End of Blame* can be judged as a continuation of *All Bleeding* rather than a 'thorough re-writing' of it.<sup>10</sup> The fact that Gregor adopts a neutral and escapist policy only under pressure, following what is understood to be a period of engagement and commitment, may be meant to indicate that Gregor is a version of 'progressive artists' amongst whom, Barker claims, there is a 'high suicide rate'.<sup>11</sup> Gregor is

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<sup>9</sup> Her counterpart Ilona in *No End of Blame* seems to have been shot. At the end of Act one, Bela is shown at the port of Dover, while to the sound of fire shots, Ilona is overheard shouting Grigor's name.

<sup>10</sup> In the discussion that follows of *No End of Blame* Mik's role is overlooked, because it is a re-play of his role in *All Bleeding*.

<sup>11</sup> Howard Barker, 'The Triumph in Defeat'.

intimidated into submission and change of artistic style. In *No End of Blame* the absence of any evidence of such pressure, suggests that he is there basically to provide a stark contrast to Bela. His artistic approach is explained through actions from the start of the play, where against a background of war and fighting in the Carpathian Mountains, he finds time to satisfy his artistic 'mission' by drawing a nude. In *All Bleeding* Grigor does not seem to care much if the woman he is painting moves. But in *No End of Blame* his sense of beauty is so heightened that even the slightest movement by the woman seems to irritate him. Grigor insists on stillness, because movement destroys the beauty and purity which he seeks to reflect in the picture.

Barker admires Grigor's assertion of 'the of the virtue of human form as inspiration',<sup>12</sup> but he certainly disapproves of the political implication here signified by Grigor's insistence on stillness of the nude. For the stillness is most probably intended to foreground Grigor's approach, in particular, his posture of disengagement. Grigor believes that art should reflect beauty in man and nature. He turns out to be an ideal graduate of the Institute of Fine Arts in Budapest. In the words of Billwitz, the head of the Institute: 'We are artists because we thrill to beauty. We look for beauty everywhere. In tears. In pain . We need beauty now. Our hearts cry out... Artists are the guardians of beauty, high priests in the temple of art' (p. 10). Grigor commits himself to follow in such an 'ivory-tower' approach even though he undertakes to accompany Bela in his journey to the Soviet Union:

GRIGOR.     **LET ME SPEAK, WILL YOU! LET ME SPEAK!** (*Pause. Bela sits down.*) I have been in a world war, in a civil war, in a revolution, in a counter-revolution, and I only want a little corner where I **CAN PAINT.** (*Pause.*) I live for it. Forgive pretentiousness of this, Bela, but actually, I live for it. The human form. Sorry about this. I have a passion for it. Sorry. (p. 12)

As just mentioned, Grigor displays his passion for beauty and the human form in the first moments of the play. He equally reveals a touch of morality by condemning his friend Bela's

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<sup>12</sup> Howard Barker, in a letter to Mamdouh Imran, 27 October 1988.

attempt to rape the woman whom Grigor is painting. In doing so he is, however, himself shown as a hypocrite, because there is nothing moral about what Grigor is doing. After all, the woman he is at the time painting is held at gun point.

In the play, Barker's judgement on Grigor is further passed in the comment on Gregor's last drawing: '*A horribly emaciated female figure in a posture of rejection. As the last phase of Grigor's nude drawing it is violently distorted and painted*' (p. 43). More importantly, Grigor's own admission that he uses his benefit to buy paint in order to paint flowers and 'Windsor Castle ... by numbers' is evidence of Barker's condemnation of Grigor's attitude. A further feature of the characterization of Grigor in *No End of Blame* is his madness: 'In the worlds created by Barker on stage his characters are likely to go mad if they understand that the world is bad; if they compromise with the bad, which means being corrupted, the world continues to get worse, and that too will make them mad'.<sup>13</sup> The madness of Grigor is a result of compromise, reconciliation and escapism. It is, in other words, Barker's condemnation of Grigor's 'flight from reality' and Grigor's strong disinclination to draw any picture that may have any political or social import. This is supported by the fact that when in hospital Grigor starts to entertain the nurses by 'raising bed-pans'.<sup>14</sup> Disorientation of Grigor's mind appears to be an outcome of his flight from reality.

What is noticeable about the relationship between artist-figures in both *All Bleeding* and *No End of Blame* is that it is the 'subversive' artists who try to persuade the 'non-subversive' ones to change their style. (Grigor criticises Bela but does not in any way seek to persuade him to alter his approach.) This is to be expected since it would accord with the supposedly non-committed approach of the others. (Mik is, of course, committed in that he strongly aligns himself with the system.) Moreover, as it has just been explained, the escapist attitude is itself an implicit approval

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<sup>13</sup> Colin C. Chambers & Mike Prior, *Playwrights' Progress*, p. 87.

<sup>14</sup> Raising bed-pans is an act originally done by the boy Gary in *All Bleeding*, who at the time claims to be speaking to a vision of God. Vera happens to be occupying a bed next to Gary's, and upon seeing him behaving, as he does, Vera comments: 'Get a crisis. Get angels. Phenomena are the product of disordered minds. Minds which are afraid to face reality. POLISH YOUR INTELLECT (p. 99)!

of the existing state of affairs. The last point is further developed in *Scenes from an Execution*.

### C. Perfectionist

In addition to what is said above, the basic contrast in *Scenes from an Execution* is, however, between Galactia and her lover-artist Carpeta. The strong attachment they form with one another sexually is matched by differences between them artistically. Carpeta is a perfectionist-artist, who, rather like Grigor in *No End of Blame*, paints 'by numbers'. But Carpeta claims he is a better artist than Galactia, and does in fact replace her in doing the painting. Carpeta bases his confidence on his painting of Christ, symbol of perfection and purity. Speaking to Galactia at the beginning of the play, Carpeta claims: 'And I have painted Christ among the flocks eight times not because I cannot think of anything else to paint but because I have a passion for perfection, I long to be the finest Christ painter in Italy, I have a longing for it, and that is something an opportunist like you could never understand'(p. 48). Carpeta's charge against Galactia is preposterous, given that all Galactia's problems with the authorities stem from her stubborn refusal to adopt an opportunistic position. In fact, if anything Carpeta's claim particularly applies to his own position. When he is commissioned to do the painting of the battle of Lepanto (Galactia's painting of it having been refused and she herself imprisoned by the authorities), Carpeta acts exactly like Mik in *All Bleeding*. For he, too, allows himself to be instructed as to how he should do the painting. Priest Ostensible, as is shown below, tells him to show the Admiral like he shows Christ, that is, full of pity and compassion.

Carpeta's hunger to portray perfection by way of painting the figure of Christ is nothing but an explicit rejection of any involvement in social or political matters. This is manifest in one of his stormy conversations with Galactia:

CARPETA. I am humiliated by my feelings for you. Humiliated. *(Pause)*

- GALACTIA. Carpeta, how do you paint pity? You've always painted pity, and I never have. Tell me how to do it.
- CARPETA. I don't think you could paint pity, Galactia.
- GALACTIA. Why?
- CARPETA. I don't think you have pity, so you can't paint it.
- GALACTIA. Ah. Now you are being spiteful.
- CARPETA. No. You are violent, so you can paint violence. You are furious, so you can paint fury. And contempt, you can paint that. Oh, yes, you can paint contempt. But you aren't great enough for pity. (p. 57)

Carpeta's criticism of Galactia highlights his own contradictory position. Christ epitomizes everything that violence is not: perfection, peace, pity and compassion. Therefore, to show the Admiral as having such qualities, as Carpeta undertakes to do, means to assign Christ-like aura on him. Galactia rightly refuses to take part in this travesty of truth, for the Admiral is certainly partly responsible for the huge loss of life in the battle he won. Nevertheless, through this conversation and the one below between Carpeta and Ostensible, Barker subtly puts forward his view that religion seeks to cancel out suffering in history, a point that was explained in chapter two above. This in turn further implies that Barker views the perfectionist as the escapist- an artist whose apparent disengagement is a veiled involvement on the side of the authorities, although in the case of Carpeta his pro-establishment position is quite explicit.

Carpeta readily accepts his commissioners' ideas without in any way seeking to reflect his feeling about the battle, albeit in terms of his concept of pity:

- URGENTINO. ...I would like more red there, where the sun is setting... yes... there... perhaps orange, you say.
- CARPETA. Orange.
- URGENTINO. All right, orange. And she is in any case mad, I abhor a cliché, but you know it better than anyone. That figure is not very celebratory, I think—
- CARPETA. This one—
- URGENTINO. Holding the banner, yes, is not elated, is he?
- CARPETA. He has got an arrow in his—
- URGENTINO. Yes, but he is the standard bearer, isn't he, and standard bearers have to be elated because— that is why they are standard bearers, surely? There is altogether, and I'm sorry if I sound irritable, a certain lack of celebration in your work- (p. 82)

The session ends with Carpeta being accused of having no imagination of his own, 'a hack'. Thus Carpeta is condemned by the very people he is supporting.

Carpeta's artistic failure is significant, because it is suggestive of Barker's view that a figure like Carpeta is no more than a politician. Moreover, the failure is important because it leads the authorities to re-affirm their recognition of Galactia's artistic talent. They decide to release her from prison and ultimately display her painting. Carpeta himself visits her in prison, admits his ignominious failure, and informs her of the order to release her.

#### D. Populist

In one of Barker's most recent works, *The Bite of the Night*, Barker turns his attention to a different kind of artist, but one the effect of whose work is identical with that of the artists just examined. Barker has recently been outspoken in his criticism of the careerism and the populist tendencies of both right- and left-wing political organizations as well as their 'allies' amongst artists. Thus, in his deconstruction of the myth of Helen of Troy, in *The Bite of the Night*, Barker portrays Helen's creator, the classical poet Homer, as a populist figure. At least two points, signalling Barker's view of Homer, are made abundantly clear the moment Homer appears on stage. Homer is shown 'old' and 'blind'. Helen's daughter, thirteen-year-old Gay, introduces him to a boy, whom she is at the time teaching the reasons for the fall of Troy, as a 'horrid old man', and warns the boy not to speak to Homer, because he uses his blindness 'to exploit us' (p. 24). The girl's description of Homer, coupled with her warning to him not to 'Put your hands into my dress again' (p. 24), turns out to be justified. Homer immediately tries to seduce Gay, although, as it also turns out, he is sexually weak or impotent. However, when she relents for a moment and shows some concession, Homer 'draws' her hand '*quickly to his crutch*' (p. 25). Barker's presentation of Homer is, of course, inseparable from his treatment of history, as was explained in chapter two above, but these two physical weaknesses in Homer's character's are

suggestive of the social position expressed in his art.

Barker makes him implicitly declare himself as a populist artist. As he explains to Dr. Savage's student, Hogbin, Homer has abandoned a third book of his, 'The Ruinad', as he calls it, because he did not find it popular with the audience:

HOMER. I sing you my third book.  
 HOGBIN. Third book...?  
 HOMER. Listen, I give it to you! Listen! (*Pause.*) The Heroic Life of the Citizens of Sacked Cities.  
 HOGBIN. Long title for you.  
 HOMER. (*Pause.*) The Ruinad. (*Pause.*) I sang it once before. And they left, singly or in groups, like men who had forgotten to post letters, until at the end, I was singing to myself... (*He suddenly sobs.*)  
 HOGBIN. All right... all right... so what... if it's true— (*THE CONGA reappears.*) Oh, fuck them...! (*HOMER begins to sing, but is drowned by THE CONGA.*)  
 THE CONGA. Got—to—be—so—glad—now—  
 Got—to—be—so—glad—now—  
 Oh—so—glad—  
 Oh—so—glad— (p. 34)

Barker seems to be playing upon the word 'sing'. Obviously, classical literature was recited: therefore, 'sing' is an appropriate term to use in description of Homer's 'third book'. However dramatically, Homer's singing is outpitched by the singing of The Conga. This suggests that Barker's use of the term 'sing' is charged with his hatred for populist musicals and songs. It also implies that, for Barker, as an artist, Homer is a populist.

A populist artist is in effect an opportunist as well as escapist, and Homer is shown by Barker to have qualities of both, although he tends to be more of an opportunist than an escapist. What is dramatically stated through the simultaneous singing of Homer and the Conga is almost simultaneously explicitly stated by Homer himself: 'The first duty of the poet is to survive... Testament... Not participation... testament' (p. 34)! Homer makes survival contingent upon withdrawal and disengagement. Compared to Grigor, however, Homer emerges as a worse figure. For Homer is not pressurized by anybody to adopt a disengaged attitude towards his society.

Moreover, he does not seek, as Grigor does, to draw his inspiration from nature or the human form. In fact, Homer is an 'engaged' artist, that is, he writes about battles and events of enormous historical proportion, but from an official and popular point of view. He is particularly guilty, because he knows the truth, truth to which he chooses to turn a blind eye. Later he declares: 'When Troy fell I followed Odysseus. I followed him because I could not bring myself to look into the ruins. We all knew, there was a history in the ruins. But I thought, there will be no public for a song about the ruins' (p. 55). Thus, populism leads him to ignore atrocities of the war.

Homer is even worse than Mik, because he does not simply try to 'reflect the mood', as the latter does, but he seeks to create one, to mythologise. Homer has already boasted: 'If I had not made Helen, Helen would not have been disfigured... *(Pause.)* But Helen had to be made' (p. 35). In other words, Homer admits that he has invented the story of Helen in order to deflect attention from the atrocities of the Trojan war. It goes without saying that Barker is totally contemptuous of Homer's position, and *The Bite of the Night* is Barker's imaginative historical account of Homer's unwritten one. As was shown in chapter two above, the body of Barker's Helen, the dismemberment of her body embodies the 'ruins' to which Homer turns a blind eye.

As in *No One Was Saved* and *Stripwell*, there is no other artist in *The Bite of the Night*, against whose acts Homer's can be measured. Nevertheless, Barker is no less forceful in his condemnation of Homer than Mik, Grigor or Carpeta in the plays discussed in this chapter. Barker's position towards the last three artists is, however, further clarified by the views expressed by subversive artists in the same plays- artists with whom Barker seems to identify.

## Chapter Eight:

### The Artist-Figure: From an Educator to a Sensualist

This chapter is concerned with Barker's presentation of subversive artist-figures, including those whose commitment Barker denounces. Barker acknowledges that it is 'a tempting interpretation' to say that 'the artist represents my own self within the work'. Moreover, although he hastens to add that his 'interpretation of him is both sympathetic and often very hostile', Barker confirms the similarity between himself and some of his fictional artists by further admitting that his 'drift away from ideology as a solution to problems is clarified in the figures of those [artists], is articulated by those people'.<sup>1</sup> The chapter argues that Barker's characterization of the artist-figure, whether sympathetic or hostile, is determined by and correlates with his evolution and development both politically as well as a dramatist. In particular, the chapter seeks to demonstrate how presentation of subversive artist-figures is shaped by changes in Barker's attitude to and interpretation of ideology, satire and sexuality.

#### A. Educator

The question of ideology is an important one, because it is one of the areas where Barker seems to have undergone a complete reversal in thinking, a reversal that is above all dramatized in the figures of his artists. Barker's portrayal of the artist-figures in his early work is shaped by his strong Marxist orientation at the time. Therefore, the subversive or oppositional education his artists seek to provide their audience or readers is similarly ideologically oriented.<sup>2</sup> Chief

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<sup>1</sup> Howard Barker, in an interview with Mamdouh Imran.

<sup>2</sup> In relation to those artists, the term ideology is here qualitatively used to imply a system of ideas congenial to the working class- a system, which amongst other things, includes solidarity amongst members of that class and a common struggle to overthrow the capitalist or bourgeois system, whose ideology is dominant.

amongst the plays where Barker sought to 'achieve a proper ideological position', are *Claw* and *Fair Slaughter*.<sup>3</sup> The struggle of the hero of the latter, Albert Gocher, both as an individual and as an artist, underlies a firm belief in socialist ideology as the key for social change and freedom. This is evident in his response to his former officer's offer of a job in the entertainment business, following Gocher's expulsion from the invading British army in Russia during the civil war. Even though Gocher is at the time unemployed he declines to consider the offer. His decision, as the following quotation suggests, is based on ideological grounds:

YOUNG GOCHER. It is not okay! I am what I am, and you are what you are, and I am what I am because of you. So it is not okay, is it? It is not okay. *(Pause.)*

STAVELEY. Sing about it. Sing about your condition, then. (p. 77)

Gocher's position is ideological in that he sees his problem as an inevitable phenomenon in a class-structured society.

However, moments after Staveley's departure, Gocher comes to the conclusion that in his current situation it is better to accept the offer. Gocher justifies this conclusion in a soliloquy-like address to Tovarish's 'pickled hand':

*[STAVELEY] goes out. GOCHER sits wearily down, looks at the bottle. Pause.*

YOUNG GOCHER. The first thing, Tovarish, the first thing is that this is not your homeland. The circumstances while being international in character, are not identical. I am angry. I am angry but that doesn't seem to be enough. **ANGER IS NOT EDIBLE!** *(Pause.)* I am inclined to compose a song, I admit that. Though it degrades me, am I not equally degraded by starvation? Yes, I am. And also, I might add, ridiculing myself in the theatre queue is no greater a humiliation than that experienced daily by our working people. So in a sense, it is an act of solidarity I am performing. Arguably. *(Pause.)* Do you agree? *(Pause.)* I would appreciate your agreement, because I am very near to having composed a song. I need your blessing, Tovarish! *(Pause.)* Thank you.

*(Pause, then he gets up, and by an act of sheer willpower, divests himself of the song, tapping the shoes all the while and dancing.) (p. 77)*

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<sup>3</sup> Howard Barker, in an interview with Mamdouh Imran.

That Young Gocher accepts the job is understandable: he has been singing in the street any way. Gocher's analysis is, in other words, basically correct: he is forced by his material condition to degrade himself. But his interpretation of his decision to accept Staveley's offer as evidence of his solidarity with the workers is, however, a false one. In fact, he is accused by his older self, Old Gocher, of 'selling out'<sup>4</sup> and of hampering the cause of revolution, even though as an artist, Gocher assumes the role of a revolutionary educator.

Gocher seeks to agitate and educate his audience by singing about his conditions:

I am a no—bo—dy, No—bo—dy care for me,  
 Ain't got a job, Ain't got no wife, no responsibility!  
 I takes a stroll a—round,  
 Like a real toff on the town,  
 Sometimes I laughs, sometimes I cries,  
 Sometimes I feel right down,  
 The copper says to me,  
 The deckchairs are not free,  
 Get off your bum, Move on now, son,  
 You are a—(pretending to stifle a swear word) Lia—bil—ity!

*Big roar of applause. With a grin, GOCHER performs a tap-dance with his shoes, then shuffles off. (p. 79)*

Nonetheless, the roar of applause seems to signify the audience's pleasure with the tune, but not necessarily their agreement with Gocher's message. Staveley, it appears, banks on such a reaction. It is not just money that Staveley is interested in, but also social and political stability. Staveley's policy towards Gocher is not unlike that of Rivera towards Galactia in *Scenes from an Execution*, although Rivera is not Galactia's employer. Had Gocher been left to sing in the street, his audience might have paid some attention to his message as well, and political feeling might as a result have been stirred. On the other hand, there is no risk of such a thing taking place in the theatre, because, as Staveley believes, people normally come to theatre for entertainment.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> This is theatrically expressed at the time by a sudden switch to Old Gocher in his prison bed in order for him to deliver his verdict on Young Gocher's artistic activity.

<sup>5</sup> Staveley is not himself an artist, but in championing the view of the artist as an escapist entertainer, he acts as an artist-foil to Gocher.

However, given the generally-held view of theatre as a metaphor of the world, Barker is very likely using the debate to challenge the views of some of his audience, regarding the function of art and the artist in society, views which may tally with Staveley's. This is why it is significant that Gocher's subsequent disillusionment with art, visually expressed in his destruction of his musical instrument, reaches its climax in a scornful and abusive address to the theatre audience:

*(Suddenly he brings the banjo down onto the floor with a tremendous smash. Pause. He looks into the audience.)* I have shit on you. You have paid to come here, and I have shit on you. No, don't laugh missus, I'm not ill. Stop smiling, it's not funny. It's a fucking tragedy. You and your wonderful good humour, your British talent for seeing it through. CHRIST! You would have your daughters in the brothel and still not lift a finger! I tell you it's not funny! It is not funny that we are here to laugh at our communal bloody misery, it is a sin! Don't you understand what I have done to you, you ragged arsed workers! Have some pity on yourselves, have some pride and pity for your own sakes! *(Pause. He goes back, sits in the chair.)* (p. 84)

Staveley, who comes in shortly afterwards, tries to deprive Gocher's act of any hostile significance. On the contrary, he seeks to draw some commercial reward from it. He wants Gocher to make of damaging his banjo something of a ritual, the climax of every performance, giving a final bit of excitement to his audience. But once Staveley recognises that Gocher's act is a conscious and politically-motivated exercise, he counters it by an equally politically-oriented criticism of his own.

Staveley's words are directed to Gocher's wife Melanie, but they could equally be meant to be an apology to his audience for the offence his employee has given them- an apology which further re-affirms his view of the artist's duty to be an entertainer:

He [Gocher] is a myth-maker. He hates the people who pay to see him. He despises the audience who love him, and I think that's vile. I think that is a disgusting attitude for an entertainer to adopt. He has a private loyalty to a society which would have eradicated him and his profession long ago, a society where violence and killing have replaced any proper form of government, where free debate has been suppressed and bureaucratic savagery is the order of the day. (p. 85)

Gocher's riposte to this charge confirms Staveley's suspicion, but it also marks a new phase in Gocher's ideological and political struggle.

Addressing his increasingly confused and worried wife, Young Gocher answers Staveley's criticism by declaring: 'There are times for action, and times for entertainment. And there are times when entertainment is a crime. **THIS IS ONE OF THEM**' (p. 87). Gocher clearly concludes that the situation merits a change of tactics. No matter how dedicated and committed to his art, Gocher finds out that the effort is not worthwhile. As a political weapon, theatre is impotent. He, therefore, abandons art in favour of a more direct and effective form of ideological struggle- political agitation in factories. In other words, Gocher's failed artistic experience leads him to assume the same educative role amongst workers.

As a result of his struggle, which is sometimes violently expressed, Gocher is imprisoned. Ironically, it is his imprisonment that leads to his only significant revolutionary achievement- his success as a revolutionary educator. In prison, Gocher, whose example of a revolutionary country is Russia, tries to breathe the air of freedom and revolution into the life of his guard Leary. The latter is given to understand that he, too, is equally a prisoner, because the country as a whole is a prison. Leary seems so fascinated by Gocher's ideas that not only does he release Gocher, but he also joins him on his trip to the land of freedom, Russia. The journey by train is imaginary in that it terminates somewhere near Dover, but it is also significant in terms of shaping Leary's thinking. For throughout the trip Gocher explains to him the history of Europe, emphasising the suffering of the workers, notably in England. Nevertheless, Leary still seems to have 'strong' nationalistic feeling:

GOCHER. Don't give into patriotism, Leary. It's their way of closing yer eyes...  
*(Leary looks at him. Long pause.)* You are sitting on the Trans-Europ-Express, and I don't think you know why. You have done an action out of impulse, and it's frightened you. *(Pause.)* Pity's not enough. You've got to find an ideology. (pp. 92-3)

Gocher recognises that he has gained his freedom through an act of pity and sympathy by Leary.

Nevertheless, Gocher would very much have preferred Leary's act to have been ideologically motivated; that is, based on feeling of class solidarity as well as on a common desire to overthrow the existing system. Although Gocher's remark further confirms his own ideological orientation, it seems to be tinged with irony. By then Leary seems to have reached an ideological position of a Stalinist nature. More importantly, by the end of the play Gocher recognises that what he has been teaching Leary is also fraught with danger.

Previously, Gocher has undertaken to do a 'fair slaughter' against his class enemies, notably Staveley. Yet when it becomes possible for him to do so, Gocher shies away from committing another cruel act. He has pity on Staveley. On the other hand, Stalinised Leary stages a show trial of Staveley and decides to execute him. Leary's decision provokes Gocher's outrage:

LEARY.        You are not fit to have Tov.  
 GOCHER.       Christ, don't lose sight of your humanity! You have so much good in you!  
 LEARY.        To be licked up by this specimen. To be sucked on by his class.  
 GOCHER.       Keep an open heart, son. Feed your heart. The angrier you feel, the more you have to feed the heart!  
 LEARY.        I do what Tov says!  
 GOCHER.       Fuck him! He was an ordinary bloke, that's all. Think for yourself. They stuck Lenin under glass, and look what they have done in his name.  
 LEARY.        To hear you say that... you burn me... you sod...  
 GOCHER.       Criticize. Always criticize.  
 LEARY.        Revise, you mean.  
 GOCHER.       I mean-  
 LEARY.        **REVISE!** (p. 104)

Thus Gocher's own experience leads him to renege on his own teaching. If Leary had not had pity on him, Gocher would not have been free in the first place. In other words, Gocher recognises that his brand of ideology can be as dehumanising as the object of its criticism. Indeed, Staveley is rescued only because Leary finds himself suddenly preoccupied with Gocher's unexpected death.

Nevertheless, Leary's hard-line ideological position is a testimony to Gocher's success in his self-assigned role as an educator. But having successfully achieved his aim of creating

political awareness in Leary, Gocher comes to understand the danger of ideological indoctrination.

Clearly, the characterization of Gocher is shaped by Barker's thinking at the time. When he wrote *Fair Slaughter*, Howard Barker 'was a very Stalinist writer'.<sup>6</sup> Thus, Gocher's advocacy of socialist system may be said to echo Barker's. In this respect, one also suspects that Gocher's abandonment of art as a means of revolutionary struggle does also indicate Barker's belief at the time that 'change had to come through industrial conflict rather than through consciousness-changing'.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Barker's ever-increasing suspicion of pity as a concept is initially voiced by Gocher's dismissal of it as an inadequate revolutionary response. However, Gocher's call for the infusion of pity and sympathy into ideological practice does not, necessarily, entail an identical shift in Barker's own position. Instead, it more likely seems to signal the start of Barker's increasing disenchantment with ideology itself. It is as if, having mapped out an ideological position in the creation of the characters of both Gocher and Leary, Barker himself comes to understand the danger of ideological indoctrination.

Accordingly, Barker's 'drift away from ideology' means a movement away from 'socialist ideology'. However, this does not involve coming in favour of any right-wing ideological practice, nor relinquishing his call for political and social change. Barker strongly believes 'that *without* political change, human nature deteriorates',<sup>8</sup> and this deterioration of human nature could well occur in a socialist system. In other words, the target of Barker's object of criticism is widened to include socialism as practised in socialist countries. Thus, the system which is to a certain extent revered in *Fair Slaughter*, comes under as vehement an attack as the capitalist system in a number of Barker's plays, including *No End of Blame* and *The Power of the Dog*.

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<sup>6</sup> Howard Barker, in an interview with Mamdouh Imran.

<sup>7</sup> Howard Barker, quoted by Catherine Itzin in *Stages in the Revolution*, p. 250.

<sup>8</sup> Howard Barker, in a letter to *Tribune*, 23 September 1977.

Barker's drift away from ideology is partly initiated by his detection, belated though it may be, of the negative effects of the socialist experience in Eastern Europe:

I have discovered, partly through greater familiarity with Eastern Europe, that my interest lies in finding out what it is that stunts people's lives. I had identified that with capitalism. I have come to realize, no doubt belatedly, that socialism, too, has the power to stunt life. I no longer look at the world in terms of class conflict. I would identify ideology as the enemy.<sup>9</sup>

The drift is also almost certainly interlinked with his growing commitment to art and artistic freedom. As it always happens with artists, Barker's 'personal politics' has undergone some change. A lot of artists 'go through a socialist period but then they eventually do start expressing the imagination of the individual as the only thing that can resist oppression- and Barker is very much doing that, I think'.<sup>10</sup> This is why Barker places artists, the most imaginative characters, at the forefront in the struggle against all forms of ideology.

The artist in *Downchild* assumes the role of a revolutionary educator, although he is less concerned with ideology than Gocher. Instead, columnist Downchild preoccupies himself with technical matters, the way he seeks to educate his audience. However, like Gocher, Downchild reaches a point where he recognises that his artistic method is impotent as a political weapon. Still, it is not a less representative development of Barker's artistic experience in relation to satire.

Despite Barker's repeated proclamations and attempts to avoid satire,<sup>11</sup> satire remains a strong element in his work. This is evident as late as *Victory* and *The Power of the Dog*, respectively in the bank scene and the encounter between Stalin and Churchill in the Kremlin. Naturally, the persistent presence of a strong satirical element in Barker's plays causes him some embarrassment. Suitably, it is an embarrassment that is aired by one of his artists in *Downchild*. Having been proven to be a failure, the eponymous hero-artist declares in subdued terms:

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<sup>9</sup> Howard Barker, quoted by Laurence Marks in 'Off-beat track', *Observer*, 21 February 1988.

<sup>10</sup> Kenny Ireland, in an interview with Mamdouh Imran, 28 April 1988.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Steve Grant, 'Barker's Bite', in *Plays & Players*, p. 37; Barker's interview in *Gambit* p. 36; Barker's interview in *New Theatre Quarterly*, p. 336.

I thought, when I began my column, when I invented Cocky's Window on the World, to put two squalors side by side. I thought if in column one I showed the dribble and the spillage of a debutante, and nudged it up against the death of infants in a Glasgow slum, I'd touch some dim mechanism in the English mind, trigger something that was curled up in the dark, justice, perhaps, that had dried up and shrivelled like a nut. I was so quick and smart, thinking I could twist the tail of the Canadian dwarf, and make his Daily Liar spill a bit of anger on the bus. But no. They read the one, they read the other, wept in one, felt envy in the other. Saw no discrepancy. It was me got done... (p. 104)

Clearly, Downchild has used satire to raise his readers' political consciousness. But 'like Brecht he underestimated the power of linear realism'.<sup>12</sup> The readers did not make the desired comparisons or draw the connections he hoped they would do.

Barker's dilemma is not different. Downchild's discovery of the failure of his technique amounts to a self-parody of Barker's own satirical technique. Indeed, Downchild echoes his creator's words almost literally:

Those old elements of corruption which you could identify in the 60s and 70s, the actual dishonesty between the word and the act, lent enormous room for satire. But one of the great ironies of present political behaviour is that in its own way it is extremely honest. Of course the regime is intellectually decadent, but there is no apparent scandal because they actually declare themselves in favour of cruelty— so when they are cruel, what can they be accused of? At the present the public face can be- isn't this extraordinary- as unashamed of its sin as the the private face used to be. There is no gap to satirize. So perhaps it isn't entirely my own weariness with satire that I'm talking about. It's also redundant.<sup>13</sup>

Unlike his hero, however, Barker does not try to lay the blame on the audience's failure to see any discrepancy between appearance and reality. It is rather the current political situation which makes of satire an obsolete weapon.

The timing of Downchild's disclosure of his failure as a revolutionary educator is significant. It comes at the end of a trial scene in which Downchild's educative function is further emphasised. The accused Lord Scadding and Lady Heyday turn out to be the parents of Downchild's boy-friend and 'pupil', a convict called Stoa. More importantly, Downchild's

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<sup>12</sup> Tony Dunn, 'Howard Barker: Socialist Playwright for Our Times', *Gambit International Theatre Review*, 11, no. 41 (1984), 59-91 (p. 88).

<sup>13</sup> Howard Barker, in *Gambit*, p.36; see also Barker's interview in *New Theatre Quarterly*, p. 336.

revelation comes hard on the heels of Stoa's decision to terminate his friendship with Downchild. The latter tries to induce Stoa to stay, but once it is understood that Stoa's decision is final, Downchild makes his intention clear, declaring the whole exercise to be for Stoa's benefit:

DOWNCHILD. Why not? (*STOAT starts to leave. DOWNCHILD stands up*)  
**The court is not yet risen! No one move!** (*STOAT stops, looks back*) Come here. (*He goes to leave again*) **Look, I'm God, aren't I? Because I'm literate!** (*Pause*) Teach you words, don't I?

STOAT. Fuck words. Picture's best.

DOWNCHILD. This is for you, Barry.

STOAT. Barry, now?

DOWNCHILD. So you may see. To give you eyes.

STOAT. Got eyes.

DOWNCHILD. **To see through this.** (*He points to HEYDAY and SCADDING. Pause.*)

STOAT. So'e's a gangster. So she's a tart. So the world is bent. 'ow about that!

DOWNCHILD. **Well, resist it!** (*Pause. STOAT looks at him*) Please... (*Pause*)

STOAT. Off to breathe the big lights, Tom. Swaller Leicester Square an' spew it up again...

DOWNCHILD. Dignity, Barry. Got to find a little bit...

STOAT. **Dignity! Me!** (*He stares at DOWNCHILD*) Me with my funny 'ip? Prancin' on the corner of the block? Dignity? Never would 'ave fucked me if I'd 'ad that. (*He casts a glance at the tympanum, looks to MOSCROP*) You wanna thank me. Ain't gonna be no foreigners queuing to look at that. (*He goes out. Pause*). (p. 104)

Downchild's aim, then, is to expose the truth about Lord Scadding and his secretary, so as to give Stoa an incentive to challenge evil in society. But Stoa's response indicates that he feels that Downchild is hypocritical. Stoa realizes that he is being exploited by the very person by whom he is asked to resist exploitation and to change the world.

Downchild's enthusiasm to educate Stoa is mixed with an opportunism and a desire to exploit the latter sexually. Moreover, Downchild is not only patronising, but always keen to make Stoa aware of his inferiority, so as to ensure his power over him. For example, at one time he

reminds Stoa that he 'plucked you from your poverty', and condescendingly enquires: 'Where would you be if I'd not found you? Squirming on the pavement with a lewd gob full of fish and chips?' (p. 78). At another point in the play Stoa is ordered to keep silent and to know his limits: 'Silence, Stoa. If I don't own you, you're not here. You have no existence. You are a figment of my brain' (p. 88). The point is that Downchild is attached to Stoa precisely because the latter is a down-trodden figure, working-class characters being more experienced sexually. In other words, Downchild's interest in Stoa is primarily sexual.<sup>14</sup>

In Barker's work there is always ambiguity between the sexual and the political. In the case of the relationship between Downchild and Stoa, however, this ambiguity may be partly due to the fact that the idea of the play was taken from the autobiography of the Labour politician Tom Driberg, *Ruling Passion*. In that book, Driberg, who admits to being a homosexual, expresses the view that he should 'have known about the "facts of life" had I been friendly with any of the working-class boys... for working-class children were always better-informed on such [sexual] matters, earlier in life, than those more sheltered from reality'.<sup>15</sup> In *Downchild*, Barker seizes on this and many similar points in *Ruling Passion* to suggest that the 'radicalism' of 'certain English ruling-class figures' is 'sexually induced'. Downchild's feeling of 'pity for the working class', Barker explains, 'is based on an eroticism, and Stoa knows that. This is why he abandons Downchild- he knows he's been exploited, the guy that is being pitied'.<sup>16</sup> This is important to note, because although Barker reveals a kind of 'artistic embarrassment' - his use of satire- Barker certainly disapproves of Downchild's opportunism, his patronization and sexual exploitation of

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<sup>14</sup> Downchild's political interest is given priority over his sexual desire only when he is told of Scadding's encounter with the secretary at the beginning of the play. Then sexual desire is extinguished by the desire to scandalize. Downchild admits that 'urge fled before a stronger power. (*He looks at STOA*) The chariots of passion scattered by the bows of curiosity' (p. 59).

<sup>15</sup> Tom Driberg, *Ruling Passion* (London, 1977), p. 13; and in a postscript to this book, Michael Foot, a colleague of Driberg, praises the latter's devotion to socialism, but also points out that Driberg's 'homosexuality truly was his ruling passion'; and that this passion 'condemned him to a life-time of loneliness' and made it impossible for him 'to have satisfactory sexual relationships with those in his own social milieu'. p. 252.

<sup>16</sup> Howard Barker, in a interview with Mamdouh Imran.

Stoat.

For his part, Stoat may look submissive, but he is by no means so. Stoat does make this feeling clear sometimes through defiant gestures of resignation, sometimes through threats of revenge. For example, when he is ordered to stop communicating with Moscrop in the church, Stoat expresses his annoyance through gestures of defiant submission:

- STOAT.            You always 'ave to degrade me! Ain't I low enough you 'ave to degrade me? All right, I am degraded! 'appy, are yer?
- DOWNCHILD.    I do hate it when he fights back. Such powerful words. He wounds me.
- STOAT.            Whatcha want me to do? Prostrate myself? I will! All right? I will! (*He lies down on the flagstones*) Prostrated, right? lick, lick, lovely dust, delicious, tasty beetles!
- DOWNCHILD.    Get up, you embarrass me. Prefer your spiteful little kicks! (p. 69)

Later in the same scene when Downchild leaves the church calling Stoat 'my spaniel', Stoat looks at Downchild and declares: 'I will kill 'im one day. I will kill 'im' (p. 71). Stoat does not execute his threat, but he finally manages to liberate himself, or, to be more accurate, he effects a change in Downchild.

Like Downchild, Stoat finds that he can achieve his mission through art. Stoat is a contrast to Downchild, but unlike Grigor or Carpeta, Stoat is a subversive artist, like the one he opposes. This is why the challenge he presents to Downchild is stronger than that faced by Bela and Galactia in *No End of Blame* and *Scenes from an Execution* respectively. For all the position of unequal power, both Stoat and Downchild 'need and want the other as well as resisting them, testifying to Barker's recurrent interest in the dynamics of mutual challenge involved in education'.<sup>17</sup> His first visit to the church is made with the sole purpose of enquiring about the tympanum, the picture which he later re-paints. It seems that the painting does, for Stoat, represent a coalition among the exploitative forces of church, feudal lords and politicians. His

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<sup>17</sup> David Rabey, 'Howard Barker's Theatre of education'.

vision and the role he seeks for himself are projected in the painting he does during the trial scene:

STOAT. Done it. (*DOWNCHILD is staring, fixed*) My English boy in flames. (*Pause*) Done it. (*He points up at the tympanum*) Tha's me. I look up, the flash of disintegrating cities in my eye. One 'and lies on my crutch, symbol of male modesty, the other, not so well painted, grasps dictionaries, symbol of futile communication. Beneath me feet lie melted motors and the junky glitter of a mechanistic age. In the background is a riot, burnin' goals. Front right, a sensitive policeman weeps, and prays- vainly- for peace. (*He takes a final glance at his work*) Ta, ta. I'm off. (p. 103)

Stoat clearly sees himself as a subversive artist with Christ-like mission, one that would rescue the world from some kind of apocalypse. Any one who has such a grand vision must surely have a sense of freedom first. This is why, having finished the painting, Stoat says good bye to Downchild. And it is then that Downchild acknowledges the failure of his artistic technique. Downchild learns from his 'apprentice'. In other words, Stoat is an artist who also assumes the role of a revolutionary educator.<sup>18</sup>

In *The Power of the Dog*, Barker returns to the subject of ideology, this time to show, through the experience of artist-figures, its dehumanising effects. The film-student Matrimova has an overriding aim: the creation of a new form of art that is to Stalin's liking- and who could blame her? Stalin has his own method of dealing with artists who do not take part in the process of creation: 'The artist's head is a boiled egg', Stalin says, 'you do not slice it off. You tap it gently with a spoon' (p. 25). Stalin's position is, however, more elaborately explained by the characters of his stooges, including the political officer Sorge and the art-student Matrimova

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<sup>18</sup> The relationship between Stoat and Downchild anticipates that between mason Gaukroger and his apprentice Pool in *Pity in History*. Gaukroger is also a patronising educator. But unlike Downchild, he neither has a sexual relationship with Pool nor tries to keep him. In fact, at one point Gaukroger encourages Pool to leave, because the current political climate does not favour sculpture and he does not like to have Pool 'trained for redundancy'. The point is that the Puritans are intent upon destruction of monuments. Pool himself, recognizing the gravity of such a danger, opts for a more secure means of livelihood by joining the Puritan Army. In other words, unlike Stoat, Pool is prepared to desert his master and defy him if need be. However, at the end of the play Pool surprisingly comes back to re-join his master, but more importantly to urge him to adjust himself to the changing circumstances. Gaukroger finds himself being lectured by his subordinate: 'Find the language. Find the style. New manner for new situation. When in doubt invent. Copy. Cheat. Get by' (p. 31).

herself. Together the two combine the role played by Gocher in *Fair Slaughter*: Matrimova representing Gocher the artist, and Sorge standing for Gocher the ideologically-oriented individual.

Matrimova's free 'war film' to the 72nd Motorized brigade is meant to be a typical example of a socialist realist film. The film does, however, turn out to be a fiasco. Contrary to her instructions, the soldiers enacting the film unconsciously recreate their own personal experience of the battle. This recreation of personal feelings about the war entails a deviation from the script, and by implication a deviation from the political and ideological aim of the film. Embarrassed as she becomes, Matrimova has to stop the show on a number of occasions and order many cuts in the film. On stage these could be some of the funniest moments in the play. The rigidity and repressive nature of ideology is emphasised and satirised. Barker's point is that art can not be subjected to the iron laws of ideology: individual experiences of the horrors of war can not be discarded if a faithful film about war is to be projected.<sup>19</sup>

For Sorge, who, like a director, has been watching from a distance the progress of the show, the failure of the performance provides an opportunity to deliver a strongly-worded lecture on the function of art and the purpose of the war-film in particular:

The war film which merely dispenses pity does not help any one. The experience of war is very narrow— hence the proliferation of cliches. The proper war film asks, did the the soldiers die for something, or did they die for nothing? It is a revolutionary question. So the proper war film is not actually about the battle, it is about the reasons for the battle. (p. 13)

Sorge's argument echoes that used by Galactia's inquisitors in *Scenes from an Execution*. Sorge contends that the reasons for the battle can properly be shown only if the artist is enlightened by a 'materialist conception of history', a conception which completely eliminates all such 'bourgeois'

<sup>19</sup> The enactment of the film is satirical of Matrimova and her concept of socialist realism. Curiously though, *The Power of the Dog* itself is in some respects a socialist-realist play: its episodic structure as well as the heading of its scenes by titles predicting the outcome of each scene suggest a Brechtian influence. This is a point that is also noted by Tony Dunn when he concludes: 'The play... proposes, in equal measure, a satire on and an endorsement of Brecht's realism' ('The Real History Man' *Drama Quarterly Theatre Review*, no. 155 [1st Quarter 1985], 9-11, p. 10).

ideas of courage, heroism and pity.

In order to improve her blemished image Matrimova undertakes to develop a theory of a film which tells 'the whole truth'. In other words, Matrimova undertakes to place herself at the disposal of Sorge and the Stalinist ideology. She dismisses the 'bourgeois film' as 'incomplete' and 'one dimensional'. Her new theory, the concept of 'wholefilm', as she calls it, 'entails a spectacular and democratic innovation—three screens in a dialectical relationship, producing an artistic experience which maximizes the audience's grasp of reality and at the same time offers the prospect of genuine socialist development. The screens are numbered one, two, and three. They may also be titled Psychology, History and Possibility'. (p. 29) Thus, like Gocher, Matrimova assumes the role of an educator, but a pro-establishment one.

However, if her experience with the soldiers does not convince her of the deficiency of her artistic theory, the arrest of her mentor does:

He [Sorge] must have done wrong, mustn't he? Mustn't he? It's impossible, but why would they arrest him otherwise? He's arrested, therefore he's done wrong. It's unbelievable! (*She is surging to and fro*) I don't understand how you—I mean, if the impossible is true, where does that leave- how does an artist cope with that? If the absolutely true is absolutely false, how do you— (*Pause*) It calls for a fourth screen! A Fourth Screen which says-notwithstanding all that has been registered on screens one to three—there is always the possibility that— (*She holds her head, agonised*) I shall never make a film. (p. 40)

Matrimova's confusion, puzzlement or agonising over Sorge's unexpected turn of fortune is due to her being ideologically indoctrinated to see things in black and white. This means, as an artist, she has been taught, and she accepted to resolve contradictions. Therefore, her certainty that Sorge must have done something wrong, coupled with her undertaking to add a fourth screen, amounts to an admission of the falsehood of her political belief, an admission that is visually conveyed later in unusual expression of respect for photographer Ilona who has produced the change in Sorge.

Ilona's role, together with its implication in terms of change in Barker's thinking, is fully

analysed below. Suffice it to say here that she is one of the contrasts to Matrimova. Thus, the fact that Matrimova has been changed because of her relationship, albeit an indirect relationship, with Ilona further confirms that Barker employs contrasts for mutual challenge and validation between artist-figures.

## B. Visionary

A visionary is still a revolutionary educator. As the cartoonist Vera, who is a visionary artist, puts it in *All Bleeding*, 'art is a political business', and therefore, it 'converts simple aestheticism into moral argument' (p. 85). The function of the artist, he further adds, is to 'identify your enemy. Simplify the issue. Inspire the people. Simplification. Identification. Inspiration' (p. 89). But a visionary is never an opportunist like Downchild and is certainly different from Matrimova, whose revolutionary education is no more than a mechanical repetition of a rigid party line. As exemplified by amongst others Vera, a visionary artist is a person who has the vision to see beyond and has the courage to express his or her views regardless of the pressures that are brought to bear on him or her. In fact, assertion of the artist's freedom of expression and individuality is an essential feature of such an artist. This is why every play of Barker's with such an artist-figure reaches a climax with a kind of trial scene in which people in authority act at once the judge and the jury against the artist. Yet the artist never yields to pressure, although he or she is punished or even loses mental powers as a result.

In *All Bleeding*, Vera's cartoons during the war are deemed biased and divisive by Churchill. The latter is particularly enraged by a cartoon which comments upon an increase in the price of petrol:

CHURCHILL.

You will not split our people, Mr Vera. I will stop your mouth.

VERA.

Enormous profits are being made out of the war. That is the truth.

CHURCHILL.           Your truth.  
 VERA.                    Yes.  
 CHURCHILL.           Nobody wants your truth.  
 VERA.                    I will tell it all the same.  
 CHURCHILL.           You are a bolshevik. I do not have bolsheviks in my garden.  
                               *(He turns away, to continue painting.)* Get out of my garden!  
                               (p. 92)

Theatrically, the encounter between Churchill and Vera is a nice moment, allowing for a comparison to be made between Vera's cartoons and Churchill's Sunday painting in the garden. But it is the connection between art and politics that is above all dramatized. Churchill bestows upon himself the role of an arbiter, whose own artistic experience, he seems to think, qualifies him to pass judgement on works of art. It is, however, significant that he does not comment on the artistic quality of Vera's cartoons: Churchill's criticism of the cartoons is a politically motivated and biased one. Churchill may be justified in seeking to ensure national unity at a time of national crisis, but Vera is equally entitled to express his views freely as an artist. Moreover, in view of the symbolism that seems to be attached to 'garden', it is possible that Churchill uses the issue of national unity to further his future policies.<sup>20</sup> This is why Churchill is shown to assume the role of a censor. Showing him marking Vera's cartoon with a cross is a visual statement of an act of political censorship against art.

In *No End of Blame*, as shown below, Churchill plays, through his representatives, a similar role. So do the police in Bela's native country Hungary, and later a left-wing cell in an RAF base in England. But 'the clash between artistic representation and political power in the contexts of radical social change' reaches its climax in a kind of trial scene held by a Committee of writers in the Soviet Union, the country to which Bela first emigrates.<sup>21</sup> In Russia, Bela proves to be too

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<sup>20</sup> The fact that the scene takes place in Churchill's garden is in itself interesting. Not only does it confirm that he approaches art as a leisure activity, something which militates against his self-proclaimed role as a critic, but also because of the symbolism attached to the garden. Churchill's determination not to 'have bolsheviks in my garden' suggests that the garden stands for England. In this respect, it is logical that Churchill ends that scene by saying: 'The English will not fight a class war. Not while I live' (p. 92). In other words, Churchill is the protector of the garden, England, against any subversion of the type implied in Vera's cartoons.

<sup>21</sup> Tony Dunn, 'Howard Barker: Socialist Playwright for Our Time', p. 66.

visionary even to Lenin himself. The latter is said to be particularly upset about Bela's critical cartoon of *'The New Economic Plan'*. In this cartoon, the figure of Lenin is shown covering his eyes behind a wall, while an *'old Bolshevik'* is being robbed by *'a capitalist'*. The fact that Lenin's displeasure is made known is enough for Bela to be called to appear before a Committee of the Writers' and Artists' Union in Moscow.

The members think that, having come from a capitalist country, Bela might still be 'infected with bourgeois individualism'. He would therefore, the artists believe, benefit from a session with them. Bela is certainly an individualist but is by no means an admirer of bourgeois values. This allegation against him is, nevertheless, very significant, because it suggests that Bela is tried and sentenced beforehand. The session is held merely to institutionalize the 'verdict' and to ask Bela to abide by it: 'The tribunal scene is a familiar device for heightened political self-justification in the face of oppressive conformity':<sup>22</sup>

FIRST COMRADE.	In this cartoon— and others— there is a tendency— a critical tendency—
BELA.	It's a cartoon—
FIRST COMRADE.	Quite, it is a cartoon—
BELA.	Isn't a cartoon meant to be—
FOURTH COMRADE.	Let Roy finish—
FIRST COMRADE.	A tendency to criticize the line that Comrade Lenin is advancing. Which is— which is— unhelpful—
BELA.	Unhelpful?
FIRST COMRADE.	Let me go on a minute— not because Lenin is a god, not because he is infallible but because the experiment we are undertaking here, which drew you here in the beginning, which brought you and many others scuttling across the border, without suitcase even I believe— this great experiment— must be endorsed by all the people, and not undermined. I mean, there is a case for criticism, but it is not now. <i>(Pause)</i> .
SECOND COMRADE.	Would you care to reply to that?
BELA.	I did not scuttle across the border, I walked.

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<sup>22</sup> David Ian Rabey, *British and Irish Political Drama in the Twentieth Century*, p. 158.

FIRST COMRADE. Beg pardon.  
 BELA. I did not bring a suitcase because I came to make Russia my home. And I came to make it my home because it's free.  
 FIFTH COMRADE. Quite.  
 FOURTH COMRADE. Good.  
 BELA. Because to an artist, freedom of expression matters even more than nationality. I say that as a patriotic person, a person who loves his country and his people. Not as a lick of governments. I say it as a person who loves socialism and materialism. As a person who admires Lenin more than any other man alive. But to an artist freedom comes above all things, above— (p. 21)

Obviously, the Committee's position is not dissimilar to that adopted by Churchill in *All Bleeding*. The central issue for Bela's prosecutors is national unity, while, for Bela himself, it is freedom of artistic expression. Even under interrogation, Bela does not flinch from stating his opinion. He verbally reiterates the view expressed in his cartoon, stating bluntly: 'I disagree with Lenin'. This expression of disagreement with Lenin is instantaneously denounced by Fifth Comrade as 'a supremely arrogant statement' (p. 22).

Though they deny it, the Committee, as First Comrade's remarks suggest, see Lenin as 'infallible', a man who, like God, is above criticism. In fact, the play itself, through its imagery (Scene Four, Act One, for example), criticises and warns against the creation of a personality cult, and blames Lenin for creating the condition for such an unhealthy development in the socialist system. In the garden scene '*a massive bed of flowers featuring a hammer and a sickle*' (p. 23) is displayed. Annoyed with such a spectacle, Bela stares at the flowers and suddenly '*plunges into the middle of the flower bed*', crying 'idolatry':

BELA (*lying and writhing*). IDOL— ATRY! IDOL— ATRY!  
 GARDENER. (*in disbelief*). Hey, you bugger! Out of there!  
 BELA. IDOL— ATRY! IDOL— ATRY!  
 GARDENER. That's art! That's my art you're rollin' on! (p. 27)

The implication in this scene is that non-critical artistic activity is nothing but mechanical. The artist acts like a robot, mechanically reproducing symbols of his masters and their policies. (At

the time the Gardener also recites quotas of production at different agricultural and industrial centres.) Like Grigor, the Comrades and Mik, the Gardener contrasts with Bela as an artist. The Gardener in fact resembles Mik, because the latter also mechanically reproduces art in support of his capitalist masters.

From the start, Bela sees himself as an artist with a grand mission: to change the world, as he puts it. Indeed, Bela chooses to be a cartoonist because he believes that the cartoon is a more effective weapon in the struggle to 'change the world' than poetry or painting is. Bela emphasises this attitude in a moving lecture (Scene One, Act Two) to a communist cell at an RAF base in the English Midlands, in 1943, following his immigration to England in 1936:

I am a cartoonist. I believe the cartoon to be the lowest form of art. I also believe it to be the most important form of art. I decided in my twenty-fourth year I would rather be important than great. I decided this because I have always preferred shouting to whispering and humanity more than myself. The cartoon is a weapon in the struggle of peoples. It is a liberating instrument. It is brief like life. It is not about me. It is about us. Important art is about us. Great art is about me. I am not interested in me. I do not like me. I am not sure if I like us either, but that is private and the cartoon is not private. We share the cartoon as we cannot share the painting. We plunder painting for the private meaning. The cartoon has only one meaning. When the cartoon lies it shows at once. When the painting lies it can deceive for centuries. The cartoon is celebrated in a million homes. The painting is worshipped in a gallery. The cartoon changes the world. The painting changes the artist. I long to change the world. I hate the world. Thank you. (p. 32)

Despite his hatred of the world and his strong desire to change it, Bela's 'revolutionary audience' remain sceptical about the nature of his commitment. The commitment, to his consternation he discovers, clashes with their divergent and quite irreconcilable views. What is evident about this secretive cell is their authoritarianism. They seek to impose their views on Bela by demanding him to show the world the way they see it themselves. Thus, instead of asking him questions about the lecture, they start to lecture him as to how he should 'show the proper point of view' (p. 34), and to 'draw the real war... The war which goes on beneath the war? The war of the English people' (p. 35). Bela's refusal of their view is expressed by leaving the meeting as well as by saying: 'what you are saying I know will drive me mad' (p. 34)!

Bela, who at the time has his problems with the British establishment headed by Churchill, seems to have pinned much hope in this cell as a force for change. He appears to have been under the impression that members of the cell will agree with what he says or at least be prepared to listen to him. This is why when he sees in the group's authoritarianism a re-enactment of that displayed by the revolutionaries in the Soviet Union, he expresses his fear of becoming mad. This implies a recognition on his part that his inability to change the world may make his fear a reality, as indeed happens, following his sacking from his job.

Churchill is reported to be upset by Bella's cartoon, '*there always was a Second Front*', which shows '*an English Soldier... struggling with Hitler [while] a profiteer is trying to strangle the soldier from behind*' (p. 35). Churchill sees the cartoon as divisive and giving comfort to the enemy. Deeds, Churchill's representative, declares that he is 'minded to close [*The Mirror*] down' under the provisions of the Defence of the Realm Act; that is, unless Bela issues a condemnation of his own cartoons. Naturally, Bela rejects this condition, because to accept it would run counter to his aim as a cartoonist:

- DEEDS.       What are your politics?
- LOWERY.      I think his politics are you—know—what, aren't they? Going by the cartoon?
- BELA.         My politics are to look for the truth, and when you find it, shout it. That's my politics.
- LOWERY.      Very good. But what are your politics?
- DEEDS.       I don't want to bring up the point about Mr Veracek being an alien—not specifically at this point—but—well, I seem to have brought it up, don't I? (p. 38)

Though Bela is, of course, a foreign national, the reference to him as an 'alien' is indicative of the oppositional nature of his views in Churchill's England. Further, the reference is a veiled threat of issuing a deportation order against him.<sup>23</sup> However, as the editor and proprietor of the paper

<sup>23</sup> Ironically, Bela is accused of propagating the views of the country from which he has been expelled—the Soviet Union. Ignoring his bitter experience there, Bela himself reinforces this suggestion by asking Deeds to explain the truth about the war or the exact enemy against whom the war is being fought. 'The English people', Bela points out, 'are under the impression they are at war with Hitler... that it is the Nazi bombers that are blowing their limbs off and killing children in their beds' (p. 39)!

apologize to the authorities on Bela's behalf, and more importantly as they undertake to vet any drawing by artists prior to its publication, the authorities 'concede' to leave the paper in circulation. Meanwhile, Bela, who himself declines to apologize, is asked to resign, or, to be more accurate, a decision has already been taken to sack him.

Clearly, Barker uses Bela's 'pilgrimage' to demonstrate the repressive nature of the main existing systems in Europe: socialism and capitalism. Both are intolerant of criticism, and both have their own methods of dealing with it. The fact that, as shown above, Bela is tried by a committee of writers is in itself significant, because it suggests that Barker probably means the Committee to be a microcosm of society at large. A society that is run by committees and is based on collectivism is bound to seek to suppress individual voices and to be ruthless in its restriction of freedom, especially of daring people like Bela. On the other hand, so-called democratic societies like Britain employ different tactics to achieve similar results. Diver, who is asked to convey to Bela the decision to sack him, uses evasive and allusive language. But Bela, who expects such a thing to take place, asks Diver to tell him straightforwardly that he has been fired—no need to use 'metaphors'. Diver loses composure for a moment and accuses Bela of 'arrogance'. He further claims that Bela's work is noted for its spirit of 'depression' and 'nihilism' which make him unpopular. But as if to appease Bela, Diver declares that the board intends to publish Bela's cartoons both in paper and hard back editions; and further, Diver reminds Bela that at 75 he is due for retirement anyway. Bela dismisses the offer as a continuation of attempts to subdue and intimidate him: he flatly rejects the offer, and in the spirit of his lecture at the RAF base, Bela explains that the real aim of the proposed publication is to 'make him into art', because they know 'art don't hurt' (p. 49).

Despite his protestations, Bela is nothing but pleased with the hostile attitude he meets. He maintains that they hate him because he is a 'NOAH': **'THE MAN WHO SEES. I SEE. I GOT THE VISION AND YOU HATE ME'** (p. 48)! Their hatred is his pleasure, for it confirms that

he has succeeded in accomplishing his aim: **'I SHOCK THE BASTARDS INTO LIFE'** (p. 49)! The statement strongly recalls that which Bela has made at the Institute of Fine Arts in Budapest: **'MY ART SPEAKS THEN!... I STIRRED THE POLICE, THEREFORE I TOUCHED THE TRUTH'** (p. 11). However, Bela's visionary intransigence in the face of an unchanging world seriously disturbs his brain. He ends up in hospital beside the equally insane Grigor. It is only the encouragement of his doctor in hospital to resume assigning blame that generates Bela into action again. The play ends with him 'pathetically' asking the audience for a pencil, signalling the resumption of his 'critical tendency'.

There is ample evidence to suggest that Bela's 'political pilgrimage', is to a large extent an imaginative equivalent to Barker's. Both in his interviews and in his commentaries Barker expresses views about art and the role of the artist in society, as well as on matters of social and political concern that strikingly tally with Bela's. 'Barker', it is argued, 'is in many ways the Peter Pan of his generation. While other writers have toned down their early sense of moral outrage and class hatred, Barker's plays continue to carry an intense, emotional impact and a deep and often unfocused sense of political and sexual antagonism'.<sup>24</sup> This assessment of Barker and his work is equally applicable to Bela. The latter's intransigent desire to be in permanent opposition alienates him from the rest of the community, including the community of artists. Bela is a self-proclaimed socialist, but one who is prepared to acknowledge his flaws such as arrogance and contradiction of himself. During his stormy meeting with Diver, Bela admits: 'I am a materialist. I always was a materialist, God bless it. There, I contradict myself, but then I always have' (p. 47). Similarly, Barker is not perturbed by an identical charge levelled at his work; rather, he seeks to make a virtue of this 'flaw' by pronouncing it as characteristic of the time: 'Of course the plays contradict themselves. They have to contradict themselves. I do not trust anyone who does not contradict himself. In this age to be consistent is to engage in lying of a higher

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<sup>24</sup> Steve Grant, 'Voicing the Protest: the New Writers', p. 139.

order'.<sup>25</sup> But it is, above all, in his tendency to be critical and oppositional that Bela is said to resemble his creator.

The resemblance is emphasised even when the intention is to be critical of Barker. For example, Eric Shorter suspects that *No End of Blame* 'isn't based on this cartoonist's life as a perpetual dissident but rather on this author's need to find a peg for his own line in fretful and florid wrath'.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, John Elsom complains that 'Barker, having carefully sidestepped one muddy censorship puddle, falls headlong into that swamp whereby he seems inclined to give freedom of expression to those cartoonists whose vision of history tallies with his own, but not necessarily to others'.<sup>27</sup> Likewise, while he reiterates the view that the final impression of the play is one of confusion, Christopher Hudson purports that 'Howard Barker is a romantic idealist and Veracek is a man after his own heart'.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, the resemblance between Barker and his hero is indirectly emphasised by Barker himself when he makes assertions which correlate with Bela's experience. 'Even though I'm a socialist', Barker asserts, 'and a Romantic with a capital R, I can't conceive of a future without antagonism'.<sup>29</sup> The implication is that socialism seeks to

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<sup>25</sup> Howard Barker, in *Refuse to Dance: The Theatre of Howard Barker*.

<sup>26</sup> Eric Shorter, a review of *No End of Blame* in *Daily Telegraph*; the review is reprinted in *London Theatre Record*, 1, no. 12 (June 4- 17 1981), p. 285.

<sup>27</sup> John Elsom, a review of *No End of Blame* in *Listener*; the review is reprinted in *ibid.* p. 284.

<sup>28</sup> Christopher Hudson, a review of *No End of Blame*, in *New Standard*; the review is reprinted in *ibid.* p. 286.

<sup>29</sup> Howard Barker, quoted by Jim Hiley in 'Barker's Bite', *Radio Times*, p. 8. It also seems worth noting here that antagonism is something preached by the subversive artist Milton in *Victory*. For when Milton is asked by Scrope 'to elucidate us... as to the failure of our struggle... the errors in our calculation', (p. 47) Milton's reply is short and to the point- 'shit and God', by which he means: 'When the war is won, wage war on the victors. Every civil war must be the parent of another. Those given laurels praise then execute. And their executioners, when the time comes, execute them too. Any amount of war a man will take, will acquiesce in his own destruction even, provided that he knows the change takes place. That is the God in him. But if after the first war, you only heap praise on the victors, they will make themselves your masters, even ape the first oppressor and invite him back. Any amount of power a man will take, provided we permit it. That is the shit in him. Next time, should we start there must be no finish, or we shall slap one another's faces in the gardens of our enemies' (p. 49). Barker himself warns against making too much of Milton's speech, saying that Milton is not 'writing a prescription'; nevertheless, some reviewers of the play also rightly conclude that Milton's analysis is consistent with many of Barker's pronouncements, regarding his call for permanent change as a way of averting deterioration of the human nature. Barker's warning is registered in his *New Theatre Quarterly Interview*; and reviewers' comments, notably that of Francis King of *Sunday Telegraph*, Sheridan Morley of *Punch*, and Ned Chaillet of *Wall Street Journal* are reprinted in *London Theatre Record*, III, no. 6 (12-25 March 1983), 214-217 & no. 7 (March 26- April 8 1983), 226-227.

smooth over contradictions and stifle the critical spirit. But, of course, Barker does not mean to exonerate capitalism from such a charge. For him both systems are equally dehumanizing, because both are based on 'authority'. And as these two systems are the only ones at present available to humanity, anybody who is as committed to the generation of conflict and antagonism as Barker or his hero is, is bound to find himself or herself, like Bela, in a state of perpetual opposition. If Barker's intention in *No End of Blame* is to be summarized in a few words, it is there in his assertion:

The problem for socialism is that it appears necessary for it to be, if effective, based on authority. And where there is authority there is permanent degradation of truth. Socialism without authority is at the moment, inconceivable. Capitalism without authority is a logical contradiction. This places artists in a position of permanent antithesis, without the remotest expectation of a synthesis at the end of it all.<sup>30</sup>

This explains why ideology is now Barker's first and foremost enemy, a point that will be further discussed in relation to other plays, notably *The Power of the Dog*.

Like *No End of Blame*, *Scenes from an Execution* dramatizes the clash between freedom of artistic expression and state authority. Distinguished artist Galactia is chosen to paint a picture of the most important occasion in the history of Venice, the Battle of Lepanto, in which Venice defeated the Turks. The commissioners want the picture to glorify and celebrate that victory. But Galactia, who calls herself a realist, undertakes to depict what she sees as the reality about war: death and suffering of people on both sides to the conflict. As she puts it to one of the wounded victims of the battle, Prodo, Galactia wants to 'help you bring the truth to birth': 'I am painting the battle, Prodo. Me. The battle which changed you from a man into a monkey. One thousand square feet of canvas. Great empty ground to fill. With noise. Your noise. The noise of minced men. Got to find a new red for all that blood. A red that smells' (p. 50). Therefore, no sooner does she start actual work on the painting than her troubles with the authorities start. The Doge soon discovers that she is not even the 'realist' she claims to be.

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<sup>30</sup> Howard Barker, in *Refuse to Dance: The Theatre of Howard Barker*.

For the Doge, his brother, the Admiral, does not occupy so large a space in the painting as to reflect his importance and greatness 'realistically'. In fact, the Doge argues that it is a mark of her artistic responsibility to show his brother prominent and great in the picture. Galactia obliges but once more shows her view as regards the human costs of the war: 'Well, I shall do. I shall show him not only prominent but **RESPONSIBLE**. And a face which is not exulting but **INDIFFERENT**' (p. 56). Thus, instead of showing the Admiral, as the Doge directs, exhibiting 'clemency in victory, modesty in triumph', Galactia shows him as a cruel and callous figure, as the description of her painting of the Turk shows:

I did a suppliance. I did a figure begging for his life, and I put him at the feet of the great Admiral, with his palms extended, and I thought I would put into his expression the certain knowledge he would be murdered on the deck. So with one figure I transformed the enemy from beast to victim, and made victory unclean. (p. 58)

Galactia may have made the victory unclean, but she herself is made to pay dearly for this stance.

Her oppositional stance earns Galactia the enmity of virtually everybody, artists, politicians, religious figures as well as her daughters. None of them, however, disputes her artistic skills and style: criticism of her centres upon her politics. However, as is evident in the following conversation with Admiral Suffici, whose own portrayal is the centre of much of the controversy surrounding the painting, Galactia finds in their criticism of her a vindication of her success:

GALACTIA	<i>(refusing)</i> . Sometimes you have to admit they get things right, the bureaucrats; for all their corrupt deliberations, they pick an artist who might just <b>TELL THE TRUTH</b> . And then God help us, it's blood and mayhem down the cold museums.
SUFFICI.	My eyelid.
GALACTIA.	I don't know whether Venice is a good republic or a bad one, I am not political—
SUFFICI.	Me neither, what about my—
GALACTIA.	The moment you go in for politics, you cavil, you split up the truth—
SUFFICI.	Please— <i>(Pause)</i>
GALACTIA.	I go from my belly. Yes or no. And when I show meat sliced, it is meat sliced, it is not a pretext for elegance. Meat sliced. How do you slice meat? <i>(Pause)</i>

SUFFICI. I think you are, for an artist, rather coarse.  
 GALACTIA. Coarse for an artist? It's an artist's job to be coarse. Preserving coarseness, that's the problem. (p. 61)

The encounter between Suffici and Galactia recalls that between Bela and Churchill's representatives in *No End of Blame*, although in Galactia's case it is not an interrogation yet. (Suffici is merely attending a sitting in order for Galactia to draw him and for him to be able to give his opinion as to how he should be shown in the painting.) Like Bela, Galactia looks for the truth, and when she finds it, she shouts it. Her aesthetic truth is not one of glory and celebration, but of physical violence and savagery. Of course, her truth is political, only that her politics is oppositional. It concentrates on the fate of the victims of the battle and not on the status of the victors, as her commissioners demand.

Having failed to persuade her to re-do the painting and take their views on board, Galactia's commissioners ask her to appear before a Committee of Inquisition. Rightly the inquisitors conclude that she has painted a 'slaughter at sea' and not 'a battle at sea'. For Galactia, the difference is purely semantic:

GALACTIA. A battle is a slaughter.  
 OSTENSIBLE. No, it is the furtherance of political ends by violent means.  
 GALACTIA. I showed the violence.  
 OSTENSIBLE. But not the ends. So it is untruthful. The ends were the freedom of the seas, the affirmation of the Christian faith, the upholding of a principle. Why did you not paint those?  
 GALACTIA. How do you paint the upholding of a principle?  
 OSTENSIBLE. You show it by the nobility of the participants.  
 PASTACCIO. Do you believe in the principle, Signora? (*Pause*)  
 GALACTIA. I am a painter, I'm not—  
 OSTENSIBLE. Oh, now, you cannot hide behind your sensuality, your instinct—  
 GALACTIA. Why not?  
 OSTENSIBLE. That is dishonest, that is trying to slam the gate on our debate, isn't it?  
 GALACTIA. I painted death because all I saw was death.  
 PASTACCIO. So you admit to being partial? You admit to attending to one aspect of the truth?

GALACTIA. Yes. And I don't admit it, I embrace it. (p. 78)

Galactia embraces partiality because, for her, this partiality is nearer to truth. She refuses to be drawn beyond that: in particular, she declines to argue in defence of the painting, because, as was explained in chapter six above, being in authority, her prosecutors can 'only win the argument'.

Clearly, *Scenes from an Execution* follows a pattern of events similar to that adopted in *No End of Blame*. However, there are at least two main variations in *Scenes from an Execution* which point to changes in Barker's thinking and artistic experience. Whether in relation to fellow-artists, critics, politicians or commissioners, Galactia's problems and responses tally with Barker's.<sup>31</sup> Barker is still described as a lone figure in the British theatrical scene, who 'provokes the kind of extremist reactions that some of his rivals would openly envy. Critics, audiences, managements, directors, actors, academics, all regard his often savage, incoherent, poetical work with emotions ranging from idolatry to loathing'.<sup>32</sup> Barker's dilemmas are, like Galactia's, interrelated. Howard Barker also gets commissioned, but rarely does his work get produced by the company concerned or without considerable delay and 'weary travels':

Arguably the best ones suffered the longest. *Victory, The Castle, Crimes in Hot Countries, The Power of the Dog, The Love of a Good Man, Claw*, all waited for years to find theatres. They were produced either by theatrical nomads, eccentrics, usually in poor conditions, or by virtue of some accident in a theatre programming... My major play on Helen of Troy, *The Bite Of the Night*, has recently been abandoned by the Royal Court, who commissioned it, and has found no other home. My play *The Europeans*, commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company, has been offered no production in a nine monthes' silence. The National Theatre has been offered every play of mine in the last ten years and ignored every one.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> In an interview with Mamdouh Imran, Kenny Ireland emphasises the similarity between Barker's 'moral dilemmas' and Galactia's, although Ireland also stresses that Barker's dilemmas follow a reverse pattern, because 'they are partly due to the influence of 'left-wing playwrights like Howard Brenton and David Hare who also have become part of the establishment'; Danny Boyle expresses a similar view in his lecture on *The Bite of the Night*, in *Howard Barker and Political Theatre*.

<sup>32</sup> Steve Grant, 'Barker's Bite', p. 14.

<sup>33</sup> Howard Barker, *Radical Elitism in the Theatre*. It is worth noting that *The Bite of the Night* subsequently had its first full performance at the RSC's Pit on 1 September 1988, while *The Europeans*, which, according to Ian McDiarmid, has attracted a great deal of antipathy within the organization of the RSC, is still awaiting production. Furthermore, there is a huge backlog of television plays which have yet to find producers.

However, although Barker's sense of vulnerability is great, he seems prepared for all eventualities: 'There is a serious possibility I shall become a historical phenomenon, a writer patronised by the state. But we are capable of great resilience, like rats, can live off little'.<sup>34</sup> This is a point which is perhaps paralleled by Galactia's experience in prison in *Scenes from an Execution*. There Galactia asks for a candle in order for her to be able to paint. When she is denied a candle, much to her opponent's chagrin, she draws in the dark.

As mentioned in the previous chapter and alluded to above, the role of the critics, represented in the play by Rivera, ties in with the position of other artists as well as the commissioners. Having failed to persuade her, whether by argument or imprisonment, her opponents decide not only to release her but to exhibit the painting. Rivera is important in securing both concessions. She successfully argues her point with the Doge that the Republic is quite capable of absorbing the subversive message in Galactia's painting. Better still, the public might even dislike it altogether, which means Galactia would be humiliated by failure to satisfy the public demands and not just her commissioners. Unfortunately for Rivera and the Doge, the painting proves to be a great popular success, and therefore, Galactia's stature is considerably improved.<sup>35</sup> In fact, the play ends with the Doge inviting Galactia to a dinner party. Her readiness to attend the party seems to contradict her declared policy. However, this is a practical decision on her part; and there is no indication that she will ever compromise her artistic integrity in any future commission.

Barker's experience is not dissimilar. Despite what he calls a 'surge in comedy and musicals', a demand for his type of theatre, 'intellectual intransigence' has emerged. 'Public appetite for the play of pain and problem' was indicated by the season of his plays at the Pit in 1985- much to the management's embarrassment:

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<sup>34</sup> Howard Barker, *Gambit*, p. 40.

<sup>35</sup> As will be shown in the next chapter, Barker develops this idea, the relationship between artist and public, in *The Last Supper*.

The outstanding success of all the plays, but in particular, of *The Castle*, a work of unremitting imaginative exploration, set in the crusades but entirely free of history, caused embarrassment to the management of the company. It had expected failure, it had planned for failure, and I believe wanted it. It might then have postured as a national company that gave houseroom to difficult and doomed talents for whom there was no audience- a sort of aesthetic largesse.

Unfortunately for Barker, the success of his season did not make theatre companies more receptive to his work: 'when this season sold out, no attempt was made to extend the number of performances, nor has any plan to revive them ever been proposed'.<sup>36</sup>

### C. Sensualist

The second feature in Galactia's experience that makes it more representative of a change in Barker's thinking than Bela's connects with sexuality and leads to the idea of the artist as a sensualist. In *No End of Blame*, there is no mention of sexuality except disparagingly by Bela, describing it as a manifestation of Grigor's escapism: 'Go backwards and you must take the backwardness that goes with it. Make her your idol if you like. Her parts, her fecund this, her fertile that. Go down on your knees and lick her, offer up dead lambs on the altar of her magic cunt' (p. 25). Bela's point is that such a desire for escapism, with its sexual manifestation, is not on his agenda at that particular historical juncture (World War Two). On the other hand, in *Scenes from an Execution*, sexuality seems crucial in affecting attitudes of the characters concerned.

*Downchild*, which is identified by Barker as his 'final play on English society and politics', points out to a re-alignment of Barker's strategies as well. Barker undertakes to win through desire what he has won through satire. He maintains he has 'too much sense' of the power of sexuality 'to shift patterns of behaviour, to utterly transform private worlds'.<sup>37</sup> Evidence of such a transformation is provided rather negatively in *Downchild* as regards the connection that is

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<sup>36</sup> Howard Barker, *Radical Elitism in the Theatre*.

<sup>37</sup> Howard Barker, in *Gambit*, p.36.

made between radicalism and eroticism. It is even more forcefully expressed by Downchild himself when at one point he finds himself abruptly deserted in bed by his partner Stoa:

**DOWNCHILD.**        **Come on!** (*STOAT grabs his clothes together, sweeps out of the room, slamming the door. Pause. DOWNCCHILD is very still, then at last, gets out of bed, starts to dress*) It's a wonderful thing to be a socialist. A socialist by instinct. Red, as it were, in the blood. For all my breeding and the slight retch in my gizzard at the odour of the housemaid's flesh, it triumphed over me, the naughty bacillus, I was a convert to the working man. (p. 78)

Thus, although, as mentioned above, sexual desire is an emblem of Downchild's exploitation of Stoa, it has also a positive effect in that it radicalizes Downchild's political stance. In this respect, the radicalization could be viewed as evidence of what Barker calls the 'regenerative' effect of sexual love.

*Scenes from an Execution* may not be a typical example of such a change in Barker's view, but as in *Downchild*, the relationship between the political and the sexual is characterized by ambiguity. As the quotation above shows, Galactia's interrogators seem to make a connection between Galactia's sensuality and the political as well as critical tendency reflected in her painting, although by making that specific reference to sensuality, they also mean to humiliate her. Humiliation is also intended by her lover's claim that she is commissioned because she is a sensualist: **'I AM A BETTER PAINTER THAN YOU... And you will never make a decent job of anything because you are a sensualist, you are a woman and a sensualist and you only get these staggering commissions from the state because you... thrust yourself'** (p. 48). Carpeta's claim about his professional superiority is nonsense, because when he is asked to do the painting of the Battle of Lepanto, following the rejection of Galactia's version, he fails disastrously.

Moreover, even when she herself confirms her sensuality, she is keen to draw a distinction between sexuality and professional skill. For example, later she herself addresses Carpeta: **'I wish I were not sensual. I wish I had not got from my mother, or my father was it, this need to grasp and to be grasped... Can't you just crush me in the night? I am very happy to be crushed in bed**

but I am a painter and you can't have that off me' (p. 56-57). Thus, Galactia seems to view her sensuality as a hindrance rather than a source of strength. Furthermore, this admission implies a rejection of the claim of the members of the Inquisition Committee as to the relationship between her sensuality and her refusal to uphold their principle in her painting. In fact, the only political implication of her sensuality, or to use Barker's term, the only regenerative effect of her sexuality, if any, is her readiness to carry on with her relationship with Carpeta despite his aggressive and insulting attitude to her personally, as well as his opposition to her at the professional level. The effect of the sexual encounter between the two is reminiscent of that between Ball and Bradshaw in *Victory*. Moreover, one can possibly add that her request to Carpeta to make her pregnant in prison is political in the sense that, by becoming pregnant, she will be saved from execution, the law of the Republic prohibiting execution of pregnant women. Thus, clearly the relationship between Galactia's experience and sensuality is somewhat ambiguous.

Such an ambiguity vanishes in *The Power of the Dog*. The play is a dramatization of a thesis provided by an artist in it, the poet Arkov: 'The womb knows no ideology. The womb is innocent. The enemy is ideology. You tell him. He 'll listen to you' (p. 21). Put differently, the conflict in *The Power of the Dog* is between desire and ideology. It is a conflict which is resolved in favour of desire, with the role of artist-figures on both sides of the conflict proving effective in determining the outcome. The man referred to in the quotation is officer Sorge, but the words are directly addressed to Ilona. Thus, Arkov anticipates the role she plays in changing Sorge's ideological fanaticism.

Ilona has a lot in common with Bradshaw in *Victory*. Like Bradshaw, Ilona is in search for a body, her sister's. She is also concerned with her own safety and survival in a hostile environment. However, unlike Bradshaw whose renunciation of her husband's ideology is part of her survivalist policy, Ilona follows her sister's example. Ilona shares her sister's belief that 'history' is 'a mad dog', which can be resisted by submission, as she poetically puts it:

When the mad dog comes for you  
 Don't run, you'll only stumble.  
 Instead, lie down and show your throat,  
 Some dogs don't bite the humble... (p. 23)

Indeed, in her 'pilgrimage' through war, Ilona has literally to 'lie down' and degrade herself sexually. To her increasingly impatient and fearful photographer Victor, Ilona confides: 'The wallets of Europe are stuffed with pictures of my face... heavily powdered to conceal the bruises I got for being unsatisfactory in bed' (p. 33). But it is a tactic that pays.

Ilona's overriding aim is, in fact, the exposure of the beastliness and horror of war. She does that by having photographs of herself taken beside dead bodies. The political officer of the Red Army's 12th Motorized Brigade, Sorge, who has himself committed many war atrocities, expresses surprise that she has survived: 'How did it happen? (*Pause*) A Hungarian fashion model and a Roumanian Jew wander round Europe casually photographing atrocities. They are still alive after four years. (*Pause*) Go away and think about it' (p. 22).<sup>38</sup> But the problem does not need a retreat for contemplation: the answer is hastily given by Sorge himself when he offers her 'a soap' to 'wash yourself'. In other words, her charm also instantly works upon Sorge himself. Ilona is a sensualist artist whose sensuality rescues her from her enemies. Sexuality changes their attitude. Again like Bradshaw in *Victory*, Ilona learns from sex, is changed by her sexual experience: 'And we go to a room. Not my room. His room. You cannot be educated in your own room. And we undress. And when we undress I begin to feel sad. Well, education is sad, obviously' (p. 17)! But it is an education which also proves to be beneficial to her partners as well, as the experience of Sorge suggests. Sorge's sexual experience destroys his trust in ideology.

Sorge can be described as a hypocrite. While he lectures soldiers and artists as to the values of socialism and the need for strict adherence to ideological principles by dispensing with any

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<sup>38</sup> Later McGroot, who acts the clown in 'Stalin's court', supplies the correct answer: 'They do that, doon't they, it's called desire' (p. 43).

such feeling of pity or love, he himself engages in personal relationships. It seems that Sorge has already been 'regenerated' by sexual contact with Ilona's sister Helanna. The latter's execution has been an enormous loss to him for at one point he is seen mourning her death. Moreover, his own active engagement in war atrocities, his personal experience of the horrors and random killings that take place in war, leaves him full of admiration for those who survive the strains, and for the 'divine power' helping them. Such a feeling of admiration is expressed when he asks Ilona to make love to him: 'Must! Must! (*He pulls away from her*) When I set eyes on you... the mud splashed on your calves and your crushed shoes I felt— how pure she is... through all this clamour she walks untouched' (p. 39). Thus, when he offers her the 'soap' earlier on in the play, Sorge means that he wants her to stay clean, signalling his intention to save her life.

Unfortunately for him, Sorge himself is 'touched': no sooner does he finish his address to Ilona than he is placed under arrest for indulging in personal relationship in contradiction with ideological instructions. Thus, the words with which he prefaces his request for sex soon turn out to be prophetic:

Once there was a necessity for self, for being me, for being the opposite of you, and the terror of them, for wearing yellow trousers and baring your arse on the top of the bus. When the world makes men dead-eyed with servility, and girls weep on the table tops of clubs, me is something to get hold of. In the scream of angry night-life, the dirty cocktail of poverty and exotic fucks, yes, you need me badly. But the war's killed that. We are all the same now, we all wear the same costume of dirty European mud (p. 33).<sup>39</sup>

His arrest means that it is too late for him to get clean. Nothing is heard or seen of him thereafter; and he is presumably eliminated. Thus, Sorge becomes the latest victim of a policy which he has till then upheld.

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<sup>39</sup> Sorge's experience in war anticipates that of General Starhemberg in one of Barker's latest plays, *The Europeans*, but unlike Sorge, Starhemberg is not hypocritical in his relationships and attitudes. Starhemberg, who successfully fought a battle against the occupying Turks, gets so changed by his experience and by the experience of a wounded girl called Katrin that he refuses from the start to co-operate with the Emperor in the creation of a new order for Europe in the 17th Century. Further reference to Starhemberg's role and that of the artists in *The Europeans* will be made in the next chapter.

Nevertheless, it is certainly to Ilona's credit that Sorge brings his feeling to the open. No wonder that Sorge's disciple the artist Matrimova expresses her admiration for Ilona in an unusual fashion. The expression is accompanied by Matrimova's decision never to make a film again:

MATRIMOVA. Please, may I kiss you before you go?  
 ILONA. If you want to. (*She inclines a cheek*)  
 MATRIMOVA. No, your feet... (*She kisses ILONA's feet*) I think you are very near to God...  
 ILONA. Go? (*Pause*) Go where?  
 MATRIMOVA. Everyone will miss you.  
 ILONA. Go where. (p. 40)

Matrimova's admiration of Ilona is intensified by virtue of the fact that Ilona is sent for to take pictures of Stalin. The implication of entrusting Ilona with such a 'grand task' is that Ilona is, despite her subversive role, one of 'the luckiest and favoured artists'. This unexpected turn of events and fortunes further diminishes Matrimova's belief in ideology. And underlying all this is, of course, Barker's own distrust in ideology.

The point that is repeatedly reinforced by Barker's portrayal of the artist-figure in all its manifestations is that he is an anti-authoritarian and oppositional author. His sense of authoritarianism markedly changes as his attitude towards ideology, for instance, clearly shows. Early on in his dramatic career, Barker seems to associate authoritarianism with capitalism. Thus, he sees in class struggle, as Gocher does, the solution to social problems. However, upon discovery that socialism can equally be authoritarian, Barker later directs his criticism against it. In parallel with this criticism Barker's sense of ideology seems to be considerably narrowed, because the term appears to be used almost as a synonym of authority. This limited interpretation is, nevertheless, justified in view of the fact that social systems are based on authority. Barker is, above all, interested in the welfare of the human beings, and authority is most degrading and dehumanising.

## Chapter Nine:

### The Play as an Aesthetic Statement

Barker has recently become more vocal in his criticism of existing trends in the theatrical scene in Britain and more definitive in his articulation of his own views as to the role of art and the artist in the current political and economic climate: so much so that reviewers of his recent work frequently find it necessary to alert their readers and Barker's potential audience to 'beware the dramatist who is forever issuing manifestos'.<sup>1</sup> Such a warning is normally accompanied by a host of charges against the plays concerned, dismissing them as bombastic, elitist, complex, ambiguous, disjointed in both dramatic and narrative structure as well as inconsistent in terms of characterization. To be sure, some of the issues raised by the critics are amongst the ingredients of 'the new form of tragedy', which Barker advocates in his critical writings and tries to develop or embody in his creative work. The critics are not, however, justified in the conclusions they draw from the points they raise, and many of the terms they use in their descriptions of Barker's work say more about them and their prejudices than about the work itself.

This first Barker 'manifesto', as it were, crops up in many reviews of his early plays:

The stage is the last remaining arena for the free assault of our society. It is the sump to which our poisons and our malices, our despairs and terrors, drain. It is not a place for reconciliation or relief. It is not a dark place rumbling with laughter or a padded private place for the touching of hands, but a granite crucible in which conflict and collision strike dangerous, disconcerting sparks... The dramatist who wants to show the world in his form can not become the victim of his own techniques or the moment of communication is lost. Nothing

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<sup>1</sup> Ian Herbert, 'Prompt Comer', introduction to *London Theatre Record*, VIII, no. 4 (12-25 February 1988). See also Paula Webb's review of *The Possibilities in What's On*, 2. 3. 1988, reprinted in the same issue of *London Theatre Record*, pp. 233-234; Shela Johnson's review of *The Possibilities in Plays and Players*, (April, 1988), pp. 26-27; Jim Hiley's review of *The Last Supper* in *Listener*, 24. 3. 1988, reprinted in *London Theatre Record*, VIII, no. 5 (26 February- 10 March 1988), p. 296; Charles Spencer's review of *The Bite of the Night* in *Daily Telegraph*, 7. 9. 1988, reprinted in *London Theatre Record*, VIII, no. 18 (26 August- 8 September 1988), pp. 1193- 1231.

is unacceptable on the stage except the breakdown of communication. Nothing is incredible or unlikely. It is the world which is incredible and unlikely, and it is the business of the theatre to show the agony we experience in failing to come to terms with that... Every moment of reconciliation between the audience and its society is a misuse of the theatre, and a betrayal of its purpose.<sup>2</sup>

The critics, whose comments on the plays are, as just mentioned, largely critical and dismissive, invoke this definition of the purpose of theatre by Barker to justify their arguments.<sup>3</sup> The definition is quoted to prove that traces of it are everywhere evident in his plays.

Critics must surely be aware that a writer is judged, amongst other things, by his or her success or failure to accomplish his or her aim. Thus, the hostile criticism of Barker's work perversely proves that Barker is succeeding in his aim. He manages to use the theatre in the way he considers it to be its proper function. This is in fact one aspect of what I mean by the term 'the play as an aesthetic statement'. The second aspect, which critics fail to recognise or choose to ignore, is that the plays themselves are used as vehicles through which Barker's own new ideas about art are directly reiterated. Discussion of aesthetic ideas forms one important strand running through his recent plays, especially *The Last Supper* and *The Europeans*.

This chapter may, in some respects, look repetitive. This is almost inevitable given that some of the aesthetic pronouncements made by artists in the plays discussed in the previous chapter are reiterated and developed in Barker's latest works. What distinguishes Barker's recent plays is the symbiotic relationship that is set between the aesthetic statements and the work in which they are stated. The two are inseparable, comment upon and define one another. In the process, the audience is not just indirectly told how to see the play concerned, but more importantly, is invited to engage in the aesthetic debate in it. In fact, the audience's readiness to

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<sup>2</sup> Howard Barker, quoted by Ronald Hayman in his essay on the playwright in *Contemporary Dramatists*, p. 65.

<sup>3</sup> See, amongst others, Benedict Nightingale's reviews of *The Hang of the Gaol* in *New Statesman*, 22-29 December 1978, p. 887, and of *The Power of the Dog* in *New Statesman* 1. 2. 1985, reprinted in *London Theatre Record*, V, no. 2 (2-9 January 1985) p. 65; Milton Shulman's review of *The Power of the Dog* in *London Standard* 25 January 1985, reprinted in the same issue of *London Theatre Record*, p. 66; John Elsom's review of *The Love of a Good Man*, in *Listener*, 103, no. 2646 (24 January 1980), p. 120.

be engaged is so crucial that without it, it may be difficult to recognize the existence of the symbiotic relationship just mentioned. This explains why I have in fact decided to exclude from the previous chapter discussion of the character of Lvov in *The Last Supper*.

Expressing his weariness with journalism in this country, Howard Barker has recently proposed that theatre is now the only available platform for serious debate. '[Journalism] provides no fuel for the imagination', he says, 'and that is what concerns me- a theatre which returns to the artist's original function, which is to dream'.<sup>4</sup> Lvov is an excellent example of such an artist: he is an artist-dreamer. However, Lvov would not even be recognised as an artist unless the audience undertakes to supply the connections amongst disconnected episodes and arbitrary images in the play, as well as explain the sudden and irrational shifts in the characters' behaviour. The audience is, nevertheless, helped in this task by comments made by Lvov personally or through his disciples- comments which correspond with statements made by Barker in his critical writings.

The aim of this chapter to is demonstrate that ideas expressed by Barker in his critical writings about the role of art and the artist in society merge into the very action of the plays themselves, commenting upon and being tested and attested to by them. In the process, the chapter makes it clear that this increasing tendency on Barker's part, his use of the plays as vehicles to voice views he advocates outside them, underlies his sensitivity to critical hostility and his growing isolation in the theatrical scene in Britain. The isolation is, nevertheless, intimately linked with his boldness and readiness to chart untrodden areas. For the tendency also confirms his obsession with the position of the artist and with himself as an oppositional and subversive dramatist, who is always concerned with presenting alternatives to existing trends, whether theatrical, social or political. At one level his plays are reactions against populism and careerism on the part of theatrical companies and fellow writers, as well as attempts to engage the audience in the aesthetic debate and win it to the side of the artistic concepts advocated in the

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<sup>4</sup> Howard Barker, quoted by Steve Grant in 'Barker's Bite', *Time Out*, p. 14.

plays.

Judging by the critics' reactions, very few of them are prepared to take up that responsibility. Barker's work, critics believe, is marred by incoherence of dramatic structure as well as digressions, arising from his attempts to deal with so many issues simultaneously. A number of such comments about Barker's work are here quoted partly to illustrate further the point made in the preceding chapters in this part, regarding the parallel between Barker's relationship with his critics and the way the relationship between critics and artists is presented in his plays, including *The Europeans*, which is discussed in detail below.

In his review of Catherine Itzin's *Stages in Revolution*, Michael Billington dismisses political theatre in general as lacking in 'artistic quality'. Billington makes a special case of Howard Barker's work as 'a classic example' of political theatre's 'disregard for certain inviolable rules of drama... a sense of form':

[Barker's] plays rarely get seen twice for the simple reason that he constructs them like a series of cinematic shock-cuts. In his work we always seem to be leaping from a bar in Waterloo, to Salisbury Plain, to a boat on the Serpentine, to Platform 7 at Paddington station. In jettisoning the familiar rhythms of drama, he comes up with a series of violent collisions that jolt the spectator and distract him from what is being said.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, Irving Wardle concludes that Barker's works 'show less and less sign of coalescing into a satisfying pattern'.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, Eric Shorter describes *The Hang of the Gaol* as bristling with 'conflicting ideas': 'The result is that while each episode acquires its force as a sketch, the evening loses any cumulative curiosity. We do not care what happens next or to whom'.<sup>7</sup>

Similar unfavourable comments are passed on as recent plays as *Crimes in Hot Countries*, *The Power of the Dog* and *The Castle*. For example, Sheridan Morley claims that, in *Crimes in Hot Countries*, Barker 'seems to have remarkably little interest in dramatic construction or

<sup>5</sup> Michael Billington, 'Exit Left the Revolution'.

<sup>6</sup> Irving Wardle, a review of *The Loud Boy's Life* in *The Times*, 28 February 1980.

<sup>7</sup> Eric Shorter, 'Overstating a Case against Britain', a review of *The Hang of the Gaol*, in *The Daily Telegraph*, 18 November 1978.

character development, and his play therefore drifts from scene to scene and exile to expatriate with no real idea of what it wishes us to know, beyond that the English abroad tend to be fractionally worse than the English at home'.<sup>8</sup> In like manner, Francis King faults *The Castle* by contending that 'as always, Mr Barker is trying to say a number of things simultaneously and says none of them with much coherence'.<sup>9</sup> John Barber and Milton Shulman agree, although their reviews are clearly more hostile. 'Setting up a shop as a playwright of ideas', Barber argues, 'Howard Barker lacks two basic requirements: a cool head, and a fertile intellect. So, finding he cannot pursue an argument to the end, he whips himself into a rage of blasphemy, obscenity, gratuitous violence and sensationalism, with every possible effort to shock'. In like manner, Shulman contends, 'Howard Barker, as a dramatist, does not know the meaning of excess. He thinks it means normal. Every issue he confronts relies upon the shout, the shudder and the shock for its dramatic impact. He never wrestles with one theme if a few more come to mind'.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, *The Power of the Dog* is described as 'undisciplined, unstructured play';<sup>11</sup> as well as 'an incoherent morass of vaguely related dramatic propositions'.<sup>12</sup>

The fact that these comments are so repetitive in part explains why I have quoted them in the first place. Most of the points raised in those statements are legitimate, but had the critics themselves had cool heads, they might have reached different conclusions. Their criticism of Barker's work implies that comprehension and entertainment are the beginning and end for coming to the theatre. More importantly, they seem to assume that the audience will sit there mentally idle, expecting to be spoon-fed.

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<sup>8</sup> Sheridan Morley, a review of *Crimes in Hot Countries*, in *Punch* 23. 10. 85, reprinted in *London Theatre Record*, V, no. 21, p. 1014.

<sup>9</sup> Francis King, a review of *The Castle*, in *The Daily Telegraph*, reprinted in *ibid.* p. 1017.

<sup>10</sup> John Barber, a review of *The Castle*, in *Daily Telegraph* 11 October 1985; Milton Shulman, a review of the same play in *London Standard*, 17 October 1985; both reviews are reprinted in *ibid.*, pp. 1017-1018.

<sup>11</sup> Giles Gordon, a review of *The Power of the Dog* in *Punch* 6. 2. 85, reprinted in *London Theatre Record*, V, no. 2 (16-29 January 1985), p. 67.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Coveney, a review of *The Power of the Dog* in *Financial Times* 25 January 1985, reprinted in *ibid.*, p. 67.

Billington seems to suggest that predictability and clarity are essential elements of what he calls a 'sense of form'. Moreover, Billington and others tend to forget that Barker is reacting against existing conventions in theatre, conventions with which Billington and his colleagues seem happy. It is, therefore, logical for him to conclude that sudden changes of scenes distract the audience from what is being said. Such a movement is Barker's method of disrupting the audience's expectations, of demolishing the reconciliatory moment, with the aim of focusing the audience's mind on what they see and forcing them to look at reality with fresh eyes. In theatre, as Barker's definition of the role of theatre makes clear, nothing is unlikely. Therefore, in theatre, such scenic collisions should be viewed as likely. In other words, what the critics complain about is part of a dramatic strategy. For example, if they had tried to relate them to Barker's statement, quoted above, about the function of theatre, many of their worries would have been addressed. Moreover, even though they may not agree with what Barker is saying or seeking to do, they can at least note that Barker is true to himself.

Digression in Barker's plays is not a weakness or a mark of artistic incompetence on his part. On the contrary, it is one of Barker's ways of stimulating his audience's imagination in order to provide the 'missing' chains linking the diversionary episodes. *Victory*, for example, raises many issues, ranging from sex, money, power, politics to utopia. But all these are ultimately tightly woven: they are part and parcel of the many 'choices in reaction' registered in the play. Similarly, sex, politics, war and art, in *The Power of the Dog*, are closely related to the central idea, which is ideology, its dehumanizing effects and how to counteract it. The themes, as one of the reviewers quoted above notes in passing, are 'vaguely' related. It is the business of the audience to think over what they are watching, so as to supply the missing gaps. The same could be said about the way scenes are organized in Barker's plays.

To be fair, however, some critics do note, albeit in passing and grudgingly, that Barker is 'an author earnestly committed to cheating expectation so as to force a new approach to social

malaise'.<sup>13</sup> In fact, Billington's claim is implicitly contested by the editors of *Theatre Quarterly*, Simon Trussler and Malcolm Hay, who note in their interview with the playwright: 'Right from the start you seem not to have had any problems with creating a dramatic structure, with organizing material into scenes'. Barker agrees, but also seizes this opportunity to make a derisive rejection of Billington's claim, and to assert: 'In fact I do it well, and have got a good deal of pleasure from arranging quite complex plots, which is one aspect of it at least'.<sup>14</sup>

The defensiveness of his reply may, however, seem to underline Barker's sensitivity to criticism on grounds of dramatic structure. In fact, elsewhere he does acknowledge the difficulty of guessing how much information he needs to supply in order to make the plays less confusing. He is, however, not perturbed by such criticism, because his aim is an ambitious one:

What I think is released in my work is a series of related themes which are linked together by a sometimes overcomplicated plot. The effect is sometimes one of confusion, but also a sense of depth; one of the most gratifying, positive things about this apparent mayhem is that people come back, wanting to follow different things. There is no need for theatre to be small, microscopic or domestic, let alone simple. The big things are the things it does best. Sometimes I seem not to provide those sign-posts through the play that audiences might require. It's very hard to gauge how much information you need, but I am primarily interested in overall effects, in inventing a world. The danger at the moment lies in the ever-present hunger for recognizable forms and domestic settings.<sup>15</sup>

Although the reply seems even more defensive than the one above, it is again partly a riposte to the critics, who, from Barker's point of view, still seem to hunger for conventionalism in theatrical presentation.

Barker always writes with a view to reacting against conventionalism and old standards. For him, imagination is synonymous with innovation and individualism: it is at the opposite pole with

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<sup>13</sup> John Barber, a review of *Crimes in Hot Countries* in *Daily Telegraph* 11. 10. 1985, reprinted in *London Theatre Record*, VI, no. 6, p. 1014.

<sup>14</sup> Howard Barker, in *New Theatre Voices of the Seventies*, p. 186. It is also worth noting that even Billington himself earlier praises Barker's artistic skill, describing Barker's first stage play, *Cheek*, as making up in 'entertainment value and formal neatness what it lacks in the way of thematic originality' (*The Times*, 11 September 1970).

<sup>15</sup> Howard Barker, in *Gambit*, p. 38.

conventionalism. Barker's reply to critics may not, therefore, be different from one by a predecessor whom he holds in high esteem:

The spectator is to be receptive. He is to be the violin on which the master is to play. And the more completely he can suppress his own silly views, his own foolish prejudices, his own absurd ideas of what Art should be, or should not be, the more likely he is to understand and appreciate the work of art in question. This is, of course, quite obvious in the case of the vulgar theatre-going public of English men and women. But it is equally true of what are called educated people. For an educated person's ideas of Art are drawn naturally from what Art has been, whereas the new work of art is beautiful by being what Art has never been; and to measure it by the standards of the past is to measure it by a standard on the rejection of which its real perfection depends. A temperament capable of receiving, through an imaginative medium, and under imaginative conditions, new and beautiful impressions, is the only temperament that can appreciate a work of art.<sup>16</sup>

Barker may not put his response in such contemptuous terms as Wilde does, but he would probably go along with the thrust of Wilde's argument. As it is hoped will become clear below, the difference between Barker and Wilde is largely terminological. Where Wilde uses the term 'contempt', Barker is more inclined to use 'honour'. In other words, by writing as he does, Barker means to honour his audience.

Barker's apologetic reference, in the passage just quoted, to the confusing effect of digressions, and to the absence of sign-posts that may guide the audience through the plays, is not purely an admission of a worry on his part, but rather a sign of a concept in the making. This concept and its aim become clear in a pronouncement Barker makes at a later stage. Creating confusion, he declares, is an essential element in his dramatic strategy, evidence of honouring the audience:

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<sup>16</sup> Oscar Wilde, 'The Soul of Man under Socialism', in *Oscar Wilde: Plays, Prose Writings and Poems*, introduced by Isobel Murray (London, 1983), 257-288 (p. 279). In fact, the issues raised by Wilde in this essay have their shades in Barker's critical writing, and as is shown below, in *The Last Supper*. These include: the relationship between the artist and the public, including critics, press and state; dismissal of authority as degrading; contempt for the idea of the public as a force to stifle the artist's freedom of expression; insistence upon the artist's imperative need to assert his individuality; and above all, call for artistic innovation and progress through the artist's assumption of the role of a speculator or a dreamer.

I like confusion on the face of the audience. Engagement, but confusion, the feeling they have witnessed the possibility of other life. That is a delight, a greater delight than the spontaneous applause of people sharing an illusion.<sup>17</sup>

In other words, confusion, which is mostly a by-product of digressions and contradictions in the plays, is an essential ingredient of Barker's anti-conventionalism. Thus, it is no surprise that Barker does not even use the term 'confusion' in his latest retort to many of the charges registered above:

[My plays] are structured with considerable calculation, they are certainly not anarchic. My recent work is no less carefully structured. They are less obviously narrative, and the digressions within the work are often only oblique to the themes, but this is a calculation, not an accidental product of negligent writing. I would certainly state that the audience's permanent grasp of the meaning of the material it witnesses is not necessary, and is even a burden to it. The density of the texts should permit the audience to relax in the presence of unknown or even unknowable moments, to take in sensuality [*sic*] what it cannot always absorb instantly. This is an aesthetic of liberation. My plays have always defied expectations, and this is now more positively built into the structures.<sup>18</sup>

In order to demonstrate how aesthetic ideas are also 'positively built into the structures', and how the ideas themselves become the centre of debate on the stage, attention is now turned to Barker's recent work, starting with *The Last Supper*.

#### A. The Artist as a Dreamer

As mentioned above, Lvov is, in some respects, Barker's example of the artist as a seer, an individualist or a dreamer who tells truth. Lying in his hammock at the beginning of the play, Lvov is shown to be dreaming in both the literal and metaphorical senses. His infatuated and bewitched disciples, as one of them, Ivory, puts it, think of Lvov as one who 'dreams appalling truths' (p. 6). The truths are appalling because they run counter to the views held by the general public. The use of the term 'truths' is interesting, because an artist/dreamer provides knowledge rather than stale information or news.

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<sup>17</sup> Howard Barker, in *Refuse to Dance: The Theatre of Howard Barker*.

<sup>18</sup> Howard Barker, in a letter to Mamdouh Imran 27 October 1988.

Barker, it seems, uses the terms 'information' and 'knowledge' to distinguish between his theatre, 'elitist theatre' and what he calls 'documentary theatre'. The latter, which 'reached its apotheosis in the methods of the Joint Stock Theatre in the 1970s', is 'reverential towards journalism'.<sup>19</sup> In other words, this theatre is interested in uncovering of certain hidden facts through research, facts which it seeks to convey through coherent structure and story. For Barker, not only does this approach inhibit the artist, but with its insistence on clarity, it also amounts to an insult to the audience. This is something which, as a speculator, an artist-dreamer, Barker is not prepared to do. Instead, he wants to 'honour' his audience by providing

a new theatre [that] will not be ashamed of its complexity or the absence of ideology. It will feel no obligations to lived life or to the journalistic impulse to expose conditions... A theatre of conditions is a profoundly reactionary one, just as the insistently ideological is also a reactionary one... A new theatre will put its faith in the will to knowledge, not knowledge given by the knowing, but the individual will to knowledge which is elicited by the contradiction in the theatre.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, when the audience are asked in the prologue to *The Last Supper* to 'hang up the/ suffocating overcoat of communication', because 'the play contains no information', they are actually invited to accompany Barker in his journey of creating 'a new theatre' - an invitation to go on a journey with the author and his actors, albeit, to participate 'in the struggle to make sense of the journey, which becomes their journey also'.<sup>21</sup> In other words, in the prologue, Barker makes an aesthetic statement, alerting the audience not to expect to be told some pieces of information or be amused, as they would normally have in journalistic or comic theatre. His play provides them with raw material for knowledge. In other words, the audience must be an active participant in the construction of the knowledge the play purports.

By 'knowledge' Barker seems to mean the provision of a ready-made conclusion or judgement by way of an aphorism, whose interpretation is achieved by the audience partly

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<sup>19</sup> Howard Barker, *Radical Elitism in the Theatre*.

<sup>20</sup> Howard Barker, 'Honour Thy Audience', in *City Limits*, (February 25- March 3 1988), 14-15 (p. 14).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

through piecing together the fragmented elements of the narrative, as well as by trying to make sense of the 'arbitrary images' prevalent in the play concerned. In *The Last Supper*, Lvov's parables provide the material of such images. Naturally, this can only be accomplished by the end of the play. Barker is aware that form in drama is an organic progression, an accumulation: 'No spectator can fully perceive the whole structure of a given play until the performance has ended'.<sup>22</sup> This is why Barker also insists that an audience of a complex play must have a great deal of tolerance and patience.<sup>23</sup>

Many of Barker's aesthetic comments are echoed in *The Last Supper*.<sup>24</sup> The views are expressed by Lvov personally or through his disciples, who at times act as his mouthpieces. For example, teacher Dora draws a parallel between deterioration of the security situation and sullenness of style: 'even language is dying. We are coming to the end... We are witnessing the death of complexity' (p. 18). Although Dora's comment is a response to one by another disciple, on stage it is almost a direct address to the audience, hinting at the complexity to be expected in the play the audience is witnessing. It is also almost an open criticism by Barker of theatre managements for their pursuit of clarity and accessibility in theatre.

The same could be said of that moment, just before the food is being laid on the table, where Forjacks engages himself in reading some notes of Lvov's teachings. Forjacks is addressing Lvov, while others are busy placing chairs round the table:

Shh! (*He Thumbs.*) In June you said— yes— Tolerance is impossible without gratification— though you later— not just later, often— questioned the value of tolerance— but then in September— Please don't deliberately knock into me— sorry— in September— here it is— the 12th— and I may have got this wrong— you say— the knowledge of lack, when fulfillment is still possible— an orchard which a

<sup>22</sup> Thomas F Van Laan, *The Idiom of Drama*, pp. 274-5.

<sup>23</sup> Strangely, some critics give themselves the liberty to comment 'authoritatively' on certain performance, while at the same time they reveal that they have not seen the whole show. See reviews of *The Bite of the Night* by Charles Spencer, Milton Shulman, and Clive Hirschom; reprinted in *London Theatre Record*, VIII, no. 18 (26 August- 8 September 1988), pp. 1293-1231.

<sup>24</sup> Howard Barker, in an interview with Mamdouh Imran, enthusiastically agrees that the play may be 'an aesthetic statement', although he adds that he 'didn't think of it like that'.

man chooses not to trespass in— produces a state of imaginative intensity which reality fails to satisfy, at least only in recollection, so that— what that suggests to me is the essential failure of all moments of consumption, but isn't that opposed to the first proposition, or am I— (*Pause. LVOV doesn't respond.*) Please don't bang me with that chair! (*Pause.*) I suppose I am trying to be consistent which in itself is— (*Pause.*) Yes— that's the point, isn't it— as you said in April, the very attempt to inflict symmetrical systems is an oppression— Anna! (*She laughs.*) I will collect a chair, I have every intention of— (pp. 25-6)

Forjacks is a scholar; therefore, like all scholars do, he tries to impose order and discipline on what otherwise are the disorganized, inconsistent and contradictory principles. But, unlike scholars and critics for that matter, and, perhaps, being a disciple of Lvov, Forjacks recognises that it is wrong, it is a form of oppression to remove differences or resolve contradictions. Forjacks' recognition appears to be Barker's retort to those critics and theatre managements, who in their hungry pursuit of clarity, accessibility and reconciliation, attack his work and deny it production. The recognition also strongly recalls and vindicates the point made in the second prologue: 'When the poem became easy it also became poor/ When art became mechanized it became an addiction'(p. 2). Forjacks' comment is, in other words, an aesthetic statement. Like the prologue, this aesthetic statement is also an indirect address to the audience, instructing it as to the best way to approach Barker's work in general and the play it is currently witnessing in particular. It is as if Barker himself were saying: 'If a scene might mean two things it should not be reduced to one. If a speech contains its opposite it should be played for its opposites'.<sup>25</sup>

Naturally, an artist who aspires for 'complexity' and 'unintelligibility' is not going to be popular, especially if the truths he says and the values he advocates are as demanding as Lvov's. Lvov thinks of 'life as a basket' whose 'fruits', as his disciples name them, include 'melancholy', 'pain' and 'death':

JUDITH.        Pain.  
LVOV.            Pain. But—

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<sup>25</sup> Howard Barker, 'Honour Thy Audience', p. 14.

- APOLO. Death. *(Pause.)* How you love death. And you have never seen it.
- LVOV. Is death bad then? How bad?
- APOLO. Lvov has never stood under fire. Lvov has never seen the meat. Lvov has never smelled the blood. Lvov has sat in a wooden chair. I say this without the whisper of a criticism. Lvov has never felt the surgeon's. Lvov has never seen the widow's. Lvov has slept in a wooden bunk. I say this without the whisper of. Lvov has never worn bowel as garland. Lvov has never scraped brain. Or watched boys jerk on strings. And yet I listen to him with respect. Because it is hard to go where Lvov goes. Cold there, I think. *(Pause.)*
- LVOV *(to GISELA)*. If you will see me naked, I'll see you... *(Pause. She gets up. They all stare at her. She glares at them boldly.)*
- FORJACKS *(with gathering clarity)*. I know what you do! I know what you do! You make all things equal, all categories! You make evil good by removing the description! But its essence remains the same. Is anybody listening? That's his method! It's all very well saying his thought is not exactly thought at all but— something else— that's all very well, may be it's not thought but it still requires two things— consistency and— I am free of Lvov, I am free, I am free of Lvov! (pp. 41-2)

Apolo's remarks are of crucial importance to the interpretation of the character of Lvov, as well as to the parallel between Lvov's experience and the artistic experience and philosophy of his creator.

Apolo may be right in his claims: Lvov may not have experienced any of those things Apolo lists. But the point is that Lvov does not have to have personally experienced those things in order to be able to speak about them. As a dreamer and speculator, Lvov has the power of imagination and insight to engage imaginatively with war and to speak authoritatively about it. (The same is true of Barker, who, while he most probably has never been near a battlefield, keeps writing about war and its devastating effects). And in such a climate as the one shown to be existing in *The Last Supper*, it takes courage to speak out the truth. This is why anyone who is prepared to do that will almost certainly find himself isolated, as, in fact, Lvov is. Because Lvov says the truth, he is in a cold place. It is no surprise that Apolo declares that he is not prepared to go where Lvov goes. Apolo is a poet, and despite his arrogant claim earlier - 'Lvov is inferior to me. Both in language and imagination' - Apolo declines to visit Lvov's territory. In other words,

Apolo is made indirectly to condemn himself for his easygoing attitude to life and for his compromise. He knows the truth but is afraid to say it. In this respect, Apolo could be said to represent many of Barker's colleagues, who, Barker believes, for pragmatic reasons (satisfying popular demands or ideological concerns) refrain from stating the truth. Unlike them, but like Lvov, Howard Barker sticks with the truth of any situation, although 'it is a cold place to go to'.

Lvov is clearly used as an image of Barker's personality. At issue is the function of both art and artist in an increasingly populist environment; or, the nature of opposition in art in a society that is both polarized and populist: 'In an age of populism, the progressive artist is the artist who is not afraid of silence... Since no art form generates action, the most appropriate art for a culture on the edge of extinction is the one that stimulates pain... The opposition in art has nothing but the quality of its imagination'.<sup>26</sup> These are amongst the many characteristics of what Barker calls 'tragic' and 'elitist theatre' or 'theatre of catastrophe'. Populism, Barker contends, is no longer a facet of left-wing groups but of right-wing organizations as well. In fact, there is a struggle between the two wings over the people. The dominance of 'soap operas', 'comedies', and 'musicals' in theatre and other art media is a manifestation of populism. The surge in such forms, Barker further explains, is partly generated by commercialism. With cuts in theatre subsidies, theatres become less inclined to take risks by mounting serious work, as fewer people would be prepared to come and see it. This partly accounts for Barker's description of 'comedy' and its contour 'laughter' as forms of oppression. This 'falsely generated appetite for comedy, deprives people of the right to take anything seriously, has now utterly disabled the remnants of the critical theatre in England'.<sup>27</sup> The last point underscores the clash in theatrical terms of the two wings of the political spectrum in their pursuit of populism: 'The last remnants of the satirical impulse are now served up into a populist comedy, so that even a theatre which insists it exposes capitalism in

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<sup>26</sup> Howard Barker, '49 Asides for a Tragic Theatre'.

<sup>27</sup> Howard Barker, *Radical Elitism in Theatre*.

its most degenerate forms merely induces a smiling complacency, or worse, outright collusion between the audience and the wicked, but hilarious, protagonists'.<sup>28</sup>

Such arguments by Barker are placed into the mouth of Lvov in *The Last Supper*, and, as will be shown below, they are more directly expressed by a number of characters in *The Europeans*. Lvov also finds himself the object and victim of populist oppression and laughter. The play is punctuated by what the stage directions call '*terrible sound of laughter*', '*a cloud of laughter*', and '*a sound of desolation*'. These sounds do for the most part accompany a CHORUS of figures who keep appearing to Lvov. These figures represent the masses, solidarity of the crowds; and their laughter is 'the artistic celebration' of that solidarity. The masses represent a threat to the individualism of Lvov 'The Great Imaginer' (p.47); and the laughter is a threat to Lvov's individualistic and tragic vision. As Barker explains, in *The Last Supper*, 'laughter has become so artificial, so mechanical, that it has ceased to be attached to human beings at all, and drifts over the landscape like a storm cloud, discharging itself over battlefields and banquets alike'.<sup>29</sup>

However Lvov does not relent. He bounces back and asserts his right to know and dream. At one point in the play Lvov leaps into a chair, directs his face towards the audience, and delivers a defiant aesthetic lecture, which further emphasises the resemblance between Lvov's position and that of his creator's:

Losing the knack. The knack going. Losing the gift. The gift going. Finding it false and only forty-two. Come nearer those at the back! Those at the back file through! And the voice! The voice going! To hear me you must hardly breathe! Whoever coughs is not engaged, all coughers will be suffocated by their neighbours, you rob them of the right to hear, you rob them, shh! How rare this is, how rare to hear a teacher when the teachers are all dead, the teachers and the poets are all dead, instead we praise the actors, the geniuses posing for the cameras, how effortless they are and charming, this never-aging charm will be the death of us, only catastrophe can keep us clean no more geniuses in white

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid. Barker does not give names to illustrate what 'remnants of critical theatre' he has in mind, but it is almost certain that he means plays like Howard Brenton's and David Hare's *Pravda*.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

suits, his garden, his summerhouse, his paddock and his rural bench, his **passionate conviviality**, no, where are the teachers, you are so fortunate, you really are, so terribly fortunate, though the knack is going and I am forty-two, the knack has gone, but I was very young, never, never young and at the brothel wept, I never laughed, I have no wit, the wit died in my jaw, how wonderful the absence of all wit, I sit so still and never tap my feet **never trust the foot tappers** or touch a stranger intimately and at the dance-hall wept, yes, wept, I am so tired of rebels, I the rebel am so tired, are you not tired of being asked to rise, rise up, no stoop, you stoop show me your stooping I will not rise for anyone who cannot stoop say to the hero in the funny hat, you will observe I have no hat, no aspect of what passes for my personality requires a hat and if the sun is hot I seek the shade, it is simplicity you lack and in exchange they give you comedy, I never made a joke, I never ever made a joke, **this terrible deformity of laughter** makes you ugly, no, do not heed the order to rise, cease laughing and pay your taxes. (p. 23)

Clearly, Lvov's lecture echoes Barker's views outside the play. More importantly, it comments on the play itself; in particular, it explains both the significance of laughter as well as the reason for Lvov's annoyance with it. Moreover, it is also clear in this passage that Lvov is filled with a sense of disappointment and anger at being left alone to shoulder the big responsibility of 'The Great Imaginer'. In this respect, Forjacks' immediate disclosure- that, because of such a stance, Lvov has made a lot of enemies, some of whom are 'insane' while others are 'brilliant analysts'- is quite significant.

From the point of view developed in this chapter, this passage is probably the most crucial in the play. Not only does the passage confirm the resemblance between Lvov and Barker, but it also encapsulates more effectively than any other passage in Barker's work, one aspect of Barker's evolution as a playwright- his attitude towards ideology. In this respect the passage seems quite important in the interpretation of the climax of the play, Lvov's murder or suicide. Although, as just explained, populism and its manifestations in theatre are advocated by both right- and left-wing groups, Barker's anger is more with the left, because they 'are the most vociferous in identifying the sin of elitism' and readily describe his plays as pessimistic, because those plays 'do not predicate class unity, social progress, the inevitability of the dictatorship of the proletariat, and so on'.<sup>30</sup> The left subject Barker's work to such criticism, because they think

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

of him a left-wing writer, who should therefore live up to their expectations. Barker is fed up with such demands and fed up with being called a left-wing dramatist. In this respect, Lvov's ringing phrases like 'losing the knack'; 'losing the gift'; 'the wit died in my jaw'; and 'I am so tired of rebels, I the rebel am so tired' are highly metaphorical. In effect, Lvov's words express Barker's weariness with and disappointment in those left-wing writers, those who represent what he calls 'the last remnants of critical theatre'. Barker separates himself from them and alerts the audience to the danger of their style of writing. Lvov's warning, 'never trust the foot tappers' is in this sense very much Barker's. It may also be significant in this respect to note Lvov's revelation of his age (forty two), for at the time of writing *The Last Supper*, Barker also was into his forty-second year. Of course, Barker has expressed his dissatisfaction with being labelled as a left-wing author, but not in so strong terms as he puts it these days. Thus, it is not fanciful to suggest that Lvov's death is in allegorical terms a visual dramatic statement by Barker about his evolution both politically and as a dramatist. Lvov's death seems to be symbolical of Barker's renunciation of any connections with existing left-wing thinking and artistic practice. In this incident and throughout the play as a whole Barker is dismissing the wrongly held view of him being a left-wing writer; and of course, some are hostile simply because of his renunciation of political commitment.

## B. Theatre of Catastrophe

Most of the aesthetic arguments in *The Last Supper*, and for that matter in Barker's other plays, are further developed and more overtly expressed in *The Europeans*:<sup>31</sup> 'The play is really

<sup>31</sup> In a letter to Mamdouh Imran, 27 October 1988, Howard Barker, in fact, acknowledges that part of his aim in writing *The Europeans* is to use the play as a vehicle for aesthetic debate. Indeed, he claims that because 'the play contains elements of aesthetic arguments which are current', it has alienated the RSC, whose commitment is to 'populist success' and whose style is invaded by 'hectic comedy, music, stage effects [and] uncomplex "concepts" laid on texts'. Barker's claim about the policy of the RSC is confirmed by pronouncements to that effect made by the artistic director of the company. The director expresses the view that in the current climate the 'debate play' does not work; instead, time is more favourable to musicals and comedy. See Terry Hands' interview with John Vidal, *The Guardian*, 7 April 1988.

about the persistent desire to keep in the forefront of consciousness the experience of pain'.<sup>32</sup> This is embodied in the attitude of Katrin and her persistent refusal to heed the advice of the people by whom she is surrounded.<sup>33</sup> The contrast between Katrin's view and aim and those of the people around her is emphasised throughout the play, but particularly in Scene Four of Act One where Katrin is asked, or more accurately she volunteers to come to The Institute of Science in order that physicians may draw pictures of her maimed body. The scene starts with a member of the institute introducing Katrin and praising her 'patriotism':

GRUNDFELT. We are grateful to this courageous and patriotic woman.  
 KATRIN. And I am grateful to you.  
 GRUNDFELT. Drawing is permitted. (*The audience rises and surrounds KATRIN, with books and pencils*)  
 STARHEMBERG. They cluster her... How thick they are on her, and urgent...  
 SUSANNAH. Are you a surgeon? Hurry along with your pencil or you will miss the itemizing of the wounds.  
 STARHEMBERG. I shall see her...  
 SUSANNAH. Everyone will see her. She is determined her misery will go into print, and colour, too, you are staring at me in a way which at one time would have been thought offensive...  
 STARHEMBERG. Her absent breasts, and yours so very present...  
 SUSANNAH. It is peculiar, we would have thought at one time, to have such intellectual symposia among men who cannot muster a sandwich between them...  
 STARHEMBERG. Your succulence, and her aridity...  
 SUSANNAH. But we swiftly become used to anything, don't you find? All right, what have you got? I don't want pig fat, oh, God, you are Starhemberg—  
 STARHEMBERG. Introduce me to her.  
 SUSANNAH. Aren't you, you are Starhemberg, I am bathed in confusion—  
 STARHEMBERG. You honour me quite unnecessarily— (p. 22)

Susannah is Katrin's sister, so her revelation that Katrin intends to let herself be seen by everybody should be taken at its face value.

<sup>32</sup> Howard Barker, in an interview with Mamdouh Imran.

<sup>33</sup> Moreover, as was explained in chapter two above, for Barker, public exposure of pain is always inseparable from his contempt for 'pity' as a concept. The negative aspect of this concept is to be analysed in chapter five below.

However, it is Starhemberg's comments that are more important, because although apparently unrelated to the scene in question they present a correct interpretation of Katrin's position both in this scene and throughout the play.<sup>34</sup> Starhemberg's remarks about the difference between Susannah and her sister also establish the difference between Katrin's reasons for coming to the institute and the anatomists' aim in asking her to come. She comes in the hope of publicising further her tragedy, while they hope to benefit from a scientific analysis of her wounds. She wants pictures of her body to be printed and copies of them to be sent to every household in the country, while they want to confine the pictures in archives and locked places. But, because of Starhemberg's interventions a decision is made to draw pictures of her and have them printed.<sup>35</sup> Katrin asks for paintings of her deformed body to be distributed to people, so as to make them aware of the experience of pain. Thus, through Katrin, Barker is making an aesthetic statement.

Katrin is both the object of the story and its interpreter, an interpreter whose aesthetic views echo her creator's. In his criticism of existing trends in theatre, notably naturalism, Barker focuses upon what he calls its 'visual aspect', the domestic milieu, because 'behind all domestic drama lies the spectre of reconciliation'.<sup>36</sup> These are words that are placed into the mouth of

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<sup>34</sup> It is worth noting that in the relationship Starhemberg establishes with both Susannah and her sister Katrin, he is like Sorge in his intimacy with both Ilona and her dead sister in *The Power of the Dog*. Resemblance between these two officers is particularly strong in the role each one also plays in the creation or destruction of the new form of art. But because Starhemberg is an 'existentialist' and an unpredictable character, he successfully engages himself in the creation of the new art, while Sorge fails because he makes of himself a slave to ideology.

<sup>35</sup> It is interesting to make a brief comparison between Katrin's insistence that pictures of her be drawn and printed with Bela's resistance of the the idea to have his cartoons printed and sold in *No End of Blame*. This is important because it points to a development in Barker's view as to the role of art. As argued in the previous chapter, Bela believes in action and change: therefore, he refuses to have his cartoons printed. He thinks that art does not hurt, and publishing his cartoons is, therefore, intended to emasculate their critical power. Of course, the cartoon is a form of art, but he believes, and in fact the play makes it clear through contrasting Bela's cartoons with Grigor's paintings that the latter represents escapism and deception, while the former stands for change and engagement. And underlying Bela's own position is Barker's own belief at the time of the power of art to lead people into areas of analysis and political debate. It is hoped that this analysis then stirs the desire for change. As mentioned above, Barker no longer does believe that art can provoke such a feeling. The best art can hope for, Barker maintains, is to 'stimulate pain', an effect which Katrin seeks to achieve.

<sup>36</sup> Howard Barker, *Radical Elitism in the Theatre*.

Katrin at the start of *The Europeans*. In Act One, Scene Two, Katrin is shown sitting in a chair in a Convent, telling her story: how she was seriously injured and raped by four Turkish Soldiers. Katrin seems to relish telling the story, without in any way seeking to stir the feeling of her spectators or elicit their sympathy. When sister Susannah comes to collect her and take her back home, Katrin vehemently refuses:

- SUSANNAH. How much time? I carried you about, little sister.
- KATRIN. I'm so cruel, aren't I? It comes of having a vocabulary and no breasts **DON'T TOUCH**. (*SUSANNAH draws back*) I can't bear to be touched now, even by those claiming love or pity.
- SUSANNAH. I don't pity you Katrin.
- KATRIN. Why don't you? Everybody else does.
- SUSANNAH. I think you are more cruel than any clot of raping mercenaries. (*Pause*) Now, you made me say that. You made me utter sentiments which in any case I don't feel. You do that to people. Let's go home.
- KATRIN. I have finished with home, for which, all gratitude to Islam's infantry—
- SUSANNAH. Silly—
- KATRIN. **DON'T CALL ME SILLY IN THAT WAY YOU DO**. (*Pause*) I can't go home because— and do listen, this will be difficult for you, perhaps beyond your grasp— home is the instrument of reconciliation, the means through which all crime is rinsed in streams of sympathy and outrage doused, and blame is swallowed in upholstery, home is the suffocator of all temper, the place where the preposterous becomes the tolerable and hell itself is stacked on shelves, I wish to hold on to my agony, it's all I have. (*Pause*)
- SUSANNAH. Pity. I had such a pleasant room prepared for you...
- KATRIN. Use it to fuck in. (p. 11)

The reason Katrin gives for her refusal to go home echoes Barker's criticism of room-oriented theatre. But Katrin is obviously speaking about her own tragedy. She would not go home, because she would not let neither herself nor her spectators be reconciled with her dilemma. She wants to intensify her tragedy and people to be exposed to the spectacle 'of her charismatic defeat',<sup>37</sup> to use Barker's own term. Thus, in a way, Katrin's concept is not meant to be a simple reiteration of an element in Barker's artistic philosophy, but also an aesthetic address to the

<sup>37</sup> Howard Barker, 'The Triumph in Defeat'.

audience, offering them some clues as to how to witness the play. This is why it is plausible to suggest that this statement acts like a prologue to the play.

The suggestion that Katrin is speaking for Barker is probably borne out by the fact that Katrin is an artist herself. This revelation is made in, Act One, Scene Seven, when Katrin is shown being painted in a park. During that scene Katrin reveals that she is a painter, and she also expresses views about art and the function of a picture that are not unlike those expressed by Galactia in *Scenes from an Execution*:

PAINTER. I am quite fast...

KATRIN. Oh, don't be fast!

PAINTER. It isn't that I hurry, it is my method that is fast... I ground in white, and then....

KATRIN. I can paint.

PAINTER. Oh, is that so?

KATRIN. No, don't. Don't. That condescension. I am a good painter.

PAINTER. I understand you.

KATRIN. Do you? Do you understand me? We say we understand. Of course we never do. (*To SUSANNAH*) I understand, he says. He does not. I don't understand anything, and I never say so. (*To PAINTER*) I think a portrait should say awful things. The bone should quarrel with the flesh.

PAINTER. From here on a good day you can see to Transylvania.

KATRIN. What use is a portrait if death is not there too?

SUSANNAH. You're a man.

KATRIN. I'm talking—

SUSANNAH. You're a man. Why should a man not wish to make love?

KATRIN. I'm talking about death—

SUSANNAH. You're a man, what is it?

PAINTER. I— I— hardly know which—

SUSANNAH. Claiming he loves— exhibiting all the characteristics of a man who loves and yet—

PAINTER. Europe, how it shines! As if a grimy sheet were lifted off, and sunlight fell on all its fields and forests!

KATRIN. Do you love Europe?

PAINTER. And its spires—

KATRIN. And its graves— its wonderful acres of graves!

SUSANNAH. Is it to torture me? As for fidelity, he asks for none, which makes it worse.

PAINTER. The war, how tedious it was! I ached to paint women.

KATRIN. Women were in wars, where were you? (pp. 42-43)

Katrin's view of a portrait as something that should say awful things is visually vindicated by what is supposed to be taking place simultaneously off stage. The Painter interrupts painting, looks towards the other side and sadly declares: 'They are executing a man'(p. 44). Katrin's response also confirms her view about a portrait: she insists on watching the execution. The timing of the execution to coincide with Katrin's definition of a portrait suggests that Barker agrees with Katrin. Put differently, Katrin's definition is an aesthetic statement which instantaneously comments on an action in the play.

The play opens with a similar visual aesthetic statement by Barker. On one side of the stage, the emperor is shown laughing in celebration of the great victory over the Turks, and on the other some Turkish prisoners are shown standing bewildered and in terror of their lives. Barker is here doing what his heroine does in *Scenes from an Execution*. Like the Admiral, the emperor is shown as neither humble nor lenient in victory. The emperor's joy starkly contrasts with the prisoners' horror. In fact, he orders their execution, and asks his painter to record that moment as well. By presenting such a contrast, like Galactia, Barker seems to aim to elicit the audience's sympathy towards the victims, in this case the Turks. Thus, one can suggest that underlying this contrast is a kind of aesthetic statement frequently expressed by Barker in his critical proclamations and successfully dramatized in *The Last Supper*- the deformity of laughter and its separation from reality.

However, the role of the emperor appears to be a complex one. He is not there just to be shown as a cruel and merciless figure, but also to help develop Barker's 'new form of tragedy', 'the tragedy of pain'. The emperor's conduct is to a certain extent similar to Downchild and Gaukroger in *Downchild* and *Pity in History*. It has an educative value, and exploitation of the Painter is part of this process:

- LEOPOLD. You say yes to everything I say, how will you ever be a decent painter?
- PAINTER. I don't know—
- LEOPOLD. Look at the prisoners, how they tremble like reeds on the lakeside as soon as their brothers come near, like a wind they come and go— YOU LOST. YOU LOST. No fucking Seljuk lancers will cut you free, Ali! Draw them, record their bewilderment, they cannot understand why their god's quit, draw them! (p. 2)

Clearly a parallel is made between the Painter and the prisoners. Nevertheless, although Leopold is obviously the Painter's oppressor, his questions as well as his rather sarcastic remarks about the Painter's resignation do seem to give a hint of his desire to see the Painter more assertive of his individuality. In this respect, the emperor's request for the Painter to draw the Turks and 'record their bewilderment' may be meant not just to record or celebrate his victory, but also to allude to the proper function of art and the artist as he sees it. This is not entirely a fanciful interpretation, given that *The Europeans* ends with the emperor repeating 'CON— CIL— IA' (p. 99)! CONCILIA is the name of Katrin's daughter, whom Starhemberg has handed over to her ancestors the Turks. The name comes to symbolise the birth of what Barker calls 'the new form of tragedy'. It is a tragedy which reconciles the mother with suffering or one that 'restores pain to the individual', as Barker puts it.<sup>38</sup>

The most overt aesthetic statements in the play are, however, pronounced in Act One, Scene Eight, where a half-hour meeting of leading academics and critics is hosted by the emperor to discuss and devise a new form of art for 'the new Europe'. Amongst those present are the Painter and another academic, called Hrkaly, but introduced as an 'intellectual'. The ideas debated here are nothing but a rehash of Barker's own aesthetic concepts, or, more accurately the debate is nothing but charges and counter-charges of what Barker is for and against in theatre. What is noticeable about the meeting is the near equality of those who are for Barker's kind of theatre and those who are against it. In the meeting emperor Leopold acts like Jardine, the head

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<sup>38</sup> Howard Barker, '49 Asides to a Tragic Theatre'.

of the inquiry team in *The Hang of the Gaol*. This is important to note, because this is probably the first time in Barker's work that a critic is from the start shown to be supportive, even championing Barker's kind of art- an indication, perhaps, of the steadily growing recognition by critics of Barker's work and of signs of his popularity with some sections of the audience.

Both Arst and Feliks, who represent the opposing view (to Barker's, that is), are given the chance to speak. They argue for 'a People's art... an art of celebration' and 'heroism'. The emperor is shown to be rather unhappy with this idea, not least because 'heroism' in his case was 'barely perceptible' during the battle. Bomberg, who champions Barker's view, is then invited to give his opinion. Bomberg states that he is for 'an art of shame'. The emperor seems willing to know more; therefore, he asks Bomberg to expound his idea. This request is enough to enrage both Arst and Feliks. The scene then explodes into a comic slanging match between those men. Nevertheless, the ideas debated are quite serious; and it is clear that Barker is using the occasion to fend off and rebut some of the charges that are frequently levelled at his work:

- BOMBERG. Shame. An art of shame.
- LEOPOLD. Elucidate.
- BOMBERG. That's all.
- ARST. What is there to be ashamed of? (*BOMBERG shake his head*) No, don't just shake your head, that is appalling arrogance... (*He shakes it again*) I think that gesture is typical of Professor Bomberg, who is needless to say, not among the most popular of teachers—
- LEOPOLD. **WHO CARES IF HE IS POPULAR?** (*Pause*) **WHO CARES IF HE IS ARROGANT?** (*ARST concedes with a movement of the shoulders*)
- ARST. The fact is the students are unwilling even to attend his lectures which—
- LEOPOLD. **WHO CARES ABOUT STUDENTS?**
- ARST. Well—
- LEOPOLD. **EVERYTHING YOU SAY IS MEANINGLESS.** (*Pause*) All that matters is whether he is right. (*Pause*) On the other hand, Bomberg, do open yer gob. (*Pause*)
- BOMBERG. First, we must know who we are. And to know who we are, we must know who we were. I do not think at this moment, we know who we are.

- FELIKS. You will depress the people with your introspection.
- ARST. He knows nothing about the people, go into the street and see the people, you talk to nobody—
- FELIKS. Listen to the people—
- BOMBERG. The people have a million mouths—
- ARST. You see, you are a pessimist—
- BOMBERG. **YOU WANT TO CLAIM THE PEOPLE. YOU WANT TO OWN THE PEOPLE. NONE OF YOU TRUSTS THE PEOPLE.**
- ARST. This is why his lectures are so ill-attended—
- BOMBERG. **YOU SUFFOCATE THE PEOPLE—**
- LEOPOLD. Bomberg—
- BOMBERG. **YOU INVENT THE PEOPLE—**
- LEOPOLD. Bomberg—
- BOMBERG. **SHUT UP ABOUT THE PEOPLE. (Pause)**
- ARST. The people clamour for solidarity—
- BOMBERG. No, they ache for truth—
- FELIKS. Happiness, surely—
- BOMBERG. Fuck happiness—
- FELIKS. You see? what's wrong with happiness?
- LEOPOLD. **BRING IN A HAPPY PAINTER! YOU!** (*He points out the PAINTER*) Stand up. Don't be intimidated by men with words, you can pick words out of the gutter. (pp. 51-2)

Clearly, the stated and implied terms 'students', 'lectures', 'university' and 'professor' can stand for 'audience', 'plays', 'theatre' and 'author' respectively. Thus, it only needs to replace 'professor' by 'Barker' to recognise that in this debate Barker is dismissing criticism of his own work. Both Arst and Feliks are voicing out the criticism that is normally levelled at Barker's work: 'The statements made by the Painter and Hrkaly are refutations of populist postures widely aired at this time (i. e. the present). To an extent they are also a defence of the individualist impulse in pictorial (and literary) culture, a retort to the insidious accusations of "pessimism" which are levelled at my theatre'.<sup>39</sup> Both Arst and Feliks are in favour of populist art, one that celebrates, and 'uplifts' the audience by focusing upon the 'happy' moments in life. It is a art that captures 'the general mood' of the people, as the shabby cartoonist Mik puts it in *All Bleeding*.

<sup>39</sup> Howard Barker, in a letter to Mamdouh Imran 27 October 1988.

But for Bomberg, the Painter, and indeed for Barker himself, to level the charge of 'pessimism' is nonsense: 'Pain and apparent defeat are not synonymous with pessimism, which is a narrow concept dear to the totalitarian mind and outlawed by the totalitarian state, where "the depressing thought" as a threat to public morale has maimed literature and art'.<sup>40</sup> In fact, this point is stated by the emperor in the scene just analysed, where Arst, who charges both Bomberg and the Painter of advocating pessimism, is himself accused of being totalitarian: 'You want to dominate everything', the emperor says, 'these [Painter and Bomberg] also are the people. These are the ones whom we must trust' (p. 53). This last point supports the suggestion already made about the emperor's contribution to the new form of art.

In fact, the debate seems partly engineered for the benefit of the Painter. Bomberg and, as shown below, Hrkaly express in words what the Painter himself shows or desires to be shown in painting. The Painter refuses to take part in the debate, because his work is creative as well as mysterious and not argumentative. It is in this respect significant that in the ensuing discussion, Arst addresses his words to the Painter saying: 'I am extremely weary with souls' (p. 54).<sup>41</sup> When the Painter is asked to speak, he is shown to be rather puzzled, and unable to argue, except for saying that neither is he happy, nor can he show a 'happy picture', because 'it is not a happy time' (p. 53).

However, the outcome of the debate within the Painter's soul manifests itself in assertion of his individuality through his unexplained love of an artist called Giovanni Carpeta. Mere mention of the name stirs Arst's blood, because 'one looks at Carpeta and sees at once why the young are turning in their droves to the Spanish and Chinese':

PAINTER.        He speaks to me—

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<sup>40</sup> Howard Barker, 'The Triumph in Defeat'.

<sup>41</sup> Barker defines the work of art as 'mysterious- outcome of secret, unheard debates in the writer's soul' (in *Gambit*, p. 37).

- ARST. I don't think a single canvas of this man would last two minutes in the market square—
- PAINTER. **I REVERE HIM! I REVERE HIM!**
- ARST. It would be torn from its stretcher and the crowd would say—
- PAINTER. **I REVERE HIM!**
- ARST. You insult us with your— *(The PAINTER lets out a long moan.)*  
Yes, your human loathing— end of speech! *(He shows empty hands. The PAINTER sobs)*
- LEOPOLD. *(To PAINTER)* You have to— I'm afraid— defend your soul against the bullies of the mind...
- ARST. I must say I am extremely weary with souls, which are pretexts for exhibitions of self-adulation, from what I can see...
- PAINTER. *(To ARST)* I must tell you.... if I meet you again... I'll kill you...
- ARST. **NOW WHO'S THE BULLY!** *(He laughs. The PAINTER leaves.)*  
Soul, I assume? The passing of soul? *(Pause, then to ARST'S horror, BOMBERG grips him from behind about the throat. LEOPOLD bursts out laughing. FELIKS tries to unlock BOMBERG'S manic grip.)* (p. 54)

Thus, beyond his expression of love for Carpeta, the Painter can not explain why he loves him. But perhaps that is better explained by Bomberg's attempt to smother the Painter's oppressor. The Painter seems to admire Carpeta, precisely because of the things Arst complains about, things which Bomberg has also just advocated as the bases for the new art. This is why Bomberg is so enthusiastic in defence of the Painter.

Intellectual Hrkaly, who has been silently watching the debate, is, however, the one who provides the concept which clarifies further the attitudes of both the Painter and Bomberg. Urged by the emperor and by the Empress, who has just arrived to take part in the discussion, Hrkaly puts forward a concept which strikingly tallies with Barker's own aesthetic arguments:

- HRKALY. What I want. And what there will be. I want an art which will recall pain. The art that will be will be all flourishes and celebrations. I want an art that will plummet through the floor of consciousness and free the unborn self. The art that will be will be extravagant and dazzling. I want an art that will shatter the mirror in which we pose. The art that will be will be all mirrors. I want to make a new man and a new woman but only from the pieces of the old. The new man and the new woman will insist on their utter novelty. I ask a lot. The new art will ask nothing. I am a Hungarian, and we have been ridden over, and ridden over, and ridden over...

EMPRESS. I don't think, Mr Hrkaly, you have quite grasped the temper of the times, has he? I think what Europe needs is rococo and a little jazz!  
(*HRKALY gets up, bows, is about to leave, but stops*) (pp. 55-6)

Hrkaly stops to say something which the Painter has expressed in different form, namely the impossibility of happiness in an age of strife and death. For Hrkaly, in time of war and social hardship the sounds of 'rococo and a little jazz', as the Empress puts it, are nothing but 'sentiments of banal happiness'. The Empress exclaims, repeating 'why not' (p. 56).<sup>42</sup>

The final scene of the play both summarises the aesthetic arguments in it as well as provides the climax of those arguments in practice. The scene is both a parody of the traditional ending of tragedy, and an opportunity for all the aesthetic debaters in the play to pronounce their aesthetic opinion clearly. The ending also presents the audience of the play with the opportunity to get engaged with the actors in this kind of new experience in art. 'Traditional tragedy', Barker argues, 'was a restatement of public morality over the corpse of the transgressing protagonist- thus Brecht saw catharsis as essentially passive. But in the theatre of catastrophe there is no restoration of certitude, and in a sense more compelling and less manipulated than in the epic theatre, it is the audience who are freed into authority'.<sup>43</sup> Perhaps to emphasise the difference between Barker's tragedy and the traditional form of tragedy, the scene starts with a fireworks-display in celebration of victory in battle and restoration of order. Soldiers are also shown shouting and ordering people, in this case a group of beggars, amongst whom is the emperor in disguise, to laugh and be merry. Obviously, Leopold can not turn up amongst beggars in uniform, but the fact that he is shown to be disguising himself, is in itself significant. Disguise is probably meant to emphasise the point already made about his role in the creation of the 'theatre of catastrophe'. It is an indication that he is for the expression of 'the unbidden thought' and hidden areas. It is in this respect significant

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<sup>42</sup> This repetition is probably meant to suggest that the Empress is being ironic, because, together with her husband, she is a proponent of the new form of art. In deed, later she asks Hrkaly to allow her to write with him a book on the new aesthetics. The truth of empress' true view and the validity of Hrkaly's are supported by the background sound effect with which the scene ends: '*the sound of a popular march played by a band, rising to a crescendo*' (p. 56).

<sup>43</sup> Howard Barker, 'The Triumph in Defeat'.

that Leopold pronounces the basic principle of the new book on aesthetics that Hrkaly is supposed to write: 'NO MOMENT OF UNITY IS EVER TRUE' (p. 97). The morality of order is a shame, and reconciliation is a fallacy. The only true reconciliation is with pain. This is an aesthetic statement that sums up in few words nearly all other such statements in the play, and elucidates, as statements by Starhemberg, and above all, Katrin herself also do, the actions in *The Europeans*. Katrin, who is then informed by Starhemberg that he has given her daughter to the Turks, does not seek revenge on the man who deprives her of her child; rather she welcomes the prospect of a new cycle of pain and misery. Thus, in order to illustrate further the central argument that aesthetic statements in Barker's plays are at once reiterations of his views, artistic and otherwise, as well as comments on the plays themselves, perhaps the best way to end this chapter is to quote in full the ending of *The Europeans*:

STARHEMBERG. I returned her to her fathers.

KATRIN. What...

STARHEMBERG. To her creators. She's with them.

KATRIN. You—

STARHEMBERG. I—

KATRIN. Wait! Let me finish it. *(Pause)* You— *(With an effort of concentration)* made— restitution— of their— property— for which— I merely was— curator? *(Pause)* How well I can express my suffering, as if expression took the teeth from it, congratulate me, then.

STARHEMBERG. I do.

KATRIN. It also is habitual, and there's the actual tragedy, not in pain, but the unflinching tolerance of it, did you expect I'd kill you, thrust some woman's blade into your eye, or poison you at breakfast? No, no melodrama, me. All woven in. All swallowed, and digested, look. *(She stares at him, in a state of utter stillness.)* Now, that was a splendid— *(A burst of firework drifts down the sky)*

STARHEMBERG. I think, if only you would tremble, then so would I...

KATRIN. Never. It would wash away every arch on which my sanity is built... you the river... me the bridge....

STARHEMBERG. I have restored you to your pain... *(He kisses her.)*

LEOPOLD. CON— CIL— IA! *(Burst of lights)* CON— CIL— IA!  
*(They trickle down the sky.)*

### Conclusion

The previous chapters have shown that, whether in his dramatic style, his treatment of issues or his presentation of the artist-figure, Howard Barker has both developed and managed to remain oppositional. Barker is not, of course, above criticism, but what makes him a great writer is that it is difficult to speak about his weaknesses without at the same time foregrounding his strengths. Indeed, as has been shown in many of the previous chapters, very often what is thought of by critics as a flaw in his work turns out to be an asset. For example, critics frequently accuse Barker of being an extremely repetitious playwright- writing the same play all over again. With as prolific an author as Barker is, repetition can occur. More importantly, it is an expected consequence of recurrence of the very things he dislikes in the world around him. Nevertheless, repetition does not entail circling or duplication but progress and development. Therefore, the only way one can do a writer of this kind justice is to see him, as Poirier suggests of Mailer, as 'the author of a large work in progress'.<sup>1</sup> This is very true of Barker. For writing a work of art is never, for Barker, the end of the story. It is always a beginning for a new one. This is why an idea vaguely tackled or briefly stated in one play is developed and elaborated by Barker in a new play at a later date.

Topics and issues that recur in Barker's works 'with obsessive frequency' are many, the most important of which are dignity, sex, pity, knowledge, history, ideology, God and art. Whether recurring within the same play or in Barker's work as a whole, those subjects are interlinked, although inevitably Barker's interest in each of them varies from one play to another. The interlinkage amongst issues treated in Barker's work as well as the variation in that treatment correspond with and are shaped by an alteration of Barker's own perception of the issues treated.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Poirier, *Mailer*, p. 63.

For example, the Bishop's sermon in *The Love of a Good Man*, questioning God's role in the miseries and sufferings of people, acquires new dimensions in both *The Castle* as well as *Pity in History*, and reaches its apotheosis in Lvov's philosophy in *The Last Supper* and Orphuls' cruel acts as well as his own sermon in *The Europeans*. Barker's development of this idea of pain goes hand in hand with his increasing disenchantment with pity as a concept as well as with his locating of history in the body. For before *The Love of a Good Man*, Barker's plays are historical only by virtue of their context in that they present a reading of contemporary and very recent British history by a self-proclaimed socialist dramatist. Barker's modification of his political stance, his movement away from a traditional socialist position, due in part to his coming to grips with negative aspects of socialism in Eastern Europe, has a bearing on the way history is treated in his later plays. In other words, his identification of the body as the centre of history is inseparable from his hostile attitude to ideology in all its forms. The idea itself, the rootedness of history in the body, is premised on Barker's belief that history is basically that of the victims of incessant clashes between cultures and ideologies. Therefore, as if to assert his hostility to all brands of ideology, Barker tests his idea within different ideological contexts. Each time this is done, the ideology shown to be dominant or emergent in the play in question receives the criticism, although the vanquished one is never exonerated. Thus, while the fascists and the Nazis are never absolved from blame, it is the British capitalists and imperialists as well as the Russian Stalinists who are indicted for many of the atrocities shown to be committed in *The Love of a Good Man* and *The Power of the Dog* respectively. Similarly, in *Victory*, Barker's attack on the Royalists in Restoration England is matched by his assault on their political enemies the Cromwellians in *Pity in History*. Both developments, movement away from ideology and location of history in the body are, moreover, tied to his recognition of the liberating value of sexuality and its historical role. For while sexuality in the early work is shown to be governed by social relationships, in the later work social patterns and convictions are themselves shown to be

greatly affected by it. Barker's growing conviction of the potential of sexuality would inevitably lead to a reading of history that is fundamentally different from the socialist way of reading it.

Some of his assumptions and enactments may be open to question. Indeed, some of them are risky and could even lead some of his audience to emerge with conclusions that totally contradicts what he would hope them to reach. His serious and largely successful attempt to make his working-class characters in the early plays speak the same kind of language the higher-class ones do is a noble one, but it can also be interpreted as an idealization of the working-class characters. He himself indicates that in reality such characters do not talk in that way. However, in the plays themselves, idealization of such figures at the level of language is not matched at the level of action or deeds. Very often he shows them doing outrageous acts, only to punish them very hard afterwards. Very few of them achieve a political recognition, and if they do, as Noel in *Claw* does, it is a very belated one. Moreover, Barker is probably a little bit heavy-handed on Labour politicians, emphasising their betrayal of the cause and corruption without recognizing any positive thing about the Labour Party. On the other hand, while Barker never even remotely endorses the politics of right-wing figures, such figures are very often shown in some of his plays as likeable, and there is always the ideological danger that they will provide models, even though they are punished in most cases. Barker is a writer with a strong sense of moral outrage. This is why he is harsher in his punishment of the dishonest or traitors of his 'natural allies'. The lack of a clear positive view in his early work explains why charges such as nihilism are levelled at him. However, to be an oppositional writer does not necessarily mean to pose alternative programmes.

Barker's treatment of history, art and sexuality carries its risks, too. It is his emphasis on pain in relation to those issues that could bounce back at him, in that the audience might reach different conclusions. Some critics are doubtful as to whether there are so many people, especially amongst historians, who still believe in the view of history, and myth for that matter, to which Barker is reacting.<sup>2</sup> This objection may have some truth in it, and certainly there is more to

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<sup>2</sup> See Michael Billington's review of *The Bite of the Night*, reprinted in *London Theatre Record*, VIII, no. 18, pp. 1193-4.

history than pain. Barker is not, however, writing essays on history. He is, above all, concerned with the present; he historicises the present from an oppositional point of view. This oppositional stance is based on the human aspect of historical events and discourses. In most cases, what Barker reacts against is the view of history advocated by dominant groups in society and their allies, including artists.<sup>3</sup> The problem for Barker is that the audience may not respond to it in positive terms. Barker's claims that other views of history are employed by their advocates to 'bludgeon people into submission' could be countered by a claim that his view could lead to the same end through despair. If whatever one does pain will be a major effect, if every system is stained by the blood of victims, then some people might find little point in acting at all. In other words, to stop doing anything might be the final resolution of some people, were they to carry Barker's view to its logical conclusion. Barker is certainly aware of the risk that such an interpretation be reached by some members of his audience. This is why Barker places a great responsibility on his audience, and trusts their intelligence.

However, suffering is the aesthetic truth of a speculative artist, and an elitist kind of audience, as Barker expects his audience to be, would be prepared to engage with the imaginative truth the plays provide, and sense its utopian possibility. Barker's plays do historicise the present, but they are not reproductions of empirical reality, nor even critical reproductions of it. The irrational quality of the plays, especially the irrational behaviour and increasingly contradictory nature of characters in them; their dense and artificial language; the terror of their beautiful imagery as well as the complex and episodic nature of their structure are amongst the means Barker uses to dissociate his plays from reality. Above all, it is their expression of pain which abstracts the plays from the real world. Paradoxically however, this expression of pain is what connects them with the reality they attack, only the connection is a negative one. The plays are

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<sup>3</sup> For example, as Ian McDiarmid says in an interview with Mamdouh Imran, Barker's *Scenes from an Execution* was very much Barker's reaction to the Falkland war, but also a reaction to pictures drawn by the artist Linda Kitson in celebration of British triumph in the war.

images of negative reality; and as such their reconciliatory moment is an extremely negative one: catastrophe. In terms of negative dialectics, this 'conjuring up' of the image of catastrophe allusively 'conjures up' the image of the opposite of catastrophe: utopia. In their refusal 'to accept the unity of art and this life', Barker's works 'hold out hope for a future life that will imitate art at its most utopian. For only in the utter uselessness of such works, which stubbornly resist all attempts to instrumentalize them, is the present domination of instrumental reason defied. Although in the suffering they register, they reflect the current dilemma of mankind, their mere existence as aesthetic expressions of such suffering points beyond to that "peace as a state of distinctness without domination"'.<sup>4</sup> Barker's tendency to write in response to fellow-artists, his hatred of laughter and his attacks on comedy and musicals fit in with this analysis. Comic theatre, critical though it may be, smothers utopia, because its reconciliatory moment is with the real and not with the imaginary.

Utopian hope equally characterizes Barker's much contested treatment of sexuality, particularly in his second phase where he attaches a regenerative value to it. Pain or the experience of it as part of the experience of desire is, for Barker, almost a pre-condition for any desire on the part of the characters concerned to transform the world around them. Some critics find this view suspicious on the grounds that it blurs the issues and introduces a diversionary element in the struggle for social change. This is because, for them, change is mostly the outcome of struggle and movement of social and economic forces. Worse still, in the eyes of some other critics, is Barker's association of pain with women in relation to sexual experience. Although women seem to take responsibility of their destiny and are allowed in Barker's work to change people around them, many critics argue that women remain the creation of a male-biased imagination. But I think that this association of pain with women is a stark illustration of Barker's utopianism. Given that in actual fact women are in every respect more victimized than men, and

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<sup>4</sup> Martin Jay, *Adorno*, p. 159.

taken in relation to what has just been said about the utopian figure of art (the hope and promise of and association between what is existent and what is not existent), it seems to me that Barker's suggestion is an entirely valid one. In the end, however, the whole issue of Barker's portrayal of women, and for that matter his use of language replete with sexual expletives relating to woman's body, may boil down to his being a man. To be fair, he himself admits that there may be a lot of things about women that neither he nor other men would be able to appreciate properly.<sup>5</sup> However, his failure to appreciate the experience of women fully is quite different from failure to satisfy the standards set by some critics as to how the experience should be portrayed. The latter kind of failure may not be a failure at all, because the standards themselves may be wrong. Moreover, to suggest, as is implied in this kind of criticism, that he should stop writing about women, is fraught with danger because this suggestion would further imply not only that women should equally stop writing about men, but also more ominously, that there are no go areas for writers. It is also worth remembering that Barker does not present his male characters in better shape than female ones.<sup>6</sup>

Many of the changes in Barker's thinking, including in relation to history, sexuality and art, together with the criticism that goes with them, are ramifications of his changed attitude towards ideology. In retrospect, that he has failed to achieve a proper ideological position in his early plays, is from his own point of view, not all that bad a thing. Barker's understanding of ideology, as he preached it then, seems to coincide with what can broadly be described as proletarian ideology, one that is interested in safeguarding the ideas and interests of the working class. Needless to say, this entails that his enemy then was what can also be generally described as capitalist ideology. As mentioned before, Barker's change of attitude towards ideology has not manifested itself in a switch from one form of ideology into another, but towards a rejection of

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<sup>5</sup> See Barker's interview in *Gambit*, p. 39.

<sup>6</sup> For similar conclusion, see Ruth Shade, 'All Passion Is a Risk: Howard Barker: Sex and Sexual Politics', pp. 108-9.

ideology in all its forms. It may be very difficult indeed to see how one can be free from ideology at all. Barker himself recognises the difficulty of a non-ideological position. In order to rescue himself from such a contradictory position, Barker seems to narrow down the meaning of ideology. He criticises both capitalism and socialism, and dismisses them as authoritarian. Barker's anti-authoritarian stance is at the heart of his rejection of ideology. In fact, in his canon the term ideology itself is almost synonymous with authoritarianism or authority. Although this is obviously a limited interpretation of ideology, an interpretation that is above all concerned with effects, I think that Barker is consistent, because no system yet exists that is sustainable except by dependence upon authority. And where there is authority, there will be restriction on freedom and suffering. The question is: will there ever be such a society that is free from suffering and restriction of liberty? This is why one can also characterize Barker's work as having a tinge of utopia in a traditional sense, an ideal, imaginary world.

The most important aspect of Barker's rejection of ideology is that it allows him to sustain an oppositional and subversive stance, which for him is the absolute priority of the artist. Although Barker deals with issues and poses certain propositions that people would normally associate with, say, socialism and feminism, whenever asked to define his position more clearly, he retorts by declaring himself to be an artist. Some critics might think that he uses this title as a defence mechanism, a shield that would allow him to evade making important choices. But this is his way of asserting his artistic integrity, his individuality as well as his anti-authoritarianism.

Barker's obsessive interest in art and the artist-figure does, nevertheless, leave him vulnerable to another type of criticism. Rightly, critics, hostile and friendly alike, refrain from classifying Howard Barker. If he is to be classified at all, Howard Barker can be very broadly described as a rebel dramatist. He certainly at once falls into Brustein's three 'categories of revolt' in drama: 'messianic', 'social' and 'existential'. However, the obsessive recurrence of an artist-figure with God-like qualities in Barker's work indicates that Barker's drama is, above all

messianic. In general, drama of revolt, according to the man who provides this categorization, is self-conscious and subjective, but it is messianic drama that is particularly 'tendentious and systematic- a philosophical play on the order of Goethe's *Faust*... The messianic play, in short, is a dramatization of the Romantic quest for faith; as such, it is the most personal mode in the theatre of revolt, and functions as the dramatist's religious testament... The messianic hero, in one way or another, is an extension of the playwright, who thus provides himself with superhuman faculties: the hero is the imaginative realization of the playwright's dream, the vicarious acting out of his moral imagination'.<sup>7</sup> The last part of this thesis shows the correspondence between Barker's portrayal of the artist-figure and the way he himself operates as a dramatist; but it is also significant that two important points in this quotation are foregrounded in very recent works by Barker. *The Last Supper*, which has one of Barker's most overtly messianic figures, is subtitled 'A New Testament', and *The Bite of the Night* has the figure of Dr Savage, who is generally thought of by reviewers of the production as Barker's example of Faust.

However, the presence of strong subjective elements in Barker's work does not necessarily entail that the work is 'autobiographical'. Not to mention the fact that Barker's views are systematic and shared by renowned thinkers, it is in the nature even of messianic drama for the playwright to keep some distance from his characters. The hero of this type of drama does not necessarily realize his aim, and he is in most cases deserted by the playwright by the end of the play. The central dilemma of such an artist is put into the mouth of the woman-artist, Galactia, in *Scenes from an Execution*, in the course of her defence of herself against attacks by, amongst others, her daughters, to one of whom the following address is made:

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Brustein, *Theatre of Revolt*, pp. 19-20. It worth adding that Barker's early plays exemplify Brustein's view of revolt in social drama: 'Social drama, in short, represents modern life for the purpose of whipping and scourging it- it is an imitation for essentially satiric purposes' p. 24. However, Barker's existential hero is to be distinguished from that in the sense defined by Brustein. As my explanation of history, amongst other things, shows, Barker's existential hero is not a metaphysical rebel, but one whose rebellion is, above all, against social conditions- an existential hero in the Sartrean sense.

Supporta, listen to me. The act of painting is an act of arrogance. It is arrogant to describe the world and then to shove the thing into the world's face. It is arrogant to compete with nature in painting a flower, or to challenge God by improving views. To paint is to boast, and if you don't like boasting you ought not to paint. Now, let me concentrate. I will negotiate with power because I have to. I will lick the Doge's crevices if need be, because he has power. I am not wholly an idiot and I like to eat and drink as well as you. (p. 59)

Thus, no matter how the artist tries to free himself or herself from reality he or she remains influenced by it, despite the artist's 'God-like' qualities'. In fact, Galactia herself accepts to dine with the Doge; and Bela is driven crazy and except for the encouragement of his doctor he would not have mounted his final act of defiance at the end of *No End of Blame*. Similarly, recognising that he can not reach a divine status, Lvov seeks to achieve it by a spectacular death at the end of *The Last Supper*. As Brustein concludes, 'despite the prominence of subjective ideas, the [messianic] drama still remains a form of conflict- a clash between the ideal desires of the hero and the insurmountable obstacles of the real world'.<sup>9</sup> More importantly, none of the artists modelled after Barker's personality displays any interest in the personal and private as such: in fact, they all suffer because of their introspective engagement in matters of public nature. Their integrity, as artists, derives from their public engagement and subversion.

Barker's 'tendentiousness' is inseparable from his rebelliousness, which in turn is inextricably likened with his consciousness of himself as an artist bound by the demands of his imagination. The trouble for Barker is that the very things he is against, whether on the social, political, economic or artistic level, are gaining grounds. Given his acclaimed refusal to make concessions except to his imagination, this situation can fuel his imagination. There is no guarantee, however, that he will ever be popular in the sense of well-liked as an artist. But this is a measure of his success in the task he sets himself as an artist. In that he is not different from rebellious dramatists and artists before:

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 21.

Instead of myths of communion, he offers myths of dispersal; instead of consoling sermons, painful demands; instead of liturgy of acceptance, a liturgy of complaint. He is an apostate priest, and one who secretly would be God. Taking as his motto Lucifer's *Non Serviam*, he emerges as the spirit of denial, the man who says No, pursuing his Yes down countless avenues of revolt.<sup>9</sup>

I have frequently used the terms innovative and original to describe Barker's work. This is not the same as saying that what he says or does has never been broached or tried before. His originality is inseparable from the historical change in present-day Britain; his readiness to say no, when the general mood in society and art is to say yes.

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Brustein, *Theatre of Revolt*, p. 16.

## Appendix 1

### Interview with Howard Barker

12 April 1988

*Can you begin by telling us something about the projects you are working on at the moment:*

**Brutopia, Terrible Mouth and your version of King Lear?**

Well, *Brutopia* I am now half way through. There is a well known English play called *A Man for All Seasons* by an author called Robert Bolt, which is a student study here; and it was filmed some years ago. It is about the life and final days of Thomas More who is a great English Renaissance scholar, who produced a book called *Utopia*- which is why we all use the word 'utopia', meaning an ideal society. Bolt's version of that play showed Thomas to be a great humanist and a great Englishman. In other words, he was made to contain in himself the values of civility and culture: humanism, a good family and so on. And the production of the play and the text shows More as a very virtuous Englishman. And I have always disliked that approach to the character, although I did not know a great deal about More at the time. But I read a small section in a book by Stephen Greenblatt, who is an American scholar you may know, called *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, and in that book is a chapter on Thomas More. So I went to the BBC and said I would like to re-interpert Robert Bolt's play, because I knew that More was not as civilized a human being as Bolt had shown him to be, but he's also persecuted. He was extremely intolerant in his religious affairs and as the Chancellor of England he had sent many Protestants to the stake where they were burnt alive. And I was interested in showing More's complex contradictions. I also knew he had two daughters, one of whom he loved and one of whom he did not love. So I thought that I would write the story from the point of view of the daughter he did not love; and that she, I imagined, also read a book called *Brutopia*- about a brutal world, whereas her father

wrote a book about an ideal world. And I personally don't like the utopian concept any way. I'm always suspicious of utopians. I think they conceal authoritarian trends in themselves. Any way I've now written half the play. It's for television. I'm developing it now. So it is hard to talk about it at the moment.

*In fact, I wanted to ask you about your views on utopia, because there seem to be certain allusions to it in your plays: for example in Crimes in Hot Countries, Victory and The Castle.*

*The way you also speak about history seems to me to verge on utopia.*

I don't think I have a utopian vision of history. On the contrary, I think the opposite is the case. But I do invent historical situations. I mean, just as Thomas More invented *Utopia* and pretended that it was a real place and someone told him about, all my historical places and situations are imaginary, but they do take certain characters from history to give the whole thing a sense of reality. I don't actually believe very much in the essence of historical fact. I always think the alternative to that fact exists within it. So the idea that Thomas More was an impeccable gentleman conceals the fact that More had an intense loathing of opposition and a loathing of female sexuality. More hated women and could not communicate with women, and had no physical sexual life at all. So that suggests to me a certain repression in More: that he was a repressed man, and his cruelty that was born out of that repression expressed itself in the persecution of Protestants. So every fact I look at also, for me, contains its opposite within it. But I certainly do place real people... for example, in this play More is real, Henry VIII a real character; and in *Victory* we have Milton and Charles II... There are no real people in *The Castle* but it is about a real situation.

*What about reference to Lawrence of Arabia in Crimes in Hot Countries?*

Yes, that's right. Lawrence of Arabia has a second life. He's always been a fascinating character in the English culture... He represents many things to the English middle class. The working class don't know of him and of More, but the idea of Lawrence as a man with secret life appeals

very much to middle-class English men; and his homosexuality is also quite crucial to that mystery, self-created mystery: because Thomas More and Lawrence of Arabia are both people who invented themselves, they created myths. More created the myth of himself as a great man of culture, and Lawrence created the myth of himself as a secret, well, both a soldier and a man of culture, which in England is most unusual- the idea of a soldier being a cultured sensitive poet is impossible in English culture. Lawrence is the only poet who is also a soldier, I think, in English culture, except for Sir Philip Sidney perhaps in the 16th century. So there is a great deal of fascination about Lawrence.

*I also would like you to talk about utopia in relation to sexuality in your work, because what I mean by utopia is actually this kind of 'heuristic utopia', one that is based on passion and feeling.*

I think sexuality in my landscapes- I call them landscapes throughout rather than utopias- is never restful and never subdued, never produces what we conventionally call happiness. It is a context.

*Yes, I mean, I would argue that your call, persistent call for change, implied in your treatment of sexuality, is utopian... I don't mean a rigid system... just feeling...*

Yes, I think the form in which sexuality expresses itself is partly a feeling of pain, but the outcome of it is to force transition in the characters, and the characters who endure these experiences are people who want them. I mean, usually especially the women actually... I think in *Crimes in Hot Countries* Erica says: 'Will this change me? Can you promise this will make me different?' That is very crucial. But the outcome of this experience of pain is knowledge.

*Like what you do in Women Beware Women.*

Yes, but that's very extreme, that's the most extreme so far, isn't it? Not only does sex change them as individuals, but it also makes them, or it certainly makes Livia wish to change society. In other words, it is the liberation, the freeing of thought that desire produces leads her into a conflict with the state itself. And in that respect, my new play *The Bite of the Night*, which you

heard read [at the Almeida Theatre], but is going to be produced in the Autumn, it is always the sexuality of Helen of Troy which is the target of the state systems or the new Troys. The other Troys that are created always identify Helen as the enemy and the one who must be- she is physically reduced. But because she represents a sort of transgression she is labelled and identified as the enemy of peace and stability. So you are right to detect this. I mean, I do see sex as a transforming, not sex but desire as a transforming spirit with political consequences; so that utopia, if there is one at all, is one in which the essence of desire is conflict. I never achieve any sort of conclusions to those relationships. There is no domesticity... never resolved. The same in a way with D. H. Lawrence, I suppose. It never leads to domesticity really, or, when it does, it dies. I am never interested in the domestic.

*What about, you know, I read Reich's book, The Mass Psychology of Fascism...*

I haven't read that, but I am aware of it. It filters through to me. I think it is there in my work, actually... the idea that unexpressed libido produces repressive instincts. I feel that is true in the character of Thomas More.

*But also when I read Women Beware Women- I actually saw it- I felt this way rape is presented more or less hinges on the views presented by Michel Foucault as well. I mean sex as a discourse: especially when there is this talk about rape, rape as a deliverance and that kind of argument that goes on between Livia and Leantio. So could we state, for instance, that this scene of rape may have a kind of semantic, symbolic or discursive value attached to it?*

Yes, I mean, I can't answer that directly. That's an academic question. The logic behind the act of rape in the play is formulated by Sordido, I think, when he says that she is a sexual property. He says that women employ sex as a bargaining counter: therefore it is property rather than spirit; and because it is property it is therefore stealable. That's the rationale behind the action. And of course, it is also a dislocating act. Because she is a princess her sexuality is a special privilege. It is a focus for the crowd, for the masses. But if he were to steal that, if it was stolen by a member

of the masses, the edifice collapses...

*There is certain reference to Marcuse's principle of repressive tolerance...*

Yes, I am sure there is. Yes, the only philosopher I read at all is Adorno. I don't read Foucault and any of those people. I am sure that is a useful way to my work, actually, and Derrida, too...

*What about Robert Bolt's play? Bolt speaks about Brecht and Brecht's influence. Do you also intend to subvert the theatrical conventions as you did in **Women Beware Women**?*

I am not actually picking up Bolt's text in the way that I did with Middleton's. I am merely taking the idea of family as a crucial element in English middle-class culture: and, of course, More's family has been idealized for generations as a perfect family. That is the element in which I try to open aperture into that and to subvert the formality of that family life by showing the conflict within it. So I'm re-telling the story. I'm not actually using Bolt's model. I'm writing it for television, but I'm writing it for stage in essence, because I don't make any particular considerations for television. So it could be a stage play.

*And that is what you do with what is called the domestic version of **King Lear**?*

Yes, I am hoping to do that. I haven't started yet. But what I am going to do with the Lear play is to trace the missing mother. There is a kind of assumption when you read *King Lear* that the three daughters had different mothers, because Cordelia is so perfect and the other two are such monsters that you sense they come from different mothers. But we never hear of their mother. It is very odd; if you read the whole text, there is no reference to Mrs Lear. So that is the point of my inquiry: and the silence is deliberate. There is a strong silence about the missing mother. And I'm interested in exploring the way in which Lear's cruelty and vicious appetite for love is the product of a repressive family in an earlier time. This is as far as I can tell about that.

*You seem to be increasingly concerning yourself with adapting and re-working of works by other writers. Is there a special reason for that?*

Yes, I think I got interested in mythical traditions and certain types... I mean my interest in the myth of Helen of Troy, for example, because it is quite crucial to European culture.

*And the last play, The Last Supper.*

Yes about the death of Christ. And I've also written a play... called *The Europeans*, which is the last I wrote... It's set at the end of the siege of Vienna when the Ottoman expansion into Europe finishes, that is, in 1683, and the Europeans begin to push the Turks back out of Europe. So it is a kind of important cultural moment I think. In this play the emperor of Austria, who comes back to Vienna, discusses what the future of European culture will be. His leading general refuses to cooperate in the development of the new order, and instead, befriends and becomes fascinated by a girl who has suffered during the war: and the play is really about the persistent desire to keep in the forefront of consciousness the experience of pain... I am consciously aware that history absorbs pain.

*Yes, that's why you seem to be contemptuous of pity...*

Yes, I am very bothered about pity as a concept.

*Yes, I have seen evidence of that in Fair Slaughter.*

As early as that, have you? Do you find it that early?

*Yes, I mean when Gocher says to Leary: 'Pity is not enough, you have to find an ideology' ....*

Yes, that's right. It's interesting.

*Pity is corruptive and that argument that goes on between them in the train; it is also there in Pity in History; also Downchild speaks about it as part of what he calls a trinity, in which he connects it with violence; and in The Last Supper it is probably the central thesis of the play.*

Indeed, yes. I interpret it as a means of actually diminishing experience. Certainly, in *The Europeans*, the ability of the people to feel sorry for the injured girl somehow is also in a sense a way of enclosing her pain and asking her not to impose it on us- which she refuses throughout the

play. She defiantly says, no, you must see what's happened to me... express it publicly.

*This might recall the relationship between Eleanor Rigby and her mother in No one Was Saved, as well.*

Oh, well, that's going a long way... Yes you could find that out. But Eleanor is very subdued about it. She speaks hardly at all, does she? And her pain is quite private, isn't it?... I'm, of course, more interested in the public nature of pity and sympathy. I mean, one of the things you or we could ask ourselves is kind of my notion of history as such which is quite complicated.... which also in some way is connected with the way I am interested in the body: the human body is disintegrated or is cut and re-assembled.

*This is the central image in Victory.*

Yes, it is in *Victory* particularly, but obviously in *The Bite of the Night* with Helen. But it is also in the other plays, isn't it? It is also in *The Love of a Good Man*, where the mother desperately wants her son's corpse as being good enough as long as she believes it is the body. And that's interesting, because I was only reading in the paper the other day that the Americans are bringing home not only the dead soldiers from the Vietnam war, but also the dead soldiers in Canada from the war of 1812. They want to bring these soldiers back to America, too. It is a hundred and eighty years later. This is in some sense culturally- I don't know if this is true of the Arab world as well- but in the West the idea of the body is terribly important....

*What about Terrible Mouth?*

Well, I can't tell you about it because we haven't begun yet.

*I want to ask you about it especially because Bela in No End of Blame invokes the name of Goya as an artist who has been made into art. You know, Bela refuses to get his cartoons published because he believes that art does not hurt... I want to ask you if that idea is to be developed in that opera, or, you more or less foreground Goya's portrayal of how people frame themselves*

*under oppression, something which you yourself tend to do.*

Yes that's why I am so attracted to the man. But I am principally attracted to him not only for his exposition of pain and suffering in historical circumstances, but also the idea of the irrational, the constant irruption of the irrational into politics and life. I plan to set the opera in a hospital during a war of 1812 so that some of the same things would appear... One of the interesting things about him is this moment of his illness, which occurred in his life. Goya had been a very successful society artist. He became ill horribly at one stage of his life, and as a result of that he was changed. He produced these very extraordinary documents like *Los Caprchos*, which shows a peculiar hostility towards female sex, but also images of madness in society. This is very appealing to me.

*While still on the subject of adaptations, can I ask you about My Sister and I? When I read it I felt it is modelled on the plot of Macbeth. There is also an allusion to King Lear.*

I did not know about it being like *Macbeth*, but it may be... I am not very familiar with much of Shakespeare as a matter of fact. I never read English as a university student and I'm not caught up with many of the great texts.

*When you speak about The Castle you more or less say it is riposte, a kind of reaction to other writers' reaction to Greenham Common. Does this have any relationship with adaptations?*

Not consciously... Are you asking if my inspiration tends to be oppositional rather than...

*Yes.*

Well, that may be. That is a good point. It could be true. Yes, I suppose so. I'm very interested in offering alternative versions of existing myths. I mean, you saw *The Possibilities* at the Almeida, didn't you? I mean, that contains- you see that picture up there [wall]- it contains the other of that story of Holofernes and Judith. For example, the one that is called 'The Unforseen Consequences of a Patriotic Act'; it is based on my view of that particular picture... But when I see an image like

that and I know the story in which Judith is praised as a heroine of her people immediately my mind reached to the other possible alternative to that story. What price do you pay for doing an act? So, I mean, in a way all my work is kind of opposite, series of opposites, series of options- and *The Possibilities* is an example.

**Yes, *The Possibilities and Victory*.**

Yes, that's right. I mean, *Victory* is a very clear attempt, and it relates a lot to the political climate here and now. What do you do with an ideology that's born in a different era? How can you try to live with it? What do people do with it? She ditches it and she throws it away and attempts a complete act of compromise with the new regime, or, secretary Scrope who maintains the belief in the lost order and in the end pays a very heavy price for standing up for what he believes. As you know, he is maimed in the end.

*I want to ask you a question which always keeps recurring to me: I mean, why do you tend to place art and artists at the centre of a considerable number of your plays?*

I can't resist it. I don't know, it always happened. It's happened in the new play *Brutopia*. And in *The Europeans*... the king's painter appears throughout the play and in a very crucial scene defends his right to love an artist when the Committee of academics who were trying to invent a new art for the Christian Europe say: we don't want this particular artist; he doesn't speak for us; and he says no I love him; and they say why do you love him? Tell us, give us a reason why you should like his pictures; and the artist cannot explain why he likes him; and he breaks down and in the end he attempts to kill one of the academics in a scene which is not unlike the Bankers scene in *Victory*... So it would be easy to say that the artist represents my own self within the work. This is a tempting interpretation.

*Yes, this is the real question which I was more or less hesitant to ask, but I could not resist.*

Well, my interpretation of him is both sympathetic and very often hostile... I am always conscious of the artist being both a heroic figure, but also quite contemptible figure. I mean, Bela is heroic

in many respects... visionary, but also ambitious, selfish and vain: and in many cases has to overcome elements of vanity in himself. And in *Scenes from an Execution* Galactia is desperately keen to be a martyr-figure... But sometimes she is quite base.

*Yes, I mean the sexual relationship with the other artist, Carpeta.*

Yes, but it is also a quarrel between them over talent, how much talent they have got.

*But although he replaces her in doing the painting, she still seems attracted to him sexually.*

Yes, I suppose so. That's is probably all that's between them....

*But there are a lot of other artists, some of whom are opportunists like John Lennon in **No One Was Saved** and Downchild who is patronising in his relationship with Stoa.*

Yes, very much so... *Downchild* is very much about English cultural values... The original model for Downchild is an English politician called Tom Driberg... He wrote a book called *Ruling Passion*, and I took the idea of *Downchild* from that... It's quite an English play in that sense of feeling about the ruling-class man and the working-class youth... The sexual and political mixed together there. I'm trying to suggest in that play that the kind of radicalism certain English ruling-class figures have, their radicalism is sexually induced. And in this particular play his pity for the working class is based on an eroticism, and Stoa knows that. This is why he abandons Downchild- he knows he's been exploited, the guy that is being pitied.

*To put the same question differently, it looks to me that these artists, I mean, if I were to speak about the development of these artists, I am tempted to suggest that there exists some kind of correlation between your evolution and development both politically and as a dramatist and the way the artist-figure is presented in your plays. I mean, coming back to Gocher, for example, when he speaks, you know, about ideology, that this is something which is needed and not just pity; then your dissatisfaction with ideology is more or less expressed by Bela in **No End of Blame** where, to use your phrase, the artist is placed in a permanent antithesis; Galactia in*

*Scenes from an Execution also finds herself in the same position; Downchild's revelation of the failure of his technique- putting together two squalors side by side- seems also to echo your complaint about satire; and more recently, in The Last Supper, Lvov looks to me to be your example of the artist as a dreamer.*

Yes, yes, he has a clear heir, a clear fore, a predecessor in Toplis in *Crime in Hot Countries*... The visionary man who- although Toplis is an actor, a fraud- the idea that you can be set free by a visionary person, that you can surrender yourself in his hands, that's very artistic: it is a form of art. I mean Toplis is also an artist, so is Lvov. Yes, I think you are right to see that my drifting away from ideology as a solution to problems is clarified in the figures of those, is articulated by those people. I think that's true, yes. I've become very intolerant of ideological positions which, I suppose, is why I was attracted to dealing with Thomas More: because *Utopia* is almost the first ideological tract. And in that play I have someone who appears in the play who's come from Utopia. He turns up in the garden and says I've come from Utopia and I tell you what it is really like; and More says there is no such place; and he says yes there is such a place and it happened and it will go on happening. And of course the Utopia he describes is a hell of conformity and of oppression and a nightmare state rather like the Cultural Revolution in China. There is no peace, there is constant criticism, constant upheavals. So I think, yes, I now see ideology as the enemy of freedom, and not as I once believed of.

*Yes, I mean especially in Fair Slaughter.*

Yes, I was a very Stalinist writer at the time I think. Though even when I felt myself almost to be a Stalinist I was, if one looks at the text, I never actually achieved a proper ideological position myself... And it is interesting. I mean, *Claw* was always seen as a left play *par excellence*, about class struggle and so on, but the text, if you look at it now, it is not an ideological piece at all. So I was failing even as I thought I was producing education. I was not. I was suggesting subversion instead.

*So how would you define the role of the artist in the current climate?*

I would say it is interesting I don't have so many friends on the Left... not because I am a right-wing artist, but because in some ways I don't satisfy their criteria for what a left-wing artist does...

*And the feminists as well.*

No, they don't like me, either- the clever ones do. I certainly don't believe in supporting political positions in art: I don't think art can do that. I've always quoted Brecht's *Arturo Ui* as a play which does not do what it thinks it's going to do. I'm much more interested in a play which subverts the audience's expectations, but in doing so unlock some of their own beliefs to create, if you like, a madness in the audience of confusion in order to force it to reconstruct. Now, I'm not saying reconstruction must consist of this or that principle; but in a time of increasing pressure as we live under the best service art can do is to unlock, if it can the building bricks in the public's mind which enable this system to occur. So I still think of the artist as subversive, but I don't believe of him as offering programmes...

*What about laughter? You seem to be advocating banning it.*

Oh, I have great hatred of laughter. It's funny because I write comedy quite well.

*That's what I want to ask about, I mean, the laughter which one gets from the figures of the Fire Inspectorate in **The Hang of the Gaol** is different from what one gets from the three soldiers in **The Last Supper**.*

There's comedy there, yes, I agree. Well, that's a bit to do with history. I mean, anyone who started writing when I did, in the early seventies, in England anyway, automatically wrote satire, which I know is not the same thing as comedy; but that was what we were trained and felt we could do easily; and the political situation made satire very relevant then... Now I find comedy as opposed to satire in particular, is now almost a means of social cohesion- that we are offered so

much comedy that every time you put on television you get comedy. And I am curious about what the sociological reasons for that in a given time. Normally, it is during wars, I mean, when we talk about war there is a lot of comedy in the last war, lots of comedy programmes, because the population needed it, seemed to need it. And I don't think comedy is of any use at all in unpicking ideas. It tends to reinforce ideas even when it pretends to unpick them. I mean, Dario Fo's comedies don't seem to me to really invite the audience to challenge anything and merely ridicules the powers in society. They don't actually oblige the audience to take the responsibility itself for changing themselves. Therefore, I am attempting to develop a form of tragedy that obliges an audience to deal with the lower levels of its beliefs and consciousness.

*And that is connected with your rejection of naturalism?*

Yes, I've often said that naturalism is a defunct form. But you are right to point out that it is ironic that I still write comic effects. But the way a laugh- you'll have noticed in the last shows you saw- the way the audience laughs in my work is itself quite ambiguous... I mean, the laugh should be an uncomfortable laugh. Sometimes you hear somebody laugh and then stop himself because nobody else's laughed. And I think this is very uncomfortable, a very good effect. So you don't know whether you should laugh or you should not. That's quite complex.

*If we could now turn to characters. There is a great deal of similarity, it appears to me, between characters in your plays: for example, the working-class characters in your early plays like **Cheek, No One Was Saved and Alpha Alpha**; the artist-figures in **Fair Slaughter, No End of Blame and Scenes from an Execution**; and between the engineer in **The Castle** and the academic in **The Bite of the Night**... So can we in this sense say that the plays are themselves meant to be companion pieces?*

You could not say they were meant to be, but I think in a sense they are... Yes, I mean, you could track that probably, you could trace that. There're certain themes that dominate characters in different ways. In some of the women it is quite obvious: I mean, there is a whole breed of

women. In the men, I think, a desire for knowledge in certain men is a crucial link between some of them or in some way the fear of knowledge, the fascination of it. I mean, Krak is a man of immense culture, but also afraid of certain types of knowledge. In *Savage* in *The Bite of the Night* the man is obsessed with knowledge. In both cases the root to knowledge lies usually through sexuality or through violence, I think also. And there are probably others like those two in the work somewhere. Though knowledge as a subject, I have recently become interested in. There's no reference to knowledge as such in the earlier plays, but in *The Last Supper* Lvov talks about knowledge: he asks what is it, doesn't he? But the working-class characters... yes, they form a block. There is only a limited amount of difference you could achieve as a writer... I think what I've begun to do is to make sure that the working-class characters have the same language as the ruling-class characters.

*Yes, that's actually my next question. I mean, apart from few instances where there seems to be a kind of signification of class differences through dialect or colloquialism, you don't adopt a patronising attitude in your use of language.*

No, that's right... I think Shakespeare doesn't do it either. What I think I don't care for is that school of English writing which says the working class has to be presented as inarticulate. I think the greatest sinner in this respect is Edward Bond. I mean, in the play *Saved* the working class say ah, eh... It is all staccato ignorance... Because they don't articulate, therefore, you think they don't think: because in theatre how else can you show thought except by speech? It is the only way you can do it. So because I believe the working class thinks as complexly as any other class, I therefore give it powers of articulation that it does not actually possess. I mean, I know they don't articulate but they think. So I give everybody in my plays full articulation. Anybody who thinks an idea speaks an idea. It's the nature of the writing.

*Yes, I mean, this is more or less one way of making a political comment through the use of language.*

Yes, it could be, may be, yes.

*What about the relationship between language and violence in your work? It appears there is a relationship between language and violence: I mean, language is used by the state as a means of controlling the population. For example, in **The Hang of the Gaol** a key phrase is 'the power of vocabulary'; Erica in **Birth on a Hard Shoulder** says: 'Language is the sledgehammer of social conformity'; and the Home Secretary in **That Good between Us** warns her security agent not to 'do violence to language or you will end up doing violence to people'. So is it also implied that the violence done or committed by the individuals against the state is in a sense due to their inability to articulate themselves or to find the proper language to express themselves politically?*

I don't know a straight answer to that...

*You know, because I remember this passage by Old Biledew in **Claw** when he asks his son to find the words... But he also spoke about that fellow who wanted to introduce him to **Das Kapital** and how he couldn't grasp it... And I thought I would connect it with this visual symbol, I mean, when he he attacks the boy using Marx's picture*

This is an interesting question... I find it hard to answer that question about the language... Yes, it comes up all the time, doesn't it? People seem to suggest if you can express the thing properly you get power. It's the power that's given to you by the ability to express; and that's why Old Biledew says to his son 'find the words', yes. Because the poor and the oppressed are not only oppressed in their material conditions, but they are also oppressed because they cannot articulate their position: because if they can articulate it, then they are free. I've always related that to the way in which the press, the papers in this country are so clearly class-divided. The popular papers, the tabloid press is full of single syllables. I picked that up in *The Bite of the Night* when one of the regimes, called Laughing Troy... tries to force people to speak in words and to laugh all the time. So, yes, that's a manifestation of feeling. Yes, I mean to me expression is freedom obviously... But it also, of course, has the opposite effect because in some ways it allows

spurious and deceitful characters to obtain, to achieve power. Downchild has immense power over Stoa, because he says to Stoa at one point: 'you wander around in my imagination like a child in a fairground'... And in *Crimes in Hot Countries* when Toplis is playing the conjurer does it in a magnificent flow of language which captivates. So it is both suspect and liberating... So yes I see it as a weapon, of course, but a weapon that can be used by the unscrupulous as well as by liberators... But in sex, too, interestingly, to come back to that, sex is always very highly spoken in my work. People don't simply perform actions of love in my work, and there is very little physical embrace. I think it doesn't work in theatre any way as an act, but it is always very well articulated and spoken, the sensuality is spoken.

*That is why, I suppose, some people reacted with horror at that scene in Women Beware Women.*

Yes, and in *The Castle* they find it difficult, too, when the women talk about their cunt, for instance... That creates terrific problem for the people, because the word 'cunt' in English is used as a swear word all the time: 'fuck off, you cunt'. Nobody minds that. But, if a middle-class audience hears a woman talking about her cunt as a place, as a feature of her body with an erotic charge, which it obviously has, then it does produce terrible mayhem in the audience. But isn't it also interesting that question of speaking and sex in *The Bite of the Night* when Helen's first husband has his tongue ripped up by Shade, she says you've castrated him, and he says I only cut his tongue out. She says that's the place where his power as a lover came from, and his ability to speak sex as much as to do it. So that is a good example of how I see it.

*What about the relationship between words and images? You know, Bela rejects poetry and rhyme; Stoa finds his freedom through images; and even Galactia refuses to argue...? Does this signify that, for you, the visual is more powerful than the verbal- perhaps that's why most of your artists are visual artists- or, is this part of what might be called a violent dialectic between the visual and the verbal and/or speech and silence?*

I have to answer that obliquely. I don't think I have a notion of the superiority of the visual image over the verbal image, because it is Bela himself who says that pictures can lie just as well as anything else can lie. There is no objective truth in that picture. Then he talks about the picture in the gallery, doesn't he? Can deceive for generation... So I don't think I kind of imply that there's a greater truth in the visual image. What Galactia is afraid of when she is taken before the Committee of Inquisition is that she simply can not assemble the same language powers that her prosecutors can. So she refuses to engage in argument. And that's a position that's taken up by the women in one playlet of *The Possibilities*, called 'The Philosophical Lieutenant'. They say to him if we argue with you, you will only win, because you have more words

*Yes, that's what I mean: there seems to be a relationship between argument and the verbal language, like the verbal is in a sense related to logic, to argument, while the visual may be related to sensuality and freedom... I mean, ripping Scrope's tongue is an example of imposed silence...*

I suppose there are certain moments where, because everyone is so articulate in a play by me, the moment of silence is very powerful. That's quite true, yes... Milton doesn't speak for a long time then he speaks, doesn't he?...

*Poets in general, I find it interesting to note, are more or less failures. I mean, Milton hides; the poet in *The Power of the Dog* shoots himself... and even the nurse in *The Last Supper* says 'paint your feeling'.*

I don't have a philosophical response to that question. I don't know why it is like that. Well, no I don't feel I enhance the the visual over the verbal.

*I mean, I want to relate that to your poetic use of verbal language, the use of images, metaphors and so on...*

That's true, yes... Obviously I am a poet and I write poetry... I am a painter and I draw. So the visual is always important to me. The visual moment on stage, the creation of the image on stage

is very important.

*Yes, I mean the Bank-of-England scene in Victory; The séance in The Love of a Good Man and Birth on a Hard Shoulder; and the parody of the Da Vinci Picture in The Last Supper.*

Yes, that's quite coarse, isn't it? Yes, I do that. That's a quotation, but I normally construct visual images quite consciously on stage. I mean, you talked about *Victory* and *Scrope*... He is called a sad present, isn't he? ...There's a powerful picture of the man with no tongue.. Yes, I'm aware of constructing those pictures. That's why I don't set my plays indoors very often: I don't find the domestic presents a visual picture... It's not because I am a frustrated film director at all. I don't ache to write films. I just find the exterior inside the theatre much more exciting and stimulating a vehicle for ideas than the interior, because the English theatre has been for so long about the interior, about the domestic life: and even John Osborne, who broke a tradition of English middle-class theatre, still put his plays inside rooms. It's only in the 1970s that we began to take theatre into the country or into outside- barring Shakespeare, of course.

*When I look at Women Beware Women I see less imagery than, say, The Castle- apart from the telescope and the orange, whose significance I am not quite sure of..*

That was Bill Gaskell's direction; that was never in my text... No, the Duke was merely looking out of a window; and it was Bill's idea to have a telescope... That's me. The orange was quite good. No, on the whole, I agree, that doesn't create quite a number of visual pictures that some of the plays do. I don't know why that happened. I mean, the thing about *The Castle*, as a play, is that it's never been produced in a form in which the castle ever played the role it should have done in a production... I mean, it's never been constructed, and the castle should be constructed around the actors. That's never happened. In fact, most of my plays- because they have always been produced in small places- have never given the visual impact they should have... I've only seen that abroad. In Finland, for example, I saw *The Love of a Good man*; and the construction of a huge battlefield was magnificent- very exciting for me to see that. I've always written on a big

scale and never seen the work on a big scale.

*And there is also visual comedy: for example, the boys in Cheek imitating car driving; Gocher in Fair Slaughter dancing around the bottled hand; the soldier in The Love of a Good Man with his trousers down; and the officers in The Hang of the Gaol shitting. Are these pictures meant to interrupt the arguments and make certain comments on the text or the theme?*

I think one has to see that as an inherent habit of demolishing the moment always... I've never allowed a moment to be fulfilling itself without also being demolished at the same moment... A good example is in *Victory* where Bradshaw and the king are left alone in the room and she cradles his head and seconds later she is beaten up by somebody... I never sort of permit ... for that moment of relaxation that comes when a predictably satisfying image created. I always have to demolish it.

*But there is that kind of feeling at the end of The Power of the Dog when Stalin and Ilona embrace.*

They do, yes. But you know that's a lethal embrace, don't you? I think in some ways that's been one of the reasons why I've never been what might be described as successful writer in the particular field, because I won't allow that reconciliatory moment that the audience craves for.

*In talking to Finlay Donesky, you refer to your interest in language as something new- it's not, of course- but I mean you refer to poetic language in particular as something novel. Would it be true to suggest that this is concomitant with, maybe a natural outcome of, your interest in sexuality, the latter being regenerative and spiritual necessitates a poetic treatment?*

Yes, that's quite romantic. I suppose I am quite romantic in some ways... It's not exactly that. Because sexuality, for example, has become so debased in this culture, anybody who has become interested in talking about sexual relation between men and women has an immense burden placed upon him to make the truth of the moment apparent. There's no way of doing it visually. But there are ways of doing that in language, which I tried to find. And I've always found the

audience and the actors very gratified by the ability to express feeling in unconventional way. So the new convention for love, the contemporary convention for it is quite unverbally or quite brutalized. If you endow the feeling with complex expression, then you can give rebirth to the idea so that...

*That's why I want to connect it with sexuality; because sexuality, as presented in your plays, stands for rebirth.*

Yes, that's quite right. So I had to find a new voice for that.

*There is also the use of imagistic language to alienate common-place assumptions.*

Yes, I'm always at war with clichés, and when I find myself wandering into a scene that for a moment sounds typical of its time or typical of its culture, I resist it. I have to force myself to create a harder mode of expression for it: and that means taking considerable risks in what I am saying in a relationship between a man and a woman on the stage. For example, I rarely talk about sadism, what commonly passes for sadism as an element in a sexual encounter, and this is why, of course, I don't have so many friends among the feminists... But the actresses playing the parts, it is truth to them. But even that has to be expressed carefully, selectively and quite often poetically. I mean, obviously, my sense of sexual relation and desire as a focus for liberation means that I respect the moment very greatly and have to preserve it with a kind of a very consciously contrived language. That's true.

*When you alienate common-place assumptions, I mean, when prisoners in *The Hang of the Gaol* are described as 'bucket-shitters', do you mean to convey to the audience the idea that they have to look at reality with fresh eyes...*

Yes, you're putting an obligation to see... I mean that phrase is a word, an unexpected word coming from the mouth of a person who would not speak that way, which creates a freesome of unease in the audience. It's the same in *The Love of a Good Man*, isn't it? When the Prince of Wales, who is a man of utter repression, says to the woman he desires: 'I want to fuck your

cunt'. This is a crude monosyllabic statement which always made the audience here tremble with alarm. Because it was a certain phrase which if it were said by a working-class character would mean nothing, but because it was said by a ruling-class character, it was crucial. And that's why language in this society is stratified in class, obviously.

*And that's why, for example, you tend to juxtapose dialect, the vulgar or colloquial with the formal.*

Yes, that's right. I mean, even in the midst of a very highly written and somewhat poetic speech I've very often dropped a word of common slang- which is where the originality of a language comes from, I think. It is a mixture of the coarse and the refined.

*So when, for example, it is said or you say that language in your plays is poetic, what do you actually mean by that?*

I mean it is a language of invention... it is a contrived language: it's not the language of common speech. That's principally what I mean by it; but also that it contains an emotional charge, an attempt to engage the audience's emotion quite consciously: and I think that is what poetry does....

*This is why I attempted to write that passage in **The Castle** when Skinner describes how the women 'utopia' was created and came to operate- 'first there was the bailiff, and we broke the bailiff' - to write in form of verse.*

Yes, that's right. I mean in some ways my invention in language has gone much further. You might have noticed in *The Last Supper* that some people don't finish sentences off. The character called Ivory, the old aristocrat, says 'pity the man who has no wall, pity his freedom of' and 'of' is the last part in the sentence. And I've done that more often, I created a sort of... a private language....

*And the use of repetition and choral exchange between characters especially between Stucley and*

*his servant in The Castle and among the armoured figures, the soldiers in the same play.*

Oh, yes, the soldiers are the most kind of choral I've ever been in a piece actually. Yes, it is all, I suppose, engendered by a desire to escape from the rules of theatre as we happen to experience them. Choral speaking and truncated lines and so on are attempts to inform the audience that it's a different environment, I suppose.

*There is also this scene, which looked to me quite funny, in The Hang of the Gaol where the fire inspectors seem to be playing games with language: one of them uses alliterative words.*

Yes, they are developing a game underneath... Sometimes I also find myself putting rhyme in a single speech.

*Yes, this is what I also want to say, I mean, Ilona in The Power of the Dog gives poetic passages: for example, when she speaks about pain in history, she uses 'history', 'mystery', 'pain' 'strain': the passage looks exactly like a poem.*

Yes, I was moving towards those things in that play and earlier ones, too. I've got more and more towards that artificiality and self-conscious demonstration of language by characters. As I've written more, I've done that more and more. You see in some ways the theatre of the last twenty-five years has told the audience that when it comes to the theatre it is only seeing life. In other words, it is showing inside what also could be found outside. In my theatre I want to do this kind of no: this is not dealing with the material of exterior life at all; and one of the ways you indicate that change of circumstances is through the use of language, the method to which people speak. In *Victory* it is done very brutally by the use of the word 'cunt' in the first scene... One critic calls it 'a nine-cunt flourish', I think. But that's my way of informing the audience that it was not in the real world at all. I know I use other methods....

*And it relates to history, again, there is this separation between reality and fiction.*

That's right. But because this is a society which is obsessed with history, with the form, it is quite

important if you are working in historical thing. I mean, every time you switch on the BBC it is producing a serial about a political period... I mean, there are political reasons for that, I'm sure, but if I'm going to write about history and I want the audience to experience it as a speculation about the past, then you have to break the assumption that's coming with them. Sometimes I do that by using modern words which are completely unsuitable or references to things which are not historic. And I suppose that kind of nine cunt is another way of telling the audience that it's not experiencing traditional history. And the three soldiers in *The Last Supper* are such kind of unfamiliar and unvalidated figures, by speaking in unison, one is informed that they are somehow mythical and they are soldiers of the whole historical period and not just one time.

*Can I ask you about the parabolic technique which you use in The Possibilities and The Last Supper? Is it what you mean by 'vertical' or 'psychological epic'... when you said you wanted to concentrate on character rather than on linear presentation of history as in Victory?*

I don't think I could have written or can write again any epic play of the *Victory* kind, which crosses a landscape at a time in a natural order of time or narrative sequence. So one of the ways in which I can construct a world other than by taking the audience through it step by step with the character, with the leading character in a way that Bradshaw explores the world of 17th-century England by a literal journey, is to describe a world through the form of arbitrary pictures. These scenes which are dropped into the play in the way they are in *The Last Supper*, which are not parables in the obvious sense- because a parable is a story which gives you a metaphor, it gives a message. There's no particular message in any of *The Last Supper* parables at all. They are not like Christian or like Christ's stories. What they're- well they are accumulated together- is a picture of a world in which things are contradictory: that one person may at one moment opportunistically rape a nun and at another moment talk about bringing tears to people's eyes by a beautiful rendering of a piece by Bartok. I mean, all these pictures contain contradictions. I mean, like the three soldiers who are about to pull the women out of the snow in order to rape them;

when they hear the bells ringing they are called automatically to their training. Their training, their habit overcomes even their desire and so on. Each of these parables- when you add them up, construct a world of contradiction.

*Yes, and, in fact, when I saw and read the play I said, apart from what it says about the need for spiritual guidance or something of this kind, the play looked to me to be a polemic on theatre. I mean, everything you say about the Elitist Theatre is probably stated in that play....*

Yes, that's very good.

*About complexity, the need to see the other side of the thing...*

And also the responsibility of the audience to make up its own mind about the media...

*And that's why the parables are complex. I mean, when Dora says 'Complexity is dead'; may be, I thought, this is an address to the audience and possibly the theatre management...*

Yes, I agree. I mean, perhaps, it contains many of those things. May be it is an aesthetic statement... It probably is. That's interesting. I didn't think of it like that.

*I read that piece you wrote in Plays and Players about the Elitist theatre- it has a lot of that.....*

Yes, when I use the word 'elitist' ... I am attempting to save the word from destruction. Words here get destroyed very easily. One word I was asked about in a meeting a little while ago is the word 'entertainment', and I was asked why I did not like the entertainment. And I said that was a word that I thought was unsaveable that could never be... but the word could not be brought back to use for me; whereas the word 'elitist' does not have, for me, any connotations of class. It's just a question of those who are willing to make and take the chances and risks of exposing themselves to certain kinds of work. That's a form of elitism which, I think, is as inevitable as the fact that we are different individually from each other. So I would willingly work for that word and recuperate it...

*Although it could be construed as a privileged word.*

Yes, it could be, yes; and my enemies, of course, would argue that my theatre is about privilege.

*And may be the definition which you give of art, as mysterious, also can be interpreted in the same way.*

Yes, yes, absolutely.

*When I read this statement by chance I also read Oscar Wilde's essay, **The Soul of Man under Socialism...** and I found a lot of what you say about art and individuality related to it.*

I think that's true, yes. I mean, what interests me is Wilde's contempt for the idea of the public. And indeed, in *The Last Supper* the public is being held as the enemy, you know, it is that force that comes in and threatens Lvov all the time... It's an artificial creation, it's an invention which is used often to strangle artists, to attempt to impose a non-existent universal will on individuals. And there's no such thing as the public. You cannot actually identify it: it is a creation. And I think Wilde spent a lot of time trying to defend the idea of the individual against the idea of the public.

*Although one of your characters, I think, in **Heaven** refers to Wilde as a snob....*

Yes, that's right. But I don't think Wilde is a snob; I mean, for me, he is a heroic figure. But the world that Wilde struggled with is now, today, is being taken by both Left and Right in form of the people. So we have to struggle with the idea of the people now. It used to be a left-wing property going back to the French Revolution, I think. Now, it's one of the Thatcherite slogans.

*Yes, popular capitalism.*

## Appendix 2

## Letters

21 October 1988

Dear Mr Barker,

In our discussion you said you did not think that 'physical embrace' would work in theatre. Can you explain why? And what about that embrace or failure of it between Gay and Savage in *The Bite of the Night*?

When you say that 'artificiality of language' or 'self-conscious demonstration of language by characters' in your plays is intended to inform the audience of the difference between what they see inside the theatre and in the world outside, don't you also mean to say that language in your plays is used as an alienating device? If so, what other methods do you use to achieve the same effect?

In your early interviews you appear to dismiss as untrue some of the charges levelled at your work like incoherence of dramatic structure and digression. Now, especially in your recent work, you seem to make a virtue of the very things. How do you explain this change?

How would you relate your use of eponymous names to your style of characterization in general?

Part of the aim in your recent work is, it seems, to use the plays themselves as aesthetic statements. For instance, Katrin's experience, the spectacle of her 'charismatic defeat', is probably what makes *The Europeans* a good example of what you call 'modern form of tragedy'. Moreover, the reason she gives in Scene Two, Act One for her refusal to go home echoes your criticism of the 'the visual aspect' of naturalism in theatre. Hrkaly's concept of new art put

forward in Scene Eight, Act One also tallies with your call for a new 'theatre of catastrophe'. In this respect, isn't it also significant that Hrkaly is the one who defends the painter against the academics or critics?

Is there any metaphorical significance to the painter's repetition of the sentence 'it's cold' in *The Europeans*?

If artists like Bela and Galactia (*No End of Blame* and *Scenes from an Execution*) are images of yourself in the plays, would it also be true to suggest that some of your 'worries' or 'embarrassments' about yourself as an artist are somehow worked out in the figures of Grigor and Carpeta in the same plays: for example, through them you acknowledge repeating yourself in your works, as some critics claim?

I find a great deal of similarities between *The Power of the Dog* and *The Europeans* in terms of theme and relationships among characters. Resemblance is particularly strong between the officers Sorge and Starhemberg whether in the role each of them plays in the creation or destruction of the 'new form of art' or in the relationship each one forges with the sisters in each play.

Aren't the prologues to *The Bite of the Night* also meant to be reactions to and criticisms of works by certain fellow-authors?

Yours faithfully,

Mamdouh Imran

27th October, 1988

Dear Mamdouh,

Sexual embrace in the theatre, if it is not in some sense impossible, painful or even dishonest, is I think nearly unwatchable. The fact of pure feeling, which it is supposed to represent, turns the audience very self-consciously in a voyeuristic relation to the actors in a way that does not occur in for example an acted moment of violence. In *The Bite* the offer Gay makes to Savage is misjudged, her nakedness is unerotic, and the entire attempt is flawed, pitiful and painful. When Savage encloses her in his arms it is a moment of pity, not desire. If a character seduces another character with for example, the audience's knowledge that it is for an end other than desire itself, the act is watchable. If it is simply passion, reciprocated, any dwelling on the act is redundant.

No, I don't intend the form of language employed in my work to be an alienating device. It does not distance the audience from the stage. Rather its unfamiliarity, its poetry, asserts the experience of theatre to be different from the experience of life, it affirms that the play is not an attempt to reproduce reality, but its sensuality and startling qualities are intended to refresh the imagination of the audience and to engage it, not alienate it. You have to bear in mind always the existing conventions of drama, which are relentlessly naturalistic. By ceasing to be naturalistic you state the theatre requires different commitments.

I don't have my early interviews. Quite possibly I assert the coherence of my plays. I do remember defending their structures. They are structured with considerable calculation, they are certainly not anarchic. My recent work is no less carefully structured. They are less obviously narrative, and digressions within the work are often only oblique to the themes, but this is a calculation, not an accidental product of negligent writing. I would certainly state that the audience's permanent grasp of the meaning of the material it witnesses is not necessary, and is even a burden to it. The density of the texts should permit the audience to relax in the presence of unknown or even unknowable moments, to take in sensuality what it cannot always absorb instantly. This is an aesthetic of liberation. My plays have always defied expectations, and this is

now more positively built into the structures.

Do you mean by eponymous names, names which describe character? Savage, for example? I don't intend these to be identifications. The names arise at a very early stage of the writing for a series of reasons. It is much to do with non-naturalism, the desire on my part to remove my characters from the world of the outside, to announce their theatrical nature, as much as to myself as anyone else.

yes, I think *The Europeans* does best exemplify the theatre of catastrophe for me, and the play contains elements of aesthetic arguments which are current. This alone probably suffices to alienate the RSC, who have refused the play a production. The statements made by the painter and Hrkaly are refutations of populist postures widely aired at this time (i. e. the present). To an extent they are also a defence of the individualist impulse in pictorial (and literary) culture, a retort to the insidious accusations of 'pessimism' which are levelled at my own theatre. The RSC is committed to populist success and these values have invaded its styles of production (hectic comedy, music, stage effects, uncomplex 'concepts' laid on texts) so it isn't surprising they don't go along with the aesthetic debate in *The Europeans*.

The 'It's cold' line is merely descriptive, as far as I am aware.

The artist in both manifestations, (Bela, Grigor) seem to me now to be reflections of quarrels in my own development as a writer. The heroism of Bela (and his arrogance) in rejecting the introspective quality of his nature (he ceases to write poetry) and striving to find 'correct' attitudes certainly reflect my own anti-individualist conscience at the time I wrote it. It is perhaps obvious to say I find more to admire in Grigor now, not for his insistence on the idea of beauty, or his flight from reality, but his struggle to assert the virtue of the human form as inspiration. Do critics say I repeat myself? I don't read them much. Certainly there is nothing wrong with repeating yourself. Every artist repeats himself, just as he alters at the same time. In many ways I have moved further from certain political positions than I would have thought possible, or rather,

I have identified the political in different places.

Yes, That's an interesting point- about Sorge and Starhemberg, the 2 sisters, the aesthetic theory. But in essence they seem to me poles apart. Starhemberg is an existentialist, a character who sheds himself and serves his imagination with wild irresponsibility. Sorge, albeit corrupted by authority, retails the party line until it unhinges him. Yes.

Yours,

Howard

16 December 1988

Dear Mr Barker,

How would you relate your recent interest in myth and tendency to write ripostes to and adaptations of works by other authors to your study of the artist figure? In doing so, aren't you confirming your role as a subversive artist, and also in a way portraying, so to speak, 'the invisible artist', the writer of the original work against which you are reacting, and the myth-maker whose version you are opposing (although in *The Last Supper* and *The Bite of the Night*, the figure of the original artist or myth-maker is present)?

Can you explain the nature of the relationship you set in your work between history and myth? When talking about Stalin's speech in *The Power of the Dog* (where he speaks about the roads of Europe being clogged), you contend that your plays are historical because they address the mythical, 'hidden knowledge'. This may give the impression that your approach to history is ultimately not much different from that of those who approach it through research. More recently, notably in *The Bite of the Night*, you deal with history through a re-appraisal of a renowned

literary myth.

Can you elaborate a bit on your idea regarding the importance of the dead or disintegrating body in your oppositional presentation of history? Is it one of the means through which you seek to emphasise the chaotic nature of history and to foreground the idea of pain and suffering that knowledge of history leads to? As the experience of Mrs Toynbee in *The Love of a Good Man*, Bradshaw in *Victory*, Helen in *The Bite of the Night* and Katrin in *The Europeans* suggests sexuality seems crucial to understanding the relationship between history and the body. I also notice that history is frequently referred to in your work as an animal that is mad and bites.

When you say that your plays are 'imagined history', you obviously emphasise your responsibility to the demands of your imagination. But given what you think of the preceding questions, do you also imply that, as an artist, your prime concern is with 'psychological truth', Truth, with capital T?

If Savage's cruel acts in *The Bite of the Night*, his murder of his father and selling of his son, are the barriers he has to cross in his search for knowledge, isn't the same kind of implied rule also applicable to the act committed by priest Orphuls in *The Europeans*? His murder of his mother is the barrier he crosses in order to formulate and preach his new concept of morality. Moreover, aren't the priest's act and his new morality meant to reinforce or complement Starhemberg's act (handing over Concilia to her fathers)? Emperor Leopold himself detects a kind of alliance between Orphuls and Starhemberg. But I also suspect that even the emperor and his wife contribute, perhaps rather ironically, to the emergence of the moral and aesthetic arguments the play is suggesting. The emperor seems to me to act rather like Jardine in *The Hang of the Gaol*.

Language in your later and recent work is never class-structured. But how do you explain the use of accents in your earlier plays? The Scottish accent is especially used by McPhee and Jardine in *That Good between Us* and *The Hang of the Gaol* respectively. Is this accent used because the characters of both McPhee and Jardine were conceived with Ian McDiarmid in mind? Or, do you

mean to signal the origin of those characters, or perhaps, more likely, his betrayal of his origin? Can you also explain the significance of the contrast between the language used by Downchild and the labourers at the beginning of *Downchild*? I notice that Downchild himself speaks about his origin in order to induce them to reveal the secrets they know. Moreover, what about the use of the London accent in, say, *No One Was Saved*? Is it only because the play is partly a response to Bond's *Saved*? Furthermore, can you also say something about the use of the device of 'elliptical construction' mainly by higher-class characters? This device is also used by lower-class characters. Is the use of this construction by the latter characters an example of your general tendency to remove distinctions between classes in term of the use of language, or in allowing the lower-class characters to use it, you mean to satirise those who speak it? On page 24 in *The Hang of the Gaol* Turk uses this construction, and the stage direction says 'dialect'. Is Turk himself satirising the dialect, especially because elsewhere in the play, Turk proves to be a 'language-virtuoso', or is his use of it is evidence of an evasive tactic on his part?

At the beginning of *Fair Slaughter*, Staveley expresses some interest in art, and appears holding some 'icons'. The play ends with him looking 'guilty' and repeating 'got-the Pi-casso'. What change in Staveley's character is this switch from the icons to a Picasso picture meant to signify? And how does this square with handing the 'bottled hand' over to Leary?

Yours,

Mamdouh Imran

28th December, 1988

Dear Mamdouh,

My interest in the mythical figure I think connects with my relation to history, whose 'authenticity' I have always denied. Thus, the presentation of 'heroes' of culture provides alternative perspective and are not juvenile acts of iconoclasm- Homer's weaknesses, (sexually and professionally- he refuses to tell 'unpopular' stories) and Christ's roots in outrageous conduct are re-presentations of history and not attempts to 'tell the story of ...x or y...' In my work nothing is sacred, my versions do not pile layer upon layer of 'history' on the careers of heroes, some of whom are seen in uncommon states- for example, Milton in hiding, Homer in senility, or in other cases, great figures in historical situations but rendered pathetically human (Churchill drunk at Yalta). No, my approach to history is vastly different from the historical researcher. When I speak of hidden knowledge it is not the uncovering of the previously obscure that concerns me, i.e. yet another 'fact' dragged from the darkness, but the arbitrary nature of experience and the obscurity of pain, above all, the accidental and disorganized way in which society moves from state to state, crushing the human spirit on its way. The idea of historical structures, created by historians and their allies, political theorists and leaders, are employed to bludgeon populations into submission. Whether this is the 'materialist' or the 'holy' (and these are mixed in a vile cocktail) the victim is always the same. It is these victims, silenced by their obscurity, whose struggle for breath interests me in many plays.

The body is the ground of fiction, in both the sexual and historical world of the plays. Its potency as the site of misery and humiliation (Bradshaw's exposed genitalia, for example) and its mute history (Who was Ilona's sister? What occurred over or on her body?) or its damaged state (Katrin's maiming) provides the impetus for action, whether it is to reassemble a corpse, recover a corpse, or expose wounds to the public. It is the actual place of history, the point at which 'History' (Official, state, academic, pomp) meets the human. (Katrin is raped, both the rapists and her flesh are brought into proximity by a statesman's decision; Billy Toynbee has disintegrated in the mud of battle, and it is Col. Hard who laid down the conditions for the battle with his

ideology; Iona's body squirms between political decision-makers, Nazi or Communist).

I'm not sure what 'psychological truth' is. I am only working in a relation with imaginative truth, and owe no responsibility to other kinds. If I claim a superior virtue for imaginative truth, it is because it needs no validation beyond the tolerance of theatre. It has no jury but the audience, it cannot be measured by politics, necessity (or psychology, for that matter,) the theatre itself permits and licenses it. In other words, it is speculative, and the artist's job is to speculate, and not to educate or elucidate, or lead, or instruct. The act of imagination is sufficient justification in periods of intense ideological and cultural industry.

Yes. I think Orphuls and Starhemberg are teacher and pupil in their journey. Orphuls struggles with the guilt he feels in witnessing Starhemberg's 'cruelties', but his own acts liberate him and give him power through knowledge. There is a hint of this definition of the religious man in *The Castle*, when Stucley imagines what the real Christ might have been, and says 'what use is He who has not been all the places we have been' i.e. no one who has not sinned can possibly help the sinner. I think I am moving around the idea of saintliness, but I can't say more yet.

My claim that language is not class-differentiated is not quite valid, as you detect. Perhaps what I ought to say is that intelligence is not class-differentiated. It's certainly true I resort to convention for class, for example, the dropping of the 'h' for proletarians is not more than a convention. The Scots are outsiders, and that I think is their theatrical attraction. The labourers in *Downchild* are given a comic rural voice. What occurs is that, being an anti-naturalist writer, I am quite uninterested in 'authenticity' of tone, or in contemporary inflections. So the working class is given a swiftly identifiable tone through sentence construction and a sort of London cockney (no 'h') which establishes the character for the audience. It is a signal, no more. Yes, the boys in *No One Was Saved* speak the dead English of Bond's boys. I was, jejunely, but perhaps more acutely than I knew, attacking Bond's contempt for human beings which I believe is revealed in his monosyllabic speech (in this play). What you call elliptical speech is I believe (I don't know this)

characteristic of the educated in the plays, but broken syntax is not. Sentences without verbs. Single words. Commands of one word. Stopped sentences. All these are not class-based but now, growingly, style. See Skinner, as a first example she is a peasant.

Turk's language skills are attempts to disguise himself and to play illiteracy against authority.

Staveley's journey from connoisseur art-thief, rescuing major art works from revolution, to seedy lunatic gloating over a worthless reproduction, suggests the decay of the notion of 'property' in general but particularly in art. In our culture now art is only a form of currency. Its decay into money-function perhaps mirrors the philistinism of the ruling class. So crazed is Staveley by the acquisitive spirit of capitalism that his eventual glee over a piece of printed paper is pathetic in the extreme. He looks guilty because he believes he is the sole owner of a great treasure. The guilt is the secret satisfaction of exclusive ownership. The 'Picasso' is of course, hanging on every wall. I don't know if it connects with the bottled hand at all.

Yours,

Howard

## Appendix 3

A List of the Works of Howard Barker and Places of Production<sup>1</sup>

## Stage Plays

*From the Lighthouse*, 1969

*War in Pictures*, 1970

*Cheek*, Royal Court Upstairs, 1970

*No One Was Saved*, Royal Court Upstairs, 1971

*Faceache*, Recreation Ground, 1971

*Pie Face*, 1971

*Edward, the Final Days*, Open Space, 1972

*Alpha Alpha*, Open Space, 1972

*Private Parts*, Edinburgh (Traverse ?), 1972

*Mercy*, 1972

*Rule Britannia*, King's Head, 1973

*Skipper & My Sister and I*, Bush Theatre, 1973

*Bang*, Open Space, 1973

*Low Profile Contaminations*, 1973

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<sup>1</sup> The date of production for produced plays is listed and the date of publication for volumes of poetry is included; the date of composition is given for some of the plays which have not been performed except for *Heroes of Labour* where publication date is specified.

*Reach for the Sky*, 1974

*Claw*, Open Space, 1975

*Stripwell*, Royal Court, 1975

*Wax*, Traverse: Edinburgh, 1976

*Fair Slaughter*, Royal Court, 1976

*That Good between Us*, Royal Shakespeare Company: Warehouse Theatre, 1977

*The Fifth Form at St Dominics (A Distorted View of a Distorted View)*, 1977

*The Love of a Good Man*, Crucible: Sheffield, 1978

*The Hang of the Gaol*, Royal Shakespeare Company: Warehouse Theatre, 1978

*Birth on a Hard Shoulder*, Royal Dramatic Theatre: Stockholm, 1980

*The Loud Boy's Life*, Royal Shakespeare Company: Warehouse Theatre, 1980

*No End of Blame*, Oxford Playhouse, 1981

*The Poor Man's Friend*, Colway Theatre: Bridport, 1982

*Crimes in Hot Countries*, Theatre Underground: University of Essex, 1983 & Royal Shakespeare Company: The Pit, 1985

*Victory: Choices in Reaction*, Joint Stock Company, Royal Court, 1983

*Passion in Six Days*, Crucible: Sheffield, 1983

*The Power of the Dog*, Joint Stock Company, Lyeus Studio: Edinburgh, 1984

*The Castle*, Royal Shakespeare Company: The Pit, 1985

*Downchild*, Royal Shakespeare Company: The Pit, 1985

*Women Beware Women*, Royal Court, 1986

*The Possibilities*, Almeida Theatre, 1988

*The Last Supper*, The Wrestling School, Royal Court, 1988

*The Bite of the Night*, Royal Shakespeare Company: The Pit, 1988

*The Europeans*, awaits production, 1988

*Seven Lears*, The Wrestling School, Crucible: Sheffield, 1989

*Reproaches*

*Fruitecake*

*A Bit of Experience*

#### **Television Plays**

*Fallen Angels*, 1971

*Cream*, 1971

*Cows*, BBC TV, 1972

*The Chauffeur and the Lady*, BBC TV, 1972

*Mutinies*, BBC TV, 1974,

*Prowling Offensive*, BBC TV, 1975 (not transmitted)

*Heroes of Labour*, 1976

*Russia*, BBC TV, 1977 (not performed)

*Heaven* BBC TV, 1977 (not performed)

*All Bleeding*, Thames TV, 1979 (not performed), staged reading, Royal Shakespeare Company:

Warehouse Theatre, 1979

*Credentials of a Sympathiser*, BBC TV, 1979 (not performed), staged reading: Royal

Shakespeare Company: Warehouse Theatre, 1979

*The Loud Boy's Life*, BBC TV, 1980 (rejected), re-written and staged, Royal Shakespeare

Company: Warehouse Theatre, 1980

*The Blow*, BBC TV, 1984 (not performed) staged reading: Almeida, 1988

*Pity in History*, BBC 2, 1985

*Brutopia*, BBC TV, 1988 (awaits production)

*Bull Dogs*

*Short Weekend*

### **Radio Plays**

*One Afternoon on the 63rd Level of the Pyramid of Cheops the Great*, BBC Radio 4, 1969

*Mr Morris' 70th Birthday*, 1969

*Henry V in Two Parts*, BBC Radio 4, 1971

*Herman with Millie and Mick*, BBC Radio 4

*Scenes from an Execution*, BBC Radio 3, 1984

*Terrible Mouth*, BBC Radio 3, 1988 (awaits production)

### **Screen Plays**

*Made*, 1972

*Rape of Tamar*, 1973

*Aces High*, 1975

*H. M. S. Ulysses*

*Any One for Tennis*

*The Upstart*, adapted by Howard Barker and Maurice Hatton from the novel by Piers Paul

**Poetry**

*Don't Exaggerate (Desire and Abuse)*, 1985

*The Breath of the Crowd*, 1986

*Gary the Thief/Gary Upright*, 1986

*Lullabies for the Impatient*, 1988

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