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The Tears of Dionysus: the Birth of Catastrophic Theater in British Drama

By

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Doctor of Philosophy

Comparative Literature

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By

Matthew J. Roberts II
Bachelor of Arts, DePaul University, 2005

Advisor: Geoffrey Bennington, D. Phil.

An abstract of
A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University
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*The Tears of Dionysus: the Birth of Catastrophic Theater in British Drama* argues that catastrophe is an important twentieth- and twenty-first-century theatrical aesthetic category, and situates it in relation to Artaud and Beckett's critical engagement with tragic and naturalistic theater. While tragedy is the theatrical genre most associated with the representation of trauma and other catastrophic events, the dissertation arranges a series of readings that examine plays by Howard Barker, Harold Pinter, and Sarah Kane in order to distinguish catastrophic theater from tragedy. Specifically, catastrophic theater undermines the classical argument that theater makes pleasurable that which would otherwise be painful. Therefore, as Barker, Pinter, and Kane challenge the redemptive or life-affirming metaphysics often associated with tragedy and the figure of Dionysus, I argue that these playwrights demonstrate that catastrophe escapes representation. As a result, they have created innovative theatrical forms that untangle theatrical art from the mimetic framework in which plays are often written and interpreted. Following the insights of W.B. Worthen and Hans-Thies Lehmann, the dissertation illustrates that catastrophic theater ultimately challenges the dynamic between text and performance as it has been conceived by theories of performance and theater, and it reframes the antagonistic relationship between text and performance that currently situates the constitutive difference between theater studies and performance studies.

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*For Sarah*

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I write for the dead

The unborn

~Sarah Kane, *4.48 Psychosis*

vertrau der Tränenspur

und lerne leben.

~Paul Celan

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# INTRODUCTION

## Catastrophic Theater and the New Dramatic Text

> "The presentation of the tragic rests primarily on the monstrous (*Ungeheure*), how the god and human mate and how boundless natural force and the human being's innermost unite in wrath, conceiving of itself on the boundless union purifying itself through boundless separation. […] In these moments the individual forgets oneself and the god and turns around like a holy traitor, naturally in saintly manner. In the utmost form of suffering there exists nothing but the conditions of time and space." ~Friedrich Hölderlin, "Remarks on *Oedipus*"

## I. Signaling through the Flames

It is not an overstatement to claim that Antonin Artaud influenced many of the most innovative and avant-garde theatrical aesthetics in the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries. As a theater artist, Artaud worked with some of the finest inter-war theater artists and film directors, including Jean Cocteau, Luigi Pirandello, Roger Vitrac, and Carl Dreyer. Yet, Artaud may be most famous for his collection of writings entitled *Le théâtre et son double*. First published in 1938, Artaud's text radically and agonistically engaged with Attic tragedy, French classicism, and European naturalism. For example, Artaud did the unthinkable and challenged the aesthetic merit of Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*, arguing that the themes and the language of Sophocles's most famous play have "lost touch with the epileptic rhythm of our time" (116). Furthermore, he criticized Jean Racine's classicism, as well as the psychological theater that descended from it, arguing that they transformed the theater into to a peaceful and opulent space for entertainment. Yet, the point of Artaud's intervention was not simply to suggest that theatrical art must reflect the specific social concerns of its respective historical period. Instead, Artaud's theater of cruelty

challenged his contemporaries to conceive of the theater as a space in which life itself could become present. Rather than to promote an antiquated conception of theatrical art as the imitation or re-presentation of life as it is lived outside of the theater, or to encourage something akin to Brecht's effort to use theater as a pedagogical platform, Artaud concluded the preface of *Le théâtre et son double* by stating that theater must seek to touch life itself (19).

Artaud defined life as the "fragile and restless hearth that forms never touch," and in order to make life present, Artaud aimed to create a theater in which artists are "supplicants on fire making signs through the flames" (19, 20), and demanded that theater artists neglect the conventions of psychological and naturalistic theater, which attempted to make the unknown known with conventions that were not exclusively theatrical (115-129). Hence, in his two manifestoes, both entitled "Le théâtre de la cruaté", Artaud envisions a theater of cruelty that utilizes exclusively theatrical conventions such as gesture, pantomime, dance, music, as well as uninhibited corporeal sounds such as breathing, cries, exclamations, and glossolalia (133-155). These actions contributed to the theater of cruelty's effort to make life present, thereby enabling audience members to be viscerally affected by what they experienced in theater so as to explore their innermost desires and motivations. In order to achieve this effect, Artaud created a revolutionary theater design, destroying the fourth wall between the stage and audience, and replacing it with a model that had performers surround, rather than face, audience members (139-141). As Lee Jamieson states, Artaud sought to bring "the audience into direct contact with the dangers of life. By turning theatre into a place where the spectator is exposed rather than protected, Artaud was committing an act of cruelty upon them" (23). Artaud's theatrical vision was therefore comprehensive, as the theater of cruelty's spatial arrangement reflected its theatrical conventions and the effects that they were to produce.

Artaud's critical intervention categorically changed how his contemporaries created theater, and his writings went on to influence generations of theater directors and ensembles, including but not limited to: Peter Brook, Richard Foreman, Jerzy Grotowski, the Living Theatre, and Elizabeth LeCompte and the Wooster Group. In addition to the fact that his writings and plays were to become a dramaturgical well-spring for future theater artists, Artaud was nevertheless very much aware of the historical context in which he wrote. Penned between 1932 and 1938, Artaud's writings in *Le théâtre et son double* were written during a time of great change, most notably the transformation of the Weimar Republic into the Third Reich, the Spanish Civil War, and the emergence of the French Popular Party. In fact, it was the catastrophic period in which he lived that directly contributed to the theater that Artaud championed in his essays:

> In the anguishing and catastrophic period in which we live, we feel the urgent need for a theater which is not exceeded by events, whose resonance within us is profound, dominating the instability of our era. For a long time, we have become habituated to distracting spectacles that have made us forget the idea of a serious theater, which jostles all of our perceptions, breathes into us the fiery magnetism of its images, and finally acts upon us as spiritual therapy, whose passing touch can never be forgotten. (132)

To be sure, the "anguishing and catastrophic" era that Artaud here mentions is the one in which he wrote the pieces contained in *Le théâtre et son double*. And while it is or was, at least for Artaud, an era that had lost touch with theater, it was also an era that was on the cusp of world war and would soon bequeath one of the most ghastly and horrific periods in all of human history. Artaud therefore connected historical catastrophe with theater, suggesting that the events of his age required a theater that would face and make present the anguish of the living, rather

than resort to fictional narratives that merely entertained people and, subsequently, distracted them from their innermost feelings, anxieties, and desires.

Artaud not only influenced the work of many theater artists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, but he also contributed to a radical rethinking of the dramatic text and its relation to theatrical performance. Specifically, he challenged the dramatic text's authority over its performance, calling into question the very necessity of the play text. Instead, Artaud privileged myth as the textual basis for his theater of cruelty, argued that poetry should replace dialogue as the proper form of theatrical speech, and emphasized the exploration of the body and its functions to create theater, rather than character, setting, and narrative. Yet, while Artaud seems to exclude the dramatic text from his theater, his essays nevertheless altered the dramatic text's scope, and ultimately contributed to the radical transformation that the dramatic text underwent in the twentieth century in particular. For example, Artaud's criticism of dialogue—a form he felt proper to literary fiction and not theater—inspired playwrights to create works that were more poetic and less interested in presenting a specific social condition or imitating a lifestyle that existed outside of the theater. Furthermore, Artaud's lack of interest in character and his emphasis on the body's materiality directly contributed to the emergence of dramatic texts that contained complex stage directions that appeared more as choreography, rather than as precise instructions that indicated character traits or setting.

Of the playwrights who followed in the wake of Artaud, it is perhaps Samuel Beckett who first demonstrated Artaud's mark on a new generation of playwrights, many of whom complicated and ultimately challenged the aesthetics of naturalistic theater that had been prominent in the nineteenth-century. In fact, Artaud's work appears foundational to many of Beckett's contemporaries, including Adamov, Genet, and Ionesco. However, Beckett's plays, in

particular his shorter pieces, directly reflect many of the concerns that Artaud had with regard to the text's dominion over theatrical performance. For example, in *Act without Words I* (1957) and *Act without Words II* (1957), Beckett created a text that choreographed specific movements and gestures, and consequently undermined the exclusive use of language for dialogue among characters. Furthermore, with pieces such as *Play* (1962, 1963) *Not I* (1972), *Footfalls* (1976), *Rockaby* (1980, 1981), and *Catastrophe* (1982, 1983), Beckett married the choreography of his early short plays with poetic language that often expresses existential anguish and the effects of mortality on the speaking subject. Beckett's theatrical work may therefore be read to testify to Artaud's influence on a generation of playwrights whose writing reconceived the play text: no longer finding it necessary to mirror and to imitate life as it is lived outside of the theater, Beckett and his contemporaries wrote works that attempted to create a theatrical experience whose signifying efficacy emerged because of what transpired in the theatrical space itself.

As with Artaud, the catastrophic historical periods through which Beckett himself lived influenced the stakes of his plays. To clarify, I am not suggesting that Beckett's theater should be exclusively understood in relation to the historical contexts in which he wrote. Instead, just as Artaud witnessed the implications of serious global and historical conflicts, so too did Beckett. There may therefore be some parallel between the fact that the catastrophic period in which Artaud lived caused him to conceive of a theater that could put its audience more in touch with life, and the fact that Beckett's plays, the vast majority of which were written after World War II, concern the alienating strangeness of existence as it appears radically contingent and without any inherent purpose. Catastrophe, therefore, plays a vital role in the development of twentieth-century European theater. Yet, as already implied, while catastrophe motivated twentieth-century playwrights to use theater to teach an audience (Brecht), it also had the opposite effect, rupturing

the mimetic framework in which theater is often situated. And as we have witnessed, such a break had profound implications for how playwrights such as Beckett conceived of the dramatic text. However, though Artaud himself explicitly connected the catastrophic period in which he lived with the properties of his theater of cruelty and its effort to access the energy that motivates life, it is still necessary to define catastrophe and to reflect, furthermore, on whether it suggests a broader theatrical category that is irreducible to Artaud, and even Beckett's, theatrical work.

**II. The Tears of Dionysus, or on the Birth of Catastrophic Theater**

In their seminal work, entitled *History beyond Trauma*, Françoise Davoine and Jean-Max Gaudillière refer to the work of catastrophe theorist, René Thom, in order to discuss how breaks in the continuity of one's life or lived experience directly contribute to the necessity of symbolism:

> An abrupt interruption in a moment of happiness is a *catastrophe*: it is a rupture in continuity in the sense that the mathematician René Thom defines it; however, the connotation is not necessarily negative: "for me, any discontinuity in phenomenon is a catastrophe. The edge of this table, where the wood becomes air: this is a surface of separation, a place of catastrophe. The action of the saw on the wood is the realization of an elementary catastrophe. […] This static catastrophe is the memory of a dynamic catastrophe that took place at the moment this plank was fabricated. Solids, then, keep the memory of all the catastrophes that they have undergone." This discontinuity is of interest to us, because it concerns the principle of the symbol within everyone's reach: adults, children, and innocents. For the etymological meaning of *symbolon*—a means of reuniting—emerges as an effect of this rupture: it is at the moment of separation that a piece of terra cotta is broken. Later, in the next generation, when the descendants meet,

> the other pieces of terra cotta will fit, more or less, in the break of this discontinuity, to symbolize alliance at the time of the catastrophe of a departure or after a conflict. (135, 136)

As Davoine and Gaudillière argue, the need for symbols is connected to catastrophe insofar as it is conceived as an event that ruptures the continuity of lived experience. In fact, as they explicitly demonstrate, catastrophe and symbolism are interconnected as symbols reconcile and unite what catastrophe has interrupted or ruptured. While their work is not one of theater history in any way, the structure that Davoine and Gaudillière assign to the relationship between catastrophe and symbolism calls to mind the Dionysian element of tragic theater. Though this connection may, at first glance, appear tangential, it is not out of the realm of plausibility as Davoine and Gaudillière's text explicitly concerns trauma, the manifold ways that trauma affects culture and history, and the various resources, many of them aesthetic, that they have used to respond to their traumatized patients. In other words, that the dynamic between catastrophe and symbolism should resonate as an echo of the Dionysian element of tragic theater should not be surprising, particularly since tragedy explicitly concerns traumatic events. And as Aristotle observed, tragedy fulfills a therapeutic function as it allows spectators to heal from events that mirror the traumatic scenes of any particular tragedy (*Poetics* 2.1, 36, 37*)*. In fact, the recently assembled American theater group, Outside the Wire, uses Attic tragedy in order to address public health and social issues, including combat-related psychological injury, end of life care, political violence and torture, domestic violence, and the treatment of addiction.

To be clear, I am not attempting to enter into a philological debate. However, several philologists have clarified and specified the Dionysian element of tragedy in a way that further situates its therapeutic potential. As Jean-Pierre Vernant states in his essay "The God of Tragic

Fiction", "If one of the major traits of Dionysus consists in his ability to confuse the frontier between illusion and reality, to make suddenly appear the beyond in the here and now, to make us lose and disorient ourselves, then the enigmatic and ambiguous face of the god smiles at us in the theatrical illusion that tragedy established for the first time on the Greek stage" (23, 24). While the content of any particular tragedy can be therapeutic if its content reflects the trauma or traumas that an audience member or members may have experienced in their own life, the figure of Dionysus implies a broader therapeutic gesture insofar as he suggests tragedy's ability to disorient our sense of self and to reunite us with nature. Dionysus, therefore, implies our ability to reconcile ourselves with what might be considered the original catastrophe, namely, our break and separation from nature itself.

It was precisely the Dionysus's ability to induce, through the tragic illusion, self-loss and the individual's restoration with nature that Nietzsche elaborated in *The Birth of Tragedy*. For Nietzsche, the dual drives of Dionysus and Apollo engendered Attic Tragedy, and while Nietzsche opens his treatise by stating that he will examine both, it is ultimately with Dionysus that he most identifies. In other words, while Nietzsche does define the Apollonian drive as one that is responsible for individuation and as what gives aesthetic form to the unruly and orgiastic Dionysian drive, it is ultimately the suffering associated with Dionysus, as well as the cyclical nature of life that he figures, that Nietzsche prioritizes in his early work. It is with this in mind that Nietzsche's reflections on Dionysus may be read alongside Vernant's, as they elaborate on tragedy's ability to reconcile the individual with nature, and therefore re-establish one's connection with the natural world from which her or she has been taken:

> In truth, however, this hero is the suffering Dionysus of the Mysteries, the god who experiences the sufferings of individuation in his own person, of whom wonderful myths

> tell how he was dismembered by the Titans when he was a boy and is now honored in this condition as Zagreus; at the same time, it is indicated that his dismemberment, the genuinely Dionysiac *suffering*, is like a transformation into air, water, earth, and fire, so that we are to regard the condition of individuation as the source and primal cause of all suffering, and hence as something inherently condemnable. From the smile of that Dionysus come the Olympian gods, from his tears human beings were born. In this existence as a dismembered god, Dionysus has a double nature: he is both cruel, savage demon and mild, gentle ruler. But what the epopts hoped for was the rebirth of Dionysus, which we must now understand, by premonition, as the end of individuation; […] Only in the hope of this is there a beam of joy on the countenance of a world torn apart and shattered into individuals; myth symbolizes this in the image of the eternally mourning Demeter, who knows no *joy* until she is told that she can give birth to Dionysus *again*. In the views described here we already have all the constituent elements of a profound and pessimistic way of looking at the world and thus, at the same time, of *the Mysteries taught by tragedy*: the fundamental knowledge that everything that exists is a unity; the view that individuation is the origin of all evil; and art as the joyous hope that the spell of individuation can be broken, so that the premonition of unity is once again restored. (*DGT*, *KS Bd. 1*, 72, 73)[1]

As Nietzsche argues, to be human is to be cut out from nature and exorcised from it. To be sure, this judgment requires that we be separated from the natural world. Yet, the point of Nietzsche's elaboration is that it is through tragic art that we both encounter and ultimately triumph over our catastrophic alienation from nature, and are thus reunited with the natural world once more. In this regard, we who have been born from Dionysus's tears have inherited something from him,

for just as Dionysus's suffering ensured his rebirth, so too does our separation from nature bequeath us with the promise that we might overcome our alienation from nature itself.

As implied, the very structure associated with the Dionysian returns in Davoine and Gaudillière's reflection on catastrophe. As such, it is therefore possible to observe how Nietzsche's commentary on the Dionysian telepathically informs the definition of catastrophe, particularly as catastrophe is figured to make symbols (such as Dionysus, for example) necessary and, by virtue of the rupture in continuity that it signifies, promise a future in which what has been broken or torn asunder may be brought together once more. Yet, as Nietzsche has already mentioned, the unification with nature that tragedy may provide individuals is a result of the illusion that tragedy creates. Hence, a simple question seems necessary: if it is an illusion that provides the individual with an experience in which he or she is reunited with nature, would that not make the unification also an illusion, leaving the individual still fractured and separated from nature? To be sure, even Nietzsche was suspicious of his reading of the Dionysian in *The Birth of Tragedy*, as he states in his preface to the second edition of the text that his original depiction of tragedy was naïve, sentimental, and overly-romantic. And this self-criticism may be all the more necessary given that throughout *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche figures the return to nature as a return to the womb and to the maternal body. Yet, by observing this fact, something strange begins to appear in Nietzsche's early reading of tragedy: while the Dionysian suggests the possible unification with the Mother, Nietzsche also names us as having been born from Dionysus's tears. To be sure, much could be said on this topic, for throughout Nietzsche's work the pain of childbirth is figured as the highest form of Dionysian suffering, suggesting that the figure of Dionysus may be read as a hermaphroditic god whose body, while male, suffers pain that Nietzsche associates with procreation and maternity.

Leaving aside an examination of Dionysus's hermaphroditic, or perhaps more precisely, maternal body, I would nevertheless like to return to the topic of Dionysus's tears. Specifically, it is curious that Nietzsche would mention the tears of Dionysus. To be sure, Dionysus suffered greatly: the precise mythological context that Nietzsche mentioned when discussing the god recalls his having been torn to pieces by the Titans, and surely the anguish of having one's body ripped apart would at the very least induce tears.[2] The image of the god crying should, however, give us pause, particularly if his tears are bequeathed to those who will later create tragedy in order to be reunited with nature and therefore return to their Dionysian origins. In other words, while Nietzsche focuses on the promise of unification that Dionysus later fulfills, we are not gods. As already implied, to think of catastrophe is also to think of trauma, which defines an unexpected event that ruptures continuity (Freud, *Jenseits, GW XIII* 9, 10). As Cathy Caruth states:

> what is at the heart of Freud's writing on trauma, both in what it says and in the stories he unwittingly tells, is that trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, it its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, *but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language*. (4, emphasis added)

While it may be possible to heal from those catastrophic events that have disrupted the continuity of life and, as it were, act in a way that confirms the image of broken and rejoined terra cotta pieces discussed in Davoine and Gaudillière's text, the process of unifying those fragments of one's life created by catastrophe is not as easy as their reference to the healing power of symbols

suggests. Therefore, in what follows, we will encounter a group of playwrights whose work emerges from the cracks and discontinuities caused by catastrophe, rather than in reference to a mythology that attempts to alleviate the fragmentation caused by catastrophe. As a result, the Dionysian hope that theater in particular and art in general could unify the individual with nature becomes problematic, not because theater cannot produce a transcendental experience, but because the nature to which we allegedly return always resists its alleged literary and theatrical inscription, becoming the very mystery proper to the god himself. To think of the tears of Dionysus is therefore to stop short of his rebirth, and to take seriously the tears as the affect proper to his suffering, noting that they may also suggest that no matter what the god suffers, his pain will not allow us to recover fully from our own.

In the chapters that follow, I will demonstrate that the dramaturgical innovations of playwrights and theater artists such as Artaud and Beckett contributed to the emergence of an unprecedented theatrical category, namely, catastrophic theater. For Howard Barker, who first coined the term "Theatre of Catastrophe" in order to describe his own theater, catastrophic theater allows pain to become, as it did in tragedy, a subject of theatrical exploration. But unlike tragedy, the pain that Barker's protagonists experience causes them to question and ultimately challenge social values and assumed moral norms. As a result, Barker's theater challenges individual spectators to reflect on the conditions of one's subjectivity and his or her affirmation of social conventions. Yet, as we shall see, the theatrical exploration of pain is not something that belongs solely to Barker's theater. Furthermore, in the time since Artaud and Beckett wrote, numerous post-war playwrights have engaged with pain in a way that challenges, rather than reflects, the so-called world outside of the theater. To be sure, several European playwrights warrant inclusion in this project, including, for example, Peter Weiss (*Marat/Sade*, 1963), Heiner

Müller (*Hamletmachine*, 1977) and Bernard-Marie Koltès (*La Nuit juste avant les forêts*, 1977; *Dans la solitude des champs de coton*, 1985). However, I will focus on a group of British playwrights whose work contributes to the emergence of catastrophic theater in the latter half of the twentieth-century. To clarify, I did not make the decision to focus exclusively on British playwrights because of the fact that Howard Barker is British. Instead, several of the theatrical 'movements' that have originated in English theater during the past five decades, such as "In-Yer-Face Theatre" have explicitly contributed to what I refer to as catastrophic theater.[3] As a result, I will argue that in addition to Howard Barker, Harold Pinter and Sarah Kane also develop catastrophic theater, and may be read as writers whose work has helped differentiate it from other theatrical genres, specifically tragedy.

While the work of these three playwrights differs tremendously, I will focus on what unites them, specifically, the manner in which each playwright engages with language and, furthermore, situates it as the most important element of catastrophic theater, particularly as it is differentiated from other theatrical forms. As Barker states:

> In the Theatre of Catastrophe the deal under which the audience resigns its rights to the domination of the author in exchange for information or entertainment, conscience or massage, is abolished. The first signal that no such compact exists comes from the unfamiliar cadences of a new language, whose rhythms and syntax are not those of common speech. It is a speech as contrived as poetry, dislocated, sometimes lyrical, often coarse, whose destiny and internal contradictions both evoke and confuse. In a culture in which language has lost its public status in favour of image and selling, this flood of verbal sound overwhelms the listener, who must be content with a partial understanding

> but whose attention is fixed by the sensuality of substance of speech in the mouth of the trained actor. (*Arguments* 81)

By focusing on the language contained in Pinter, Kane, and Barker's plays, I will demonstrate how catastrophic theater not only distinguishes itself from tragedy, but also how it engages and challenges the aesthetics of naturalism and social realism that had dominated nineteenth- and twentieth-century theater. And as we shall see, it is precisely the way that these writers engage with language that they might also be read to demonstrate how catastrophe escapes the logic of representation all together, and therefore challenges the mimetic framework in which theater art is assumed to reside.

## III. Chapter Abstracts

### IIIA. A Mother's Touch: Trauma and the Law of Obsequence in Harold Pinter's Political Plays

Throughout his career, Harold Pinter's plays garnered scholarly attention because they often contained ambiguous language and unsettling actions. In fact, much of early Pinter scholarship consists of debates regarding how, precisely, language functions in Pinter's work. This chapter introduces the issue of language in Pinter's work by reading Pinter's 1962 address at Bristol University. Claiming that language is often used as a means to obfuscate one's nakedness and vulnerability, Pinter discussed his interest in silence and echo, and suggested that the silence of his characters often produces an echo that discloses what they are attempting to protect or guard ("Writing", *Plays One* 13-15). Yet, what is particularly fascinating is that, despite the attention given to Pinter's language, scholars have invested less time in his interest in silence and echo, and how they contribute to Pinter's dramaturgy. While several of his early plays, such as *The Birthday Party* (1957) and *The Hothouse* (1958) metaphorically concern

political issues, later play such as *Mountain Language* (1988) and *Ashes to Ashes* (1996) explicitly engage politically motivated violence. Furthermore, in these later plays, silence and echo are employed as theatrical conventions that explore such violence.

In this chapter, I read closely *Mountain Language* and *Ashes to Ashes* in order to show how Pinter uses silence and echo in order to dramatize political oppression. I argue that Pinter's use of silences and echoes elucidates theater's own vulnerability, as it is unable to transform the politically motivated violence that it presents into a form that recuperates and alleviates the pain that such violence causes. Consequently, while scholars have interpreted these plays to represent specific historical events, I conclude that these plays demonstrate how such events escape representation, leaving theater to present its inability to make them present on stage and, consequently, provide spectators with the ability to overcome or recover from the events, real or imagined, that they witness. Moreover, I observe that Pinter connects the silence in *Mountain Language* and echoes in *Ashes to Ashes* to the maternal figure that appears in both plays, and I argue that it is because of this structure that each maternal figure bears witness to the plays' catastrophic content. As a result, Pinter's final plays engage Attic tragedy and the funeral rites of Ancient Greece, most notably because mothers assumed responsibility for mourning the deaths of their children, even though they were subjected to specific laws that prescribed how and where they were to mourn (Loraux 20, 21). In his later political plays, Pinter implicitly addresses this history of mourning mothers and the fact that the funeral rites that they were to carry out were excluded from the political operations of Ancient Greece and carefully codified in Attic tragedy. Pinter's political plays not only suggest a critical attitude toward the types of politically motivated violence that are depicted in them, but they also challenge the politics of theatrical art

itself insofar as it has historically ostracized women, and in particular mothers, from the representation of violence

**IIIB. The Language of Grief and the Grief of Language: Sarah Kane's Impossible Theater**

Perhaps the most notable playwright of the so-called "In-Yer-Face Theatre" generation, Sarah Kane bridged the divide between theater's literary and performative dimensions. Of her five published plays, *Cleansed* (1998) and *4.48 Psychosis* (1999) are particularly challenging, not only because of their violent content, but also because of their innovative form. The chapter begins with an analysis of *Cleansed*, in which I argue that the violence that occurs in the play should not be read literally as it has been by Kane scholars. Instead, it must be read metaphorically. Due to this intervention and through a close reading of *Cleansed*, I show how death makes necessary the relationships that the characters forge with one another. In this regard, I read the play to suggest that death is the ethical foundation of inter-personal relationships. Moving to *4.48 Psychosis*, I argue that the play elaborates the significance of finitude that appeared in *Cleansed*. However, instead of being what forges relationships among characters, in *4.48 Psychosis* death constitutes and situates the subject's relation with itself. While scholars often associate the content of the piece with Kane's death, I argue that the language of the work precludes identification with her biography. Instead, I focus on Kane's expressed interest in writing a text for performance, rather than creating dramas that are enacted. I argue that Kane accomplishes this task by creating a text that eschews formal dramatic conventions such as character, setting, and dialogue, and privileges language in order to create a series of poetic tableaux that allows individual theater artists to realize the piece theatrically. However, since the language of the work marks its subject as absent, I argue that the play may be read to concern a

grief that is specific to language itself, since language is made to carry the loss of any particular referent to whom the language of the piece might belong.

**IIIC. From Pain, Poetry: Howard Barker and the Poetics of Catastrophic Theater**

Howard Barker's plays and theoretical writings elucidate a catastrophic theater that attempts to make pain beautiful. For Barker, beauty results from moments of extreme tension in which opposing wills collide. Though plays such as *The Castle* (1985) and *Scenes from an Execution* (1990) clearly verify Barker's definition of beauty, I suggest that his plays offer another definition of beauty. By reading closely *The Europeans* (1987)—a play Barker consistently cites in order to exemplify the stakes of his *Theatre of Catastrophe*—I argue that beauty occurs when pain transports a character or characters to a position that couples self-identification with self-loss. However, the play does not assuage the tension between self-knowledge and self-abnegation, but instead marks such a conflict unresolvable. As a result, *The Europeans* confirms Barker's commitment to a theater that creates ambiguity and introspection, rather than certainty and absolute knowledge. Furthermore, I demonstrate how this definition of beauty operates even in Barker's more contemporary work. In fact, his most recent play, *Blok/Eko* (2011), explicitly concerns the connection between pain and poetry. Therefore, I suggest that while Barker's early work transformed depictions of pain into moments of beauty, *Blok/Eko* specifically engages the relationship between pain and poetry and argues that beauty can *only* be achieved through pain. Furthermore, as the basis of his *Plethora/Bare Sufficiency* project, *Blok/Eko* relies on poetry in order to create drastic effects that overwhelm audience members. Consequently, I argue that the piece translates the often unbearable experiences that

Barker characters undergo into a dramaturgy that makes the play an extreme experience for its readers and spectators.

## CHAPTER ONE

## A Mother's Touch: Trauma and the Law of Obsequence in Harold Pinter's Political Plays

> When the law comes to me, with the ego and language, it is too late. Things will have already taken a turn. And the turn of the law will not manage to efface the first turn, this first *touch*. Aesthetics has to do with this first touch: the one that touched me when I was not there. ~Jean-François Lyotard, "Prescription", *Lectures d'enfance*
>
> It is, however, a question of making a withdrawal, in order to let him try his luck on a gift without the least memory of itself, in the final account, the remains of a body, a pile of ashes unconcerned about preserving its form, a retreat, a retracing only without any relation with what, now, through love, I just did and I am just about to tell you— ~Jacques Derrida, *Feu la cendre*

### I. The "Pinter Problem" Revisited

Harold Pinter changed the theatrical landscape of British theater. With his so-called "Comedies of Menace" such as *The Room* (1957) and *The Birthday Party* (1957), Pinter explicitly engaged the alienating strangeness of Samuel Beckett's dramatic writing. Along with Beckett, Pinter was initially considered an "absurdist" playwright, and therefore associated with other great post-war European playwrights such as Ionesco, Genet, and Adamov (Esslin, *Absurd* 234). But while Beckett often set his plays in indefinable locations and frequently shied away from domestic settings—a feature that would help to distinguish his theater from the theatrical aesthetics that had dominated the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European naturalistic theater—Pinter consistently married the anxiety contained in Beckett's plays with the domestic settings common to naturalism.[4] This strategy differentiated Pinter's plays from Beckett's

theatrical writing, and directly contributed to Pinter's ability to show how uncanny forces often haunt those spaces so often considered to be familiar. But unlike Ibsen, Strindberg, or Chekhov, for example—all of whom were also interested in the foreign within the familiar—Pinter's early plays often keep secret the disruptive forces that trouble the spaces in which they take place. *The Birthday Party*, to name but one of Pinter's early plays, clearly exemplifies this strategy, as McCann and Goldberg seem to appear from nowhere and abduct Stanley. As a result, the play leaves us curious as to Stanley's affiliation with these men and unsure where they are taking him. Such ambiguity is a common feature of Pinter's plays, and it directly contributes to their intensity as they often end at moments of conflict in which characters are exposed or forced to confront that which haunts the space in which they live or occupy. As his career continued, Pinter became well known for his "memory plays" such as *Old Times* (1970)*, No Man's Land* (1974), and *Betrayal* (1978). In such works, Pinter uses memories from his characters past to haunt the present in which they live (for example, *Old Times*), or structures the plot so that the incidents of the play are disclosed in reverse chronological order (such as in *Betrayal*). And though it is true that there are a number of political questions raised by Pinter's early and middle work, it is not really until his later plays that Pinter explicitly engaged catastrophes such as torture, world war, and genocide.

To be sure, this clean division of Pinter's *oeuvre* is not completely justified, as it too easily categorizes his work in an effort to recognize a certain trajectory that would, at best, only retrospectively observe the shifts in Pinter's career. Yet, what is of particular interest is how despite the shifts and changes throughout his career as a playwright, Pinter has consistently lead scholars and critics to investigate the uniqueness of his plays' language. Taking stock of the initial critical discourse surrounding Pinter's early work, Austin Quigley's *The Pinter Problem*

elaborates that for many of Pinter's first critics, the uniqueness of his plays pertains to the manner in which language functions in them (34). Quigley specifically references Martin Esslin's early study on Pinter, entitled *The Peopled Wound*, in which Esslin argues that the language of Pinter's first plays is unique as it expresses the inexpressible (34; Esslin, *Peopled Wound* 252). In addition, Quigley cites Robert Brustein, who suggests that the language of Pinter's early plays is intended to undermine communication (29). Quigley demonstrates that Esslin and Brustein's interpretations represented the first scholarly reaction to the language of Pinter's work (34-36). For Quigley, however, Brustein and Esslin's interpretations of Pinter represent two sides of the same coin, as they attempt "to describe what is new in Pinter's language by means of an appeal to some norm in language that Pinter either transcends or ignores" (36). In response to his contemporaries' reaction to Pinter's early plays, Quigley observes that the majority of critical attention given to them assumes that language functions referentially (40). Hence, those who theorize the significance of Pinter's language seem to take as their starting point the "problems" that his language causes a particular conceptualization of language, namely, one that assumes that words intentionally refer or ought to refer to a stable and identifiable object, action, or quality in the world (40, 41).

In response to his critique of Pinter scholarship, and furthermore influenced by the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Quigley develops an entirely different method to read Pinter: not predicated on metaphysical assumptions about language in general, Quigley analyzes Pinter's work by addressing how language concretely functions in the plays themselves, and concludes by arguing that the signifying efficacy of language in Pinter's work is constructed and produced by interdependent relationships among characters (52, 66). Consequently, language becomes the means used by characters to create, and maneuver in, relationships. (54). By following the

function of language in Pinter's plays, Quigley concludes that they are structured as complex language games in which reality itself becomes a negotiable concept that is at stake for Pinter's characters (72). Elaborating on Quigley's intervention, scholars Susan Hollis Merrit and Marc Silverstein have traced a connection between Pinter's early plays and his later and more overtly political ones. Like the early plays, the political plays often use language as the means that characters use to negotiate, sometimes forcefully and violently, the reality in which they find themselves. For Silverstein in particular, Quigley's critical engagement with the antiquated theories of language first used to interpret Pinter is of notable interest, as it provides Silverstein with ground to interrogate Quigley's own assumptions about language (*Harold Pinter* 18, 19). Yet, despite the wealth of commentary regarding the importance of language in his plays, Harold Pinter himself went to great lengths to articulate his relationship and attitude toward language. Specifically, in his 1962 speech at the National Student Drama Festival in Bristol, Pinter addressed the fact that critics and scholars had found so much interest in the language of his early work. Despite his ambivalence toward language, Pinter nevertheless commented that "[y]ou and I, the characters which grow on the page, most of the time we're inexpressive, giving little away, unreliable, elusive, evasive, obtrusive, unwilling. But it's out of these attributes that a language arises. A language, I repeat, where under what is said, another thing is being said" ("Writing", *Plays One* 13, 14).

As the address proceeds, Pinter continues to reflect on language and its connection to silence, eventually distinguishing between two silences: the silence that he hears within the speech of his characters, and the silence that occurs when his characters are no longer able to speak:

> There are two silences. One when no word is spoken. The other when perhaps a torrent of language is being employed. This speech is speaking of a language locked beneath it. That is its continual reference. The speech we hear is an indication of that which we don't hear. It is a necessary avoidance, a violent, sly, anguished or mocking smoke screen which keeps the other in its place. When true silence falls we are still left with echo but are nearer nakedness. One way of looking at speech is to say that it is a constant stratagem to cover nakedness. ("Writing", *Plays One* 15)

Silence, therefore, is not without some sort of linguistic importance, as language may be employed to keep silent some fact or acknowledgement, and, to be sure, this strategy is often employed in in the dialogue of Pinter's plays. Yet, he also mentions another form of silence, a silence that may arrest or end speech, but which does not necessarily stand opposed to language. In this later case, silence does not mark an end to language so much as it allows what has been said to reverberate as an echo; and it is with the second silence—a silence that brings forth an echo—that he hears this "proximity to nakedness", a nakedness that speech is unable to avoid. With the echo that appears near the end of his address, Pinter sets in place a dynamic through which what one hears in silence is the return of one's own speech. However, this return appears alienating as the speaker must confront the nakedness or vulnerability that provokes his or her speech. Therefore, while the speech of his characters will always be important, the significance of that speech may also be engaged by listening to the moments in which characters can no longer speak because they are overwhelmed and held in proximity to their absolute vulnerability.

What is so fascinating about Pinter's remarks regarding language in the Bristol address is the fact that they act as a sort of dramaturgical wellspring throughout his career. Following Pinter's observations, Leslie Kane's study, *The Language of Silence*, argues that Pinter employs

silence in the dialogue of his early and middle work in order to signify his character's isolation. And as Kane also notes, Pinter often uses silence in order to end plays, thereby underscoring the irresolvable social impositions that trouble his characters (146, 147). Yet, as Kane even appears to anticipate, Pinter's continued interest in fragmentation and incoherence suggests that the silences and echoes that occur in his later plays cannot be so easily understood to signify specific functions. In other words, while Kane is able to read the silences that appear in Pinter's earlier plays as though they were legible, Pinter's later plays, while at times often confirming Kane's insights, complicate the legibility of these silences and, moreover, echoes, as though they could divulge some secret or truth that would make the plays an object of knowledge. As we shall see, the language of Pinter's plays inaugurates something unique and unprecedented in British theater. By following Pinter's interest in silence and echo, specifically as it is situated in his discussion of language, it is, despite my earlier hesitation, possible to identify a certain trajectory that extends from Pinter's very early plays, all the way to the political plays that concluded his playwriting career.[5]

As I hope to show, however, though Pinter transformed the topics of silence and echo into theatrical techniques used to engage political violence and oppression, their respective appearance is often connected to maternal figures. More concretely, in *Mountain Language*, it is an elderly mother's silence that directly depicts political oppression, specifically as her silence bears witness to the torture and death of her son. Furthermore, *Ashes to Ashes* concerns a middle-aged woman named Rebecca, who recalls watching a "guide" who takes babies away from their screaming mothers. Ultimately, Rebecca remembers herself as one of these mothers, and while her recollection of the event concludes the play, her testimony is interrupted by an echo that repeats specific portions of her story until she becomes an echo of herself. I would like to

suggest, then, that it is through the maternal figures that Pinter uses silence and echo as a means to depict the catastrophic actions contained in these plays. As a result, Pinter's final plays appear to engage, perhaps unknowingly or unintentionally, Attic tragedy and the funeral rites of ancient Greece, most notably because mothers assumed responsibility for mourning the deaths of their children, even as they were subjected to specific laws that prescribed how and where they were to mourn (Loraux 20, 21). I mention this not to prompt a philological analysis or to argue that Pinter's plays knowingly refer to Attic tragedy and politics. Rather, I would like to observe that while the mourning of mothers and the funeral rites that they were to carry out were excluded from the political operations of Ancient Greece—an exclusionary act that is itself a political gesture, and one that would leave the city haunted by the absent cries of mothers made to bury their dead—Pinter's *Mountain Language* and *Ashes to Ashes* allow for this maternal haunting to take stage.

**II. Before the Law**

Published in the 7-13 October 1988 issue of the *Times Literary Supplement* and premiering on 20 October 1988 at the National Theatre in London, Harold Pinter's *Mountain Language* remains one of his most devastating plays. Though it is short, the brevity of *Mountain Language* is matched by its aphoristic quality, as it distills the political conflict it depicts into four highly charged scenes. Taking place around and within an unidentified military prison, *Mountain Language*, like *One for the Road* (1984), concerns the practice of torture against political prisoners. But whereas *One for the Road* does not indicate any ethnic difference between the torturer, Nicholas, and his victims, *Mountain Language* depicts a conflict between a national military and an ostracized ethnic group who live in the mountains. Moreover, the national military does not limit its aggression to the mountain people, but is perfectly willing to

incarcerate and torture anyone. Though the play bears some resemblance to the content of Pinter's comments regarding his visit to Turkey with Arthur Miller on behalf of International PEN, Pinter himself was quick to point out that, while inspired by the conflict in Turkey, *Mountain Language* was not a parable for the specific violence and oppression that he witnessed during his trip ("A Play and Its Politics", *One for the Road* 12, 13, 24). Though the play does not directly refer to or represent any single military conflict, it does address an antagonism between those who speak the "language of the capital" and those who speak the "mountain language." Such conflict, furthermore, may be read to be at the heart of the political oppression against which Pinter so often fought.[6] By following the manner in which the play's characters address each other, we will see that the conflict between those who speak the "language of the capital" and those who speak the "mountain language," concerns an antagonism between the civil law and its attempt to impose itself on a law of another sort.

In the opening scene, entitled "A Prison Wall", *Mountain Language* establishes the problem of politically motivated violence with a conflict between military personnel and an injured Elderly Woman who, in the company of several other women, waits to hear news regarding her son's imprisonment. The scene opens as the Sergeant asks the women for their names, despite the fact that his language is foreign to many of the women to whom he speaks. Unable to give her name to the Sergeant, the Elderly Woman is aided by the Young Woman, who repeatedly tells the Sergeant that she and the Elderly Woman have already given their names. As the exchange between the two women and the Sergeant progresses, the Young Woman attempts to seek help for the Elderly Woman, who has been bitten by one of the soldier's dogs. Paralleling the request that the women give their names, the Officer asks the Elderly Woman for the name of the dog who bit her, but the Elderly Woman remains silent, only lifting

her hand to expose her bloody wound to him. Unwilling to help the Elderly Woman and give the Young Woman information as to the status of the imprisoned men, the Sergeant responds to them by declaring that "your husbands, your sons, your fathers, these men you have been waiting to see, are shithouses" (Pinter, *ML* 8). The women's attempt to acquire information about the men yields a response that strips each man of his name—an act that is juxtaposed to the military's need to identify and name the women who have come for these men—and replaces each name with the term, "shithouse." The discursive antagonism between the military and the women is made even more obvious by the Officer, who, immediately after the Sergeant's declaration, addresses the mountain women and proclaims that their language is dead:

> OFFICER: Now hear this. You are mountain people. You hear me? Your language is dead. It is forbidden. It is not permitted to speak your mountain language in this place. You cannot speak your language to your men. It is not permitted. Do you understand? You may not speak it. It is outlawed. You may only speak the language of the capital. That is the only language permitted in this place. You will be badly punished if you attempt to speak in your mountain language in this place. This is a military decree. It is the law. Your language is forbidden. It is dead. No one is allowed to speak your language. Your language no longer exists. Any questions? (Pinter, *ML* 8, 9)

The Officer's declaration seems to trouble the emphasis on language games that Quigley brought to the reading of Pinter's plays, for as Jean-François Lyotard underscores, whenever one attempts to gain a desired outcome by denying another the opportunity to speak, then "we are in the realm of terror," and the social bond originally created by the language game is broken (*PC* 76).[7] In fact, the progression from the Sergeant's proclamation that the men are "shithouses" to

the Officer's statement that the mountain language is dead confirms this social break, signifying a division between the mountain people and those who speak the language of the capital, and violating the familial bond between the women and the men for whom the women have come. The "realm of terror" that Lyotard describes therefore follows from this break, and is first situated according to a double-bind that plagues the Elderly Woman as well as the military Officer. In the first case, what is particularly strange about the Officer's declaration is that the women he believes to be mountain people are presumably without any knowledge that he has pronounced the death of their language. The Elderly Woman's silence seems to occur because she does not understand the Officer's decree; and yet, her silence is precisely what is called for by the outlawing of her language. Consequently, either the mountain women speak and become criminals, or they are, because of their ignorance, silent and conform to the Officer's mandate. On the other hand, the Officer's declaration presents a conflict all its own, for while he declares that the mountain language is dead, the very structure of his address to the women must first assume that the mountain language exists. It is furthermore because of this fissure between the life of the mountain language and the declaration of its death that the Officer must appeal to the law, which affirms the mountain language's life insofar as it justifies the future punishment of its speakers. Rather than articulate a performative utterance, which would enact the death of the mountain language, the Officer's address to those surrounding the prison wall functions as a prescription, commanding the realization of what he states, and referring to the law in order to enforce his decree.[8]

As a result of what transpires in the first scene, it is therefore necessary to reconsider the silence of the mountain women and, in particular, the Elderly Woman. Specifically, while her silence is mandated by the Officer, it exists before the Officer's declaration that the mountain

language is dead, and precedes the contradictory matrix created by his speech. More to the point, the Elderly Woman's silence neither refers to nor is the result of anything that the Officer has said. Instead, her silence appears connected to her bloody hand, the showing of which forms a phrase that appears unreadable to the military officials, and unable to be translated into the language of the capital (Lyotard, *LD* 29-31). The Elderly Woman's bloody hand is not just the site of an injury, but also the object around which the mountain language and language of the capital come into conflict with one another. Hence, in the second scene, entitled "Visitor's Room," the significance of the Elderly Woman's injury is more fully realized than in its initial appearance in the first scene. Speaking in the mountain language, the Elderly Woman tells her son, simply called the Prisoner, that she has bread, but a Guard interrupts her attempt to help her son as he beats her and informs her that her language is forbidden. However, the Guard's exclamation fails to provide any formal linguistic differentiation between the mountain language and the language of the capital. In other words, though the stage directions indicate that the Elderly Woman and the Prisoner speak in a heavy, rural accent, the fact that the all of the lines are written in English suggests that the difference between the mountain language and the language of the capital is not one that is, at least at first, simply linguistic.

As intimated in the first scene, the difference between the mountain language and the language of the capital appears to be situated according to how the speech of each of its speakers responds to the site of blood, and, in particular, the Elderly Woman's bloody hand. Continuing to follow the trail of blood that her hand leaves, the Elderly Woman's presence at her son's side, and her effort to provide him with food, illustrates how her blood claims responsibility for the blood flowing from the Prisoner's wounds. Furthermore, the Elderly Woman's lines, "I have bread" and "I have apples," are the only lines in the play formally accused of having been uttered

in the mountain language (Pinter, *ML* 10). The second scene, therefore, begins by explicitly connecting the mountain language with the Elderly Woman's attempt to nourish her son. In other words, the second scene connects the "mountain language" to a maternal function that the Elderly Woman gives voice to through her speech.[9]

Though the Guard beats the Elderly Woman for speaking in the mountain language, and furthermore calls for the Prisoner to tell her that she is not allowed to speak it, the second scene nevertheless includes a moment of respite from the military's brutality:

> PRISONER: She's old. She doesn't understand.
>
> GUARD: Whose fault is that? *(He laughs).* Not mine, I can tell you. And I'll tell you another thing. I've got a wife and three kids. And you're all a pile of shit. *(Silence.)*
>
> PRISONER: I've got a wife and three kids.
>
> GUARD: You've what? (*Silence*.) You've got what? (*Silence*.) What did you say to me? You've got what? (*Silence*.) You've got *what*? (*He picks up the telephone and dials one digit*.) Sergeant? I'm in the Blue Room…yes…I thought I should report, Sergeant…I think I've got a joker in here. (*Lights to half. The figures are still. Voices over*.)
>
> ELDERLY WOMAN'S VOICE: The baby is waiting for you.
>
> PRISONER'S VOICE: Your hand has been bitten.
>
> ELDERLY WOMAN'S VOICE: They are all waiting for you.
>
> PRISONER'S VOICE: They have bitten my mother's hand.
>
> ELDERLY WOMAN'S VOICE: When you come home there will be such welcome for you. Everyone is waiting for you. They're all waiting for you. They are all waiting to see you. (*Lights up. The Sergeant comes in*.)

SERGEANT: What joker? (Pinter, *ML* 11)

The dimming of the lights appears to interrupt the scene's narrative, allowing for the voices of the Elderly Woman and the Prisoner to communicate even though they do not speak. But rather than imply an explicit act of resistance to the military, Ann C. Hall suggests that the voice-overs subvert it through a sort of psychic connection that transcends "imprisonment and linguistic restrictions" (17-22). While Hall's analysis appropriately refers to the telepathic quality of the voiced-over conversation between the Prisoner and the Elderly Woman, there is no indication that the subversive quality of their voices provides them with the ability to "transcend" the prison and return home to speak freely in their language.

Hall's emphasis on the telepathic form of communication that occurs during the blackout should, however, serve as a reminder of Pinter's 1962 address at Bristol, for it is through the silence of the characters that their voices are able to communicate with one another. The partial blackout aesthetically realizes Pinter's reflection on the relationship between silence and speech, since the voices are audible only when the Prisoner and the Elderly Woman are silent, and exposes what Pinter had called the "nakedness" of his characters. For example, the Elderly Woman's voice attempts to breed hope for the Prisoner as she mentions that his family is waiting for him, and that there will be an enthusiastic welcome for him when he returns home. However, given the fact that the Elderly Woman left her home in order to be with the Prisoner, and because the Guard responds to the Prisoner by calling him and his people a "pile of shit," the consolation the Elderly Woman gives to him is also marked by the distress and agony that brought her to the prison wall. In other words, the Elderly Woman's words do not just refer to the family that waits for him, but also articulate her own longing to return him to his family. On the other hand, though attentive to her injury, the Prisoner mentions his inability to help his mother. The

interlude, therefore, does not simply give the characters the opportunity to speak, but it also provides the play with the ability to present concretely what appears to be impossible for either the Prisoner or the Elderly Woman, namely, the inability to heal each other's wounds and return to their domestic spaces.

The partial blackout in the second scene, however, does not just interrupt the scene's narrative, but it also elaborates on the words spoken by the Elderly Woman during the scene's opening. While the Elderly Woman attempts to provide food for her son, the Prisoner responds by situating his relation to her, and furthermore identifies her as his mother when calling attention to the fact that the very part of her body that offers him food has been bitten and is bleeding. In other words, the Prisoner identifies his mother not by the food that she brings him, nor by her effort to nourish him, but rather by the blood that flows from her hand. This blood, therefore, does not just mark an injury to the Elderly Woman's body, but it also signifies a wound to her role as the one responsible for the nourishment of her children, and hence an injury to the very bond that is formed between her, her son, and, consequently, the family that she calls him to rejoin. However, the intimate connection that the Elderly Woman and the Prisoner articulate is established prior to his separation from her, for it is, principally, a relation between the mother's body and that of her child. While the birth of the child appears to involve the mother's ability to be present to it, as well as the child's inability to be present fully and remember his or her own birth, the relation between the bodies of the mother and child, first formed while the child is inside her, is a way of being that complicates the mother's own ability to distinguish herself from the child's body. This maternal body, composed of both the bodies of the child and the mother, gives way to a time-space in which the presence of the child's body within her cannot be completely distinguished from her own body. This pregnant body,

therefore, holds in suspension the very division between the positions of an "I" (mother) and a "you" (the child), positions that are, furthermore, discursive and made possible only by the child's separation from the mother (Marder, "Mother Tongue" 60). What is therefore at issue in the bond given voice to by the Elderly Woman and the Prisoner is the touch that occurs in a time-space in which the women's blood holds and nourishes the body of the child before he or she is born, and in so doing, is therefore touched by the child's body. Though this blood will be washed off the child, its absence only serves to remind of that which cannot be properly remembered or made present, namely, the touch that their bodies shared. It is this touch, moreover, that will become the very witness to the child's separation and exile from this rather uncanny and immemorial connection with the body of what it will later call, "mother." The fact that the Prisoner only responds to his mother's injury in the voice-over confirms this observation. Specifically, it is through his silence that the play gives voice to this corporeal touch between a mother and child, a touch that exceeds the law and which can only be heard in the play through silence and telepathically confirmed by their bodies when their wounds touch.

**III: The "Mother Tongue" and the Law of Obsequence**

Having followed the mother's blood as it creates a trail in the play, it is not only possible for us to read how the mountain language distinguishes itself from the language of the capital, but it is also possible to observe how the language of the capital functions and distinguishes itself from the mountain language. As already indicated, the fact that all of the play's lines are written in English allows for the opportunity to read what, precisely, is in conflict in the play; and as we have seen, by closely examining the lines that are spoken in the mountain language, it appears as though this language gives voice to a touch shared between the bodies of a mother and the child within her. Though this touch exceeds the law and takes place prior to the declaration of any law,

it is nevertheless at fault with the law that is exercised by the military. This touch, as Lyotard will have already stated, albeit in a different context, "has its place and moment in a savage or alien space and time that are foreign to the law. And to the extent that it maintains itself, persists in the mode of this immemorial space-time, this savagery or this sinful peregrination, it is always there as a potentiality of the body" ("Prescription", *LdE* 39). Hence, this immemorial touch that is shared only by the bodies of mother and child is what the language of the capital opposes, and in order to mitigate the "potentiality of the body" that this touch bequeaths, the military must torture and ultimately destroy the bodies of those who may become potential opponents. However, neither the mother nor her child is ever purely present to this touch: the mother because while her blood and child are within her, they are nevertheless not disclosed to her; and the child because it has not yet been born. But, as indicated by the blackout occurring in the second scene, this touch only "happens" as a corporeal phenomenon and not as a means of address. This touch is not relegated to the past, but it is rather a mode of being that never fully discloses itself as having ever occurred and made fully present to those whose bodies touch. Unable to become completely intelligible according to the referential model of language—a model that Quigley observed still dominated the way that Pinter's first scholars had read him, often finding his plays unintelligible or at the very least ambiguous—the touch shared between the mother and her child is structurally opposed to the language of the capital, which refers to a law that it must protect and exercise if it is to regulate language.

The fact that the "language of the capital" refers to the law, and in fact refers to only one law, namely, that the mountain language is dead, suggests that the language of the capital cannot, in fact, destroy the mountain language through the Officer's decree, particularly as the mountain language bespeaks the touch that escapes language and, furthermore, the law. The law, therefore,

preserves the Officer's original mistake: his declaration did not function as a performative utterance capable of bringing into effect the death of the mountain language; instead, his declaration was a prescriptive utterance, as it ordered the mountain language's death. Unable to performatively declare the death of the mountain language, the Officer must therefore refer to the law as it justifies and even demands that violence be inflicted upon those whose corporeal bonds with each other exceeds the law's control and jurisdiction. As already observed, the recipients of this violence receive the names "shithouses" or "piles of shit." These terms are spoken only by those who speak the language of the capital, and also signify the military's exact actions, since they have destroyed the homes and families of those men whom they have imprisoned. These terms, moreover, suggest that the attempt to kill or outlaw the mountain language appears directly connected to the military's effort to destroy the domesticity that organizes the civilian characters. Such violence, furthermore, is carried out with precision, as it is done against the intimacy, or better, against the touch that organizes the domestic spaces in which these characters live.

The play concludes by once again affirming the ostensibly arbitrary manner in which the military exercises power, for the Guard addresses the Prisoner and tells him that he and his mother can speak in their own language. Yet, the officer's decree is but a red herring for a much more serious issue that is at stake in the scene, and in fact, the play as a whole:

> PRISONER: Mother, you can speak. *(Pause.)* Mother, I'm speaking to you. You see? We can speak. You can speak to me in our own language. (*She is still.)* You can speak. *(Pause.)* Mother. Can you hear me? I am speaking to you in our own language. *(Pause.)* Do you hear me? *(Pause.)* It's our own language. *(Pause.)* Can't you hear me? Do you hear me? *(She does not respond.)* Mother?

GUARD: Tell her she can speak in her own language. New rules. Until further notice.

PRISONER: Mother? *(She does not respond. She sits still. The Prisoner's trembling grows. He falls from his chair on to his knees, begins to gasp and shake violently. The Sergeant walks into the room and studies the Prisoner shaking on the floor.)*

SERGEANT: *(To Guard.)* Look at this. You go out of your way to give them a helping hand and they fuck it up. (Pinter, *ML* 14)

Taken at face value, the Elderly Woman's silence is rather ambiguous, and invites multiple interpretations. In the first case, her silence may signify that the Guard and the militant group to which he belongs have successfully exerted control over the mountain language, and are now capable of deciding when it may be used. In the second case, the Elderly Woman's silence may be positioned against the Guard and his authority to decide when it is and is not possible to speak in her language. However, while the Elderly Woman's silence may certainly illustrate either one of these two combating suggestions, it nevertheless calls us to consider a rather important feature of the scene's dialogue. Specifically, it is her son, the Prisoner, who tells his mother that they can speak in their own language. With this detail in mind, the Elderly Woman's silence is not a response to having been addressed by the Guard as he addresses the Prisoner. Furthermore, the Prisoner neither tells the Elderly Woman that it is the Guard who has informed him of their ability to speak in their language, nor is there any indication that the Elderly Woman ever understood her language to be outlawed in the first place. Hence, the Elderly Woman's silence comes as a direct response to her son's message. To be more precise, the Elderly Woman's silence is a reaction to having been addressed as, "Mother," by her son, whose ability to speak in his "mother tongue" occurs only after having been severely tortured and denied return to the safety of his mother's domestic space to which she referred in the voice-over between the two.

The Elderly Woman's silence, therefore, recalls the previously mentioned address given by Pinter in 1962 at Bristol University. For Pinter, silence such as the Elderly Woman's indicates that language has reached a limit beyond which it cannot pass. In other words, one is interrupted by that which he or she cannot properly signify, and as a result, one is left disposed to one's nakedness and radical vulnerability. Though *Mountain Language* contains similar silences, specifically in the second and third scene, each of these silences produced voice-over dialogue that took place during partial blackouts. However, the fourth scene does not contain a blackout, during which it may have been possible for a reader or audience member to hear the voice that articulates the vulnerability signaled by the Elderly Woman and the Prisoner. As Elissa Marder observes, "[t]he desire to speak recalls an impossible desire for the mother; a desire that she bear the burden of our birth by remaining the silent witness to a time we can only imagine but never know, a time before we needed to speak our alienation from her" ("Mother Tongue" 60). Yet, to suggest that the mother be made the "silent witness to a time we can only imagine but never know" may also be read in the context of death, for, at least in *Mountain Language*, the Elderly Woman ultimately becomes a silent witness to the death of her son. In other words, death, like birth, gives name to that which can only be imagined and never known, and therefore while the mother may "bear the burden of our birth," she also bears the burden of our death.

Having followed the mother's bloody hand, it is possible to hear in the Elderly Woman's silence a catastrophic truth associated with the maternal function as it appears in the play: on the one hand, the Elderly Woman lives her life in order to protect her son from death, and on the other hand, the very act of giving birth to him not only makes his death possible, but inevitable. It is with this in mind that the Elderly Woman's silence presents what Jacques Derrida calls the "law of obsequence: "[w]hen the face without face, name without name, of the mother returns, in

the end, one has what I called in *Glas* the logic of obsequence. The mother buries all her own. She assists whoever calls herself her mother, and follows all burials" (*LCP* 333). Despite the Sergeant's claim, there is no "helping hand" that can resolve this truth, especially given that the one whom it involves is the one, precisely, who suffers from an untended hand wound. Instead, the Elderly Woman's mute response to the call of her child bears witness to the fact that there is no language that could respond to the Prisoner's pleading, no "mother tongue" in which to answer her son. Consequently, this final silence reveals the Elderly Woman's unspeakable sorrow, for while her blood touched him and gave him life, and though it claims responsibility for his life, it is also what, despite her efforts, promised his death. And the pain of this truth cannot make its referent present, cannot, in other words, enter language, as it is proper to the prelinguistic touch shared between her and her son prior to his birth To follow the Elderly Woman's bloody hand is therefore to expose a certain ethical problematic. Specifically, while I have argued that the relationship between the Elderly Woman and her son presents the "law of obsequence," it is not the case that I am suggesting that the Elderly Woman is somehow responsible for her son's torture. Contrarily, it is because her body has touched and given birth to that which will die that the Elderly Woman demonstrates care and responsibility. It is a clear disregard for being responsible for another's life that defines the military's position, and while they have the power to kill, this power does not open for them an ethical relation toward those whose lives are in their hands.

The Elderly Woman's silence also suggests a meta-theatrical component of *Mountain Language*, and one that explicitly contributes to the development catastrophic theater in post-war British drama. Specifically, her silence suggests the impossibility that theater could ever transform the violence that it presents into an aesthetic that recuperates and alleviates the pain

caused by specific political turmoil such as, for example, the conflict between the Turkish and the Kurdish people, or between the United States and any one of the countries that it has invaded since World War II. I include these specific events because Pinter often commented on them throughout his later career. *Mountain Language,* in other words, neither offers a cathartic resolution, nor acts under the pretense that language, even poetic language, carries with it the possibility that it could assuage the pain associated with the violence that it supposedly represents. In this regard, the Elderly Woman's silence becomes aligned with an impossibility maintained by the aesthetics of the play itself. Yet, as Charles Grimes underscores, the moments of silence that pervade *Mountain Language* are difficult to transmit through the "written page," and therefore demand the medium of performance to "amplify the play's content" (98). In this regard, Grimes calls attention to a very important dynamic, namely, that the moments of silence in the text—including the blackouts as well as the Elderly Woman's silence—allow for the greatest range of creative and performative possibilities. In this regard, text and performance are called to work together in order to accomplish the play's most challenging and, as it were, catastrophic moments. Hence, *Mountain Language,* while unable to produce any sort of reconciliatory or cathartic effect, nevertheless allows its most troubling moments to be informed by the creative intervention of theater artists, rather than dictating the means by which such moments should be performed. In this manner, scenes like the Elderly Woman's silence acquire a particular political relevance, as they give theater artists the opportunity to perform them any number of ways, instead of closing down or silencing creative possibilities.

Harold Pinter's *Mountain Language* surely draws attention to Pinter's interest in silence and transferential forms of communication, exemplified by the Elderly Woman and the play's voice-overs respectively. However, with *Ashes to Ashes*, Pinter further elaborates on the

significance of these interests by more thoroughly integrating them into the play's form. Specifically, in the conclusion of *Ashes to Ashes*, the female protagonist, Rebecca, appears to bear witness to the play's catastrophic subject matter. Concluding with this exchange between Rebecca and her echo, *Ashes to Ashes* calls to mind the fact that Pinter had, in his 1962 Bristol address, mentioned echo as the figure through which one could read what remains unsaid, though not necessarily unheard, by one's silence. In this regard, *Ashes to Ashes*, like *Mountain Language*, demonstrates Pinter's very early fascination with silence and echo, both of which are transformed into specific dramatic techniques that develop Pinter's catastrophic theater.

**IV. Echoes of the Dead**

First produced at the Ambassadors Theatre, London, on 12 September 1996, Harold Pinter's *Ashes to Ashes* contains several features of his earlier plays, as two middle-aged characters, Rebecca and Devlin, interact in a fairly banal domestic space, and attempt to negotiate Rebecca's apparently conflicted past. In this way, the play's domestic setting resembles the setting of Pinter's "comedies of menace" such as *The Birthday Party* and *The Homecoming*, while the play's temporality calls to mind Pinter's "memory plays," which often concern how past events haunt and trouble the present. Furthermore, like *Old Times*—a so-called "memory play" that concludes by contrasting its ambiguous ending against the intensity of a brightly lit stage—*Ashes to Ashes* opens with instructions on how the play is to be lit: "The room darkens during the course of the play. The lamplight intensifies. By the end of the play, the room and the garden beyond are only dimly defined. The lamplight has become very bright but does not illumine the room" (*AA* 1). This juxtaposition between the intensity of the light emanating from the lamp and the darkness of the room and the world outside it not only creates a rather stunning visual effect, but it also directly reflects the play's dramatic conflict. Specifically, the battle

between dark and light in the stage directions contributes to the antagonism at stake in the play's dialogue, which explicitly juxtaposes Rebecca's dark and ambiguous past with Devlin's effort to learn about it (*AA* 11). Additionally, like Pinter's later political plays such as *Mountain Language*, *Ashes to Ashes* seems motivated by historical events of catastrophic violence. Specifically, it is the Shoah that appears to dominate much of what takes place in the play, so much so that the play is often considered to be Pinter's "Holocaust play" (Scolnicov 1). Validating this judgment, Pinter referenced Gitta Sereny's biography of Albert Speer and the work of Charlotte Delbo when commenting on *Ashes to Ashes* (Billington, *Pinter* 374, 375). And Katherine H. Burkman argues that the man from Rebecca's so-called past—whom Rebecca latter refers to as a "guide" who lead her to a railway where he took babies away from their mothers—represents Speer and his part in the orchestration of the Shoah (86-96). But for Pinter himself, the writings of Sereny and Delbo conjured images of the Shoah that had haunted him throughout his life, specifically that of "Nazi's picking up babies on bayonet-spikes and throwing them out of windows" (Billington, *Pinter* 375).

Pinter's *Ashes to Ashes* is therefore quite an extraordinary play, occupying an important place in his dramatic *oeuvre* as it successfully refers to and includes defining features of his "comedies of menace", "memory plays", and the later political plays, while at the same time surpassing the dramaturgical and political stakes of his previous work. While scholars have attempted to solve the play's mysterious quality by suggesting that it is either a representation of the Shoah or a depiction of the Shoah's effect on Pinter, it is still necessary to appreciate the text's nuances, as the dialogue that occurs between Devlin and Rebecca produces a rather circular movement that repeats throughout the play. In this regard, the dialogue's structure seems to fit the play's concern with the traumatic images that Rebecca remembers, insofar as one of

trauma's symptoms is the ostensible repetition of the traumatic event throughout the sufferer's lifetime (Freud, *Jenseits, GW XIII* 10). However, the dialogue's repetitive movement is not exact, as every time it comes full circle it leads to the discovery of a new variable or piece of information that propels the plot forward. By following the dialogue closely, it is possible to read how Rebecca's narrative is actually an effort to recall a dream that she, in the course of the play, remembers. Whether Rebecca invites readers of the play to interpret her as a sort of representation of Pinter's reaction to the Shoah, or whether she, as Mireia Aragay argues, speaks for "all those who have been or continued to be victimized" ("Postmodernism" 255), Pinter scholars have not as of yet engaged the fact that the traumatic images Rebecca recalls actually belong to a dream that she has had. As a result, *Ashes to Ashes* calls us to consider how the effects of trauma are telepathically transmitted.

In an effort to describe the mode that will situate my reading of *Ashes to Ashes,* Elissa Marder's insightful study of telepathy as engaged by psychoanalysis and deconstruction provides an important observation. Differentiating between the deconstructive and psychoanalytic incarnations of telepathic power, Marder states that what is at stake between the two is "the difference between understanding the magical power of telepathy as a deconstructive poetics and as a psychoanalytic hermeneutics of interpretation" ("Mourning" 194). In other words, whereas psychoanalysis transforms telepathy's magic into a "form of revelatory power that claims the capacity to produce new discourses of truth and knowledge", a deconstructive approach to telepathic reading describes "an encounter with an uncanny foreign body that forever remains inaccessible—not because it was ever hidden, but because the singular event of its literary inscription resists any translation into any known or knowable language" ("Mourning" 194). As we shall see, Pinter scholars have hitherto attempted to read hermeneutically the play, using the

play's telepathic quality as a means to pull from the play an object or specific event that recovers it from its ambiguous and fragmented nature. As already indicated, it is the Shoah to which scholars appeal in order reveal the play's meaning, subsequently transforming the play into an object of knowledge. But as I hope to show, whatever the event might be that constitutes Rebecca's dream and its telepathic quality, it is one that resists translation and even complicates the ontology that I have grammatically granted it. For example, as is evident in the play's conclusion, a child's abduction—an event that is telepathically transmitted through a dream—fragments Rebecca's very ability to speak of it when an echo interrupts her final testimony, creating a call and response that ultimately disavows a mother's memory of having had her baby taken away from her. To be sure, the play's title prefaces this conclusion, for rather than the remains of what has been set on fire, ashes appear when what has been incinerated leaves no trace of itself as itself (Derrida, *FLC* 32, 34 ).

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Despite the fact that Pinter scholars often associate *Ashes to Ashes* with Pinter's reaction to the Shoah, that *Ashes to Ashes* takes place "Now" may suggest that it is set in 1996, the year when the play was first produced. However, in this case both Devlin and Rebecca are too young to have lived through the Shoah. In fact, Pinter himself confirmed the fact that Rebecca did not live through the events that she recalls, stating "I mean, she [Rebecca] had never herself gone through any of these things *at all*, and, I hope that that's made absolutely clear in the play" (Pinter qtd. in Merritt, *Echoes* 75). The emphasis on "Now" may therefore serve to underscore the complicated relationship between events that appear to take place in the past, and yet seem to survive and live on into the future. Therefore, the problem of temporality announced at the very beginning of the play suggests that the circular movement of the play's dialogue is an important

feature, since those who suffer from traumatic stress often experience the traumatic event's return, even long after it is believed to have ended. But before Rebecca describes the traumas to which she bears witness, namely the abduction of children at a railway station and the drowning of factory workers in the sea, she first recalls a man with whom she appears to have had a sado-masochistic relationship:

> Rebecca: Well…for example…he would stand over me and clench his fist. And then he'd put his other hand on my neck and grip it and bring my head towards him. His fist…grazed my mouth. And he'd say, "Kiss my fist."
>
> Devlin: And did you?
>
> Rebecca: Oh yes. I kissed his fist. The knuckles. And then he'd open his hand and give me the palm of his hand…to kiss…which I kissed.
>
> *Pause.*
>
> And then I would speak.
>
> Devlin: What did you say? You said what? What did you say?
>
> *Pause*
>
> Rebecca: I said, "Put your hand round my throat." I murmured it through his hand, as I was kissing it, but he heard my voice, he heard it through his hand, he felt my voice in his hand, he heard it there.
>
> *Silence.*
>
> Devlin: And did he? Did he put his hand round your throat?
>
> Rebecca: Oh yes. He did. He did. And he held it there, very gently, very gently, so gently. He adored me, you see […]He put a little…pressure…on my throat, yes. So that my head started to go back, gently but truly.

Devlin: And your body? Where did your body go?

Rebecca: My body went back, slowly but truly. (*AA* 3-7)

Though efforts to define the relationship between Devlin and Rebecca are common—interpretations include the possibility that the two are romantic partners (Angel-Perez 145), or that Devlin acts as a sort of psychoanalyst who attempts to uncover Rebecca's past in order to understand his own comportment towards her (Owens 78)—*Ashes to Ashes* never specifically defines the relationship between the two. The characters' proper names help to explain their relationship. In the first case, the name Devlin is from the Anglicized form of Gaelic *Ó Dobhailéin*, or "descendant of Dobhailéan" and a diminutive of dobhail, meaning "unlucky" or "unfortunate." Furthermore, the name Rebecca conjures the play's association with the Shoah given that its Hebrew origin, *Ribhqeh*, which means "connection," is derived from the Semitic base, *R B Q*, meaning "to tie" or "join." The proper names of the characters therefore reflect the conflict that situates the play: the name "Devlin" emphasizes the character's foreignness within the English home in which the play takes place, his own alienation from Rebecca, and is paradigmatic of his inability to come to terms with the trauma to which Rebecca bears witness; furthermore, the name "Rebecca" underscores her connection to a past that haunts her. More specifically, Rebecca is connected to the memory of a man who controls the parts of her body that are necessary for both breath and speech. Furthermore, holding Rebecca's neck, the man causes her body to go backward, a detail that is articulated only after Devlin asks her where her body went. Therefore, rather than simply confirm Devlin's suspicion that Rebecca may have been "unfaithful" to him, Rebecca's reaction to Devlin's inquiry suggests that she does not possess her words, but is instead possessed by them as they emerge from going back in time in order to give voice to the past.

As the play continues, Rebecca undermines Devlin's attempt to express his affection for her, as Devlin's questions only provide Rebecca with opportunities to speak of the unidentified man with whom she appears to have had an intimate relationship:

Rebecca: Well, how can you possibly call me darling? I'm not your darling.

Devlin: Yes you are.

Rebecca: Well I don't want to be your darling. It's the last thing I want to be. I'm nobody's darling.

Devlin: That's a song.

Rebecca: What?

Devlin:"I'm nobody's baby now".

Rebecca: It's "*You're* nobody's baby now". But anyway, I didn't use the word baby.

*Pause*

I can't tell you what he looked like.

Devlin: Have you forgotten?

Rebecca: No. I haven't forgotten. But that's not the point. Anyway, he went away years ago.

Devlin: Went away? Where did he go?

Rebecca: His job took him away. He had a job.

Devlin: What was it?

Rebecca: What?

Devlin: What kind of job was it? What job?

Rebecca: I think it had something to do with a travel agency. I think he was a kind of courier. No. No, he wasn't. That was only a part-time job. I mean that was only part

> of his job in the agency. He was quite high up, you see. He had a lot of responsibilities.
>
> *Pause*. (Pinter, *AA* 17-19)

As is evident in the above passage, key words and phrases uttered by Devlin conjure associations that are important to Rebecca. Specifically, Devlin addresses Rebecca with a cliché term of endearment, "darling," only then to recall a song, "I'm nobody's baby now." However, Devlin's attempt to engage Rebecca is quickly followed by her correction that the title of the song is rather, "You're nobody's baby now." The dialogue therefore shifts the emphasis from "darling" to "baby" and then reorients the personal pronouns of the song title from the first person to the third person. Consequently, this shift from the first person, "I'm nobody's baby now" to the third person, "You're nobody's baby now" also shifts the signification of the word "baby" from a term of endearment to that of an actual infant or child. In this case, Rebecca's ability to remember the song title, "You're Nobody's Baby Now" suggests a rather important disclosure that helps to propel the play forward, as it speaks of the disappearance of someone's infant. The change of emphasis from "darling" to "baby" also introduces new facts about the mysterious man from Rebecca's past. In fact, Rebecca provides more details about the man only after acknowledging that she did not use the word baby when replying to Devlin's affection. The structure of Rebecca's reply to Devlin therefore connects the possible disappearance of a baby, which Rebecca immediately disavows when stating, "I didn't use the word baby," with the man who dominates Rebecca's narrative.

As Rebecca continues to answer Devlin's questions, she discloses to him that the guide took her to a strange factory in which the workers wore "soft caps" that they doffed when she and the man entered the building (Pinter, *AA* 23). Emphasizing the fact that the workers were

"very musical," Rebecca's recollection transforms the debate about music she had just had with Devlin into an observation about factory workers. And this observation segues into her ability to remember another fact about the guide, namely, that he travelled "to the local railway station" and walked down the platform, tearing all the babies from the arms of their screaming mothers (Pinter, *Ashes* 27).[10] Formally speaking, the exchanges between Devlin and Rebecca that finally lead to her admission that the man committed acts that were literally consonant with the song title that she remembers suggest the dialogue's circular structure: the move from music to the acknowledgement that the man was a travel agent returns as Rebecca moves from commenting on the musicality of workers to describing the guide's violent actions as he took children from their mothers. As the play progresses, Rebecca only responds to Devlin's continued inquiry about the guide and his actions by referring to her own daily experiences. For example, when asked whether or not the guide actually took babies from the arms of their mothers, Rebecca states that she hates police sirens "echoing away" from her, and expresses that she finds it discomforting when a pen falls off of her coffee table since, "you know nothing of its history" because it "has no parents" (Pinter, *AA* 29-37).

Events such as the echoing of sirens and the falling of pens from tables cause Rebecca to recollect another detail of the guide's behavior, namely, that he led many people over the cliffs of Dorset and down into the sea, where they, along with their luggage, "bobbed about in the waves" (Pinter, *AA* 47-49). Having recalled the guide's involvement in the drowning of several people, Rebecca again returns to a concern that, at first, appears specific to her everyday life: she discusses a mental condition called "mental elephantiasis" (Pinter, *AA* 51). Rather than provide a specific medical definition for "mental elephantiasis," Rebecca instead resorts to metaphor:

> This mental elephantiasis means that when you spill an ounce of gravy, for example, it immediately expands and becomes a vast sea of gravy. It becomes a sea of gravy which surrounds you on all sides and you suffocate in a voluminous sea of gravy. It's terrible. But it's all your fault. You brought it upon yourself. You are not the *victim* of it, you are the *cause* of it. Because it was you who spilt the gravy in the first place, it was you who handed over the bundle. (Pinter, *AA* 51)

The progression from Rebecca's concern with the echoing of police sirens, to the pen that falls off of her table, to the description of "mental elephantiasis" creates an important network of signifiers: mental elephantiasis is likened to the sea, which not only suffocates one who suffers from the condition, but also calls to mind the workers whom the guide leads to the sea in order to die; moreover, Rebecca states that the sufferers of mental elephantiasis are responsible for their condition, as they let go of "the bundle," and therefore deprive it, like the pen, of its history and parents. Consequently, in the concerns of Rebecca's everyday life can be heard the echo of the violence associated with the guide's actions, and, in turn, each time Rebecca confesses something new about the guide, she is led to disclose an anxiety that hampers her life.

While Rebecca gradually articulates more and more details of her experiences with the guide, she explicitly states that nothing has happened to her (Pinter, *AA* 41). For Pinter, this detail is extraordinarily important, for the play does not concern a young woman who lived through the traumatic events about which she speaks, but rather pertains to a woman who is haunted by the *images* of these events (Merrit, "Echoes" 75). Yet, while the source of her narrative and its images is unclear throughout the first half of the play, Rebecca explicitly recalls the origin of her narrative immediately after describing mental elephantiasis:

Devlin: So what's the question? Are you prepared to drown in your own gravy? Or are you prepared to die for your country? Look. What do you say, sweetheart? Why don't we go out and drive into town and take in a movie?

Rebecca: That's funny, somewhere in a dream…a long time ago…I heard someone calling me sweetheart.

*Pause*.

I looked up. I'd been dreaming. I don't know whether I looked up in the dream or as I opened my eyes. But in this dream a voice was calling. That I'm certain of. This voice was calling me. It was calling me sweetheart.

*Pause*.

Yes.

*Pause*.

I walked out into the frozen city. Even the mud was frozen. And the snow was a funny color. It wasn't white. Well, it was white but there were other colours in it. It was as if there were veins running through it. And it wasn't smooth, as snow is, as snow should be. It was bumpy. And when I got to the railway station I saw the train. Other people were there.

*Pause*

And my best friend, the man I had given my heart to, the man I knew was the man for me the moment we met, my dear, my most precious companion, I watched him walk down the platform and tear all the babies from the arms of their screaming mothers. (Pinter, *AA* 51-53)

The structure that prompts Rebecca to remember her dream follows the structure that prompted Rebecca's disclosure that the man from her past was a guide. Specifically, just as Devlin's term of endearment, "darling", prompted Rebecca to mention that the man she referred to at the beginning of the play was a guide, so too does Rebecca remember that her recollections are from a dream only after Devlin addresses her with another term of endearment, "sweetheart". The fact that it is Rebecca's dream that bears witness to the traumatic images that she describes makes it necessary to consider the discourse on trauma and its relation to dreams.

Attentive to the significance of trauma as it appears in *Ashes to Ashes*, Elisabeth Angel-Perez suggests that Rebecca's character allows for the opportunity for a collective memory to articulate itself, a memory that is, furthermore, unfolded as Rebecca appears inhabited by, and not the agent of, the memories of which she speaks ("Dibbuks" 151). Haunted by these memories and repeatedly elaborating upon them in order to elucidate their content, Rebecca, for Angel-Perez, suffers from PTSD ("Dibbuks" 158). The association to PTSD in *Ashes to Ashes* certainly provides a useful and important frame within which to interpret the play, for not only does Rebecca speak of traumatic events, but she also seems to exhibit the condition's symptoms as she constantly repeats phrases and images associated with the events that she describes. As Angel-Perez states, "In Pinter's text, spectral presences loom larger and larger thanks to a whole range of stylistic devices: the text reflects Rebecca's traumatic neurosis/stress disorder. Freud explains how patients with PTSD suffer repetitive assaults by the traumatic event" ("Dibbuks" 158). And, as Angel-Perez argues:

> He [Pinter] does not write about the Shoah but about the memory of the Shoah, about what Blanchot calls *l'après-coup*, (*the aftershock*) taking up the Freudian concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, this chronotype in which past events repeat themselves ceaselessly but

> are somehow put at a distance by present time. With *Ashes to Ashes*, Pinter places himself in "the aesthetics of post-memory." What interests him […] is the way Auschwitz repercusses, ricocheting on the future generations. ("Dibbuks" 151)

Despite Angel-Perez's astute analysis, it is unclear, however, that the formulation of *Nachträglichkeit* that Freud provides in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, and which becomes central to trauma studies after Freud, suggests the repetition of an original traumatic event. In fact, it is possible to read an ambiguity surrounding the repetitive temporality of trauma. However, in order to more fully appreciate the development of *Nachträglichkeit*, it is necessary to return to *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

Like *Ashes to Ashes*, Freud's elucidation of traumatic neurosis in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* calls attention to a "railway disaster," for as Freud states, railway disasters and other accidents akin to them involve the sort of risk to life that often provokes traumatic neuroses (*Jenseits, GW XIII* 9-10).[11] Continuing, Freud states that the chief cause of trauma "seems to rest upon the factor of surprise, of fright; and secondly, that a wound or injury inflicted simultaneously works as a rule *against* the development of neurosis" (*Jenseits, GW XIII* 10). From Freud's elaboration, two important consequences follow. First, differentiating fright [*Schreck*] from anxiety [*Angst*] and fear [*Furcht*], Freud states that fright emphasizes the element of surprise (*Jenseits, GW XIII* 10). Hence, the traumatic event is traumatic insofar as it is an event that is unexpected (*Jenseits, GW XIII* 10). Second, in keeping with the suggestion that trauma works against the development of neurosis, Freud turns to dreams in order to elaborate a rather astonishing concern, namely, why the dreams of those who suffer from traumatic neuroses have the characteristic of constantly bringing the patient back into the situation of his or her accident (*Jenseits, GW XIII* 10-11). To be sure, the dreams of those suffering from traumatic

neurosis complicates Freud's theory of dreams in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, since trauma dreams neither allow the sleeper to rest, nor do they fulfill the wish or wishes of those who dream (*Traumdeutung*, *GW II* 123-126). However, pertinent to the discussion of traumatic dreams and *Nachträglichkeit*, the "repetition" of the traumatic event that occurs in the dream "repeats" because one was never ready for it. And it is precisely because one is not ready for the traumatic event that one cannot assume to have been purely present to its occurrence. As a result, it becomes impossible to locate the trauma's precise temporal coordinates, since it is through the affect that it creates—for example, a dream—that one is able to become ostensibly more conscious that it happened.

This detour through Freud—though neither extensive in its attention to the structure of trauma as it appears implicitly and explicitly throughout Freud's corpus, nor explicitly engaged in the many discourses that have responded to Freud's work on trauma— is nevertheless necessary: the connection between Freud's psychoanalytic discourse and Harold Pinter's *Ashes to Ashes* appears rather explicit and it has had an important influence on the play's scholarly reception. Yet, as a result of the detour, it is possible to restage the engagement between Freud's work and *Ashes to Ashes*. Specifically, Freud's interest in the temporality of trauma suggests that trauma explodes the distinction between past and present insofar as the affect associated with the so-called "traumatic event" survives well beyond the historical date and or time that it occurred. The repercussions that Angel-Perez identifies as symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder are therefore precisely what allow one suffering from PTSD to become more conscious of the trauma that affects him or her. In other words, it is because trauma interrupts a "straightforward temporal or causal continuum" that it, through the after-shocks it produces, appears comprehensible as traumatic (Bennington 42). What is, however, described in this examination

of trauma dreams is a way to account for how or why dreams may be read as witnesses to trauma. In other words, dreams may be trauma's "after-shock" *par excellence* as they appear to return to the act or action associated with the trauma, and yet make visible the inability to locate precisely the time at which the respective traumatic event happened. In this case, the dream work of one suffering from traumatic neurosis appears to follow Freud's elaboration of *Nachträglichkeit,* insofar as the term names trauma's deferential structure, acknowledging that what is called a "traumatic event" can only be recognized as such through the belated "after-shocks" that compromise one's ability to state conclusively the moment when the traumatic event occurred.

With the psychoanalytic exploration of trauma and *Nachträglichkeit* in mind, Jeanne Colleran cites recent trauma studies scholarship in order to account for Rebecca's behavior. As Colleran states, "Rebecca is, in LaCapra's terms, 'possessed by the past and performatively caught up in the compulsive repetition of traumatic scenes'. This 'acting out' constitutes a 'melancholic feedback loop' where 'tenses implode'" (95). For Colleran, Dominick LaCapra's *Writing History, Writing Trauma* helps to describe how Rebecca's narrative articulates a belated temporality that appears consonant with LaCapra's argument that trauma implodes tenses such as past, present, and future. However, occurring in a "Now" that is continuously repeated with each performance and always haunted, the play underscores an important implication of Rebecca's testimony: the possibility of being affected by traumatic events that have or may have occurred prior to one's capacity to have endured them. In this regard, the concept of the melancholic feedback loop that Colleran takes from LaCapra's thought neither corresponds exactly with the manner in which Rebecca's narrative speaks of trauma, nor does it engage the issue of the "Now" in which the play is set. Instead, rather than a feedback loop, Rebecca's narrative appears

more akin to the description of mental elephantiasis that she gives in her correspondence with Devlin. In other words, by calling attention to what happens when one breaks a gravy boat resting on a table, Rebecca not only provides a metaphor that describes mental elephantiasis, but she also figures the movement by which she inherits the traumatic images that appear to her in her dreams. And though she denies having had anything traumatic happen to her, the metaphor of the gravy spilling is immediately associated with the taking of babies from the arms of their mothers. As such, Rebecca rhetorically and structurally associates the metaphor linked to a particular psychological condition with the dominant image of her dream. Hence, the spilling of the gravy underscores the play's elucidation of the temporal structure specific to trauma: akin to the breaking of a gravy boat and the expansion of gravy that flows over a surface and risks spilling over onto another surface, trauma ruptures and escapes from the temporal coordinate to which it may at first appear to belong, and can adversely affect those who may claim not to have been present to it.

The play concludes in a manner that appears rather reminiscent of its opening, as Devlin inhabits the position first assigned to the guide: he grabs the back of Rebecca's neck, tells her to "kiss his fist," and then demands that she say to him, "put your hand round my throat." However, rather than positively respond to Devlin's demands, and thereby repeat the relation with the guide that appeared to her in her dream, Rebecca instead offers her last testimony:

Rebecca: They took us to the trains

Echo: the trains

*He takes his hand from her throat*.

Rebecca: They were taking the babies away

Echo: the babies away

*Pause.*

Rebecca: I took my baby and wrapped it in my shawl

Echo: my shawl

Rebecca: And I made it into a bundle

Echo: a bundle

Rebecca: And I held it under my left arm

Echo: my left arm

*Pause.*

Rebecca: And I went through with my baby

Echo: my baby

*Pause.*

Rebecca: But the baby cried out

Echo: cried out

Rebecca: And the man called me back

Echo: called me back

Rebecca: And he said what do you have there

Echo: have there

Rebecca: He stretched out his hand for the bundle

Echo: for the bundle

Rebecca: And I gave him the bundle

Echo: the bundle

Rebecca: And that's the last time I held the bundle

Echo: the bundle

*Silence.*

Rebecca: And we got on the train

Echo: the train

Rebecca: And we arrived at this place

Echo: this place

Rebecca: And I met a woman I knew

Echo: I knew

Rebecca: And she said what happened to your baby

Echo: your baby

Rebecca: Where is your baby

Echo: your baby

Rebecca: And I said what baby

Echo: what baby

Rebecca: I don't have a baby

Echo: a baby

Rebecca: I don't know of any baby

Echo: of any baby

*Pause.*

Rebecca: I don't know of any baby

*Long silence*

*Blackout.* (Pinter, *AA* 75-85)

Hanna Scolnikov's important reading of this final scene suggests that as the play represents the Shoah's horrific legacy, it also allows us to remember those who died during the Shoah (7, 8).

This emphasis on memory, furthermore, need not refer only to the past, but may also pertain to the ability to become aware of those atrocities occurring in what is called the present (Merritt, "Echoes" 79). Therefore, while the images within the play may at first emerge as memories associated with the Shoah, the violence of these images conjures the violent actions of, at least for Pinter, post-World War II democracy, insofar as counties such as the United States and Great Britain have themselves subscribed to "repressive, cynical, and indifferent acts of murder" (Pinter qtd. in Aragay, "Interview" 10-11). Consequently, the play's ability to remember those who have died in the past suggests something about its capacity to allow readers and spectators to reflect on their shared social responsibility. Rebecca even seems to confirm this suggestion when claiming that those who have mental elephantiasis are responsible for their affliction. To be sure, the ethical impetus of the play is rather powerful and without question. But it is at least worth mentioning the fact that the memory that Rebecca recalls is of an event that never happened to her in waking life. Observant of this fact, Mark Taylor-Batty therefore suggests that while Rebecca's memories do not remember any particular event that occurred during her lifetime, they nonetheless suggest "some possible real trauma that she is struggling to overcome" (111). Rebecca's memories do have something to do with "real trauma." Yet, as I hope to have demonstrated by my analysis of traumatic temporality, trauma, by its very definition, explodes the concept of the referent, and it is to this explosion that Rebecca's dream seems to bear testimony. In other words, Rebecca's narrative makes it difficult, perhaps even impossible, to locate the "real trauma" that she is struggling to overcome, since she herself disavows having ever experienced the traumatic event that she recalls. Despite the difficulty associated with Taylor-Batty's claim, it is still worth pursuing the connection between Rebecca's narrative and the possibility that it bears witness to trauma, albeit a trauma that, as we have seen, does not rest

comfortably in the past. Yet, in order to accomplish this, it is worth reflecting on the structure of the echo before deciding on its function as a means of communication.

**V. The Ashes of History**

In her reading of Echo's figuration throughout literature and trauma studies, Judith Greenberg argues that the echo is paradigmatic of trauma and the repercussive effects that it produces. An echo alters the content of an original phrase, and returns to the speaker not only the sound of one's voice as only the other can hear it, but also a phrase that is similar, though not exact, to the one that he or she had first said. As a result of this dynamic, Greenberg argues that:

> The sound of an echo is thus necessarily a *belated return*. Echoes seem to return *fragments* of sounds because the angle of incidence of sound waves equals the angle of reflection, meaning that an echo of a certain delay will return a sound of that duration or less. An echo may return the sound not just once but repeatedly, as in a series of echoes or an echo chamber due to complex conformations of reflecting surfaces. In this simplified description of the salient characteristics of acoustical echoes emerge the first two features of PTSD—returning and fragmentary pieces of an original. Furthermore, concave structures have become associated with a lurking and invisible vocal presence, this creating the sense of echoes that hover mysteriously in the air, with a separate vitality of their own. In this respect, the echo that *survives* between presence and non-presence or life and death can suggest the way that trauma may seem to lurk invisibly in the air and uncontrollably possess its victim. […] The trope of the echo can symbolize the persistence of belated and fragmentary after-effects, returns, or reflections of an original—the original utterance of the original traumatic moment(s)—even if that original remains inaccessible. (324, 325)

As we have already encountered, the symptoms of post-traumatic stress often include affects that return one to the "scene" of the traumatic event. Yet, as Cathy Caruth states, "[t]he historical power of the trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all" (17). And as we have already witnessed, such forgetting most explicitly appears legible in Freud's account of trauma when he describes trauma's unexpected nature, which creates "after-shocks" that seem to cause one to return to the original event. Yet, if the repetition of the traumatic event is said to take place, then the event itself cannot be described as having ever fully ended, and as a result, the term "repetition" may not be the best one to describe the temporality that trauma creates. Instead, I have suggested that the metaphor of the spilt gravy that Rebecca uses to describe mental elephantiasis may be a better indication of trauma's effect, for as Greenberg also states, trauma lurks and possesses its victims in such a way as to explode the linearity (or rather, the direct connection between past and present) that repetition implies.

Taking the echo as our cue for engaging the topic of trauma, what is striking about the echo in the conclusion of *Ashes to Ashes* is that it makes audible something within Rebecca's speech that is foreign to her; and this point is furthermore emphasized by the fact that the echo eliminates any reference to the guide. What to make of this elision remains unclear, for it may emphasize the connection between the woman and her child or, perhaps, suggest the guide's phantasmatic existence and his inability to exert control upon Rebecca's life (Merritt, "Echoes" 80). In fact, both of these possibilities seem perfectly viable. But what is important about the structure of the echo is not just that its return fragments a speaker's speech, but that its sound is radically different from the sound that the speaker hears when he or she first spoke. This difference, which is integrated into the very structure of the echo, emphasizes something of the

other within the self, as the echo allows the speaker to hear what or part of what one says, but to do so by receiving one's voice as only the other can hear the speaker's voice. What is therefore significant about this structure is that the echo confronts the speaker with the non-appropriable otherness within him or herself. And such alterity, furthermore, calls into question the speaker's autonomy as the origin of his or her language.[12]

That the echo marks a division between itself and Rebecca therefore questions the precise manner in which memory enters into Rebecca's final testimony. In order to appreciate this issue, it is important to consider how Pinter's own reflections on echo appear to be consonant with the rather alienating consequences of the echo's structure. For Pinter, echo remains when silence falls and acts as a sort of reverberation through which one can hear what one or another attempts to conceal with words. The echo that appears in Rebecca's final testimony emphasizes key terms and phrases such as "baby," "cried out," and "bundle," and in so doing creates a sort of dialogue with Rebecca. And as Greenberg follows the work of Shoshana Felman, the dialogue that is created between a speaker and an echo "serves to expose latent significations. The echoes of traumatic narratives reveal layers of the unassimilatable experience" (336). The transition from baby to bundle, a transition that is provoked by the echo in much the same way as Devlin's words prompt Rebecca's narrative to unfold, creates a drastic effect, designating "the contained, an envelope lacking an inside, a kernel, some kind of signifier deprived of its signified" (Angel-Perez, "Dibbuks" 157). Furthermore, Rebecca herself becomes the echo of her own words, as her final words, "I don't know of any baby" repeat and respond to the echo's final call, "of any baby." Like the echo of the siren, which makes present to Rebecca the ambulance's absence, the echo that occurs at the play's conclusion underscores how the sound of the baby's cries signal its departure and radical absence. Specifically, like the pen, whose history and parentage escape

Rebecca, Rebecca concludes her testimony with a response to her echo that ultimately disavows the child's genealogy and existence. In fact, the figure of the missing infant alone bears witness to its disavowal: without speech (*in-fans*) the infant emphasizes the incommunicability of its absence.[13] Furthermore, figuring the child only then to subject it to disfigurement by virtue of the shift from "baby" to "bundle," the play suggests the sudden preclusion of futurity that is furthermore emphasized by the eternal "Now" in which the play is set, as well as by echo of the figure of the infant that occurs when Rebecca repeats her own echo and proclaims, "I don't know of any baby" (Pinter, *AA* 85).

In order to engage fully with the infant's absence, it is necessary to turn to the play's title and the manner that the figure of ashes appears in the play. For a play entitled, *Ashes to Ashes*, it would seem as though the appearance of ashes in the play would prove vital to it. Though the topic of ashes does conjure the Shoah, suggesting a reference to the burnt remains of those who were murdered in Nazi death camps, this reference does not explicitly appear in the play. Instead, the play references ashes in a moment during which Rebecca and Devlin return to the topic of music:

> Rebecca: No. You can end once and then you can end again.
>
> *Silence.*
>
> (*Singing softly*) 'Ashes to ashes'—
>
> Devlin: 'And dust to dust'—
>
> Rebecca: 'If the women don't get you'—
>
> Devlin: 'The liquor must.'
>
> *Pause.*
>
> I always knew you loved me.

Rebecca: Why?

Devlin: Because we like the same tunes (Pinter, *AA* 68, 69).

The song sung by Rebecca and Devlin is an ordinary saloon song that has, over time, made its way into several American and British pop songs. But given the progression from ashes to dust in the song sung by Devlin and Rebecca, the play calls to mind numerous biblical passages, most notably *Genesis* 3.19, which states "By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust and to dust you shall return" (Meeks 10).[14] The reference to *Genesis* also carries with it a connection to "The Ordre for the Buriall of the Dead" first published within the 1549 *The Book of Common Prayer*, which states, "I commende thy soule to God the father almighty, and thy body to the grounde, earth to earth, asshes to asshes, dust to dust, in sure and certayne hope of resurreccion to eternall life, through our Lord Jesus Christ, who shall change our vile body, that it may be lyke to his glorious body, accordying to the myghtie working wherby he is hable to subdue all thynges to him selfe" (Cummings 82, 83). The lyrics of Rebecca and Devlin's song therefore suggest the play's obsequial quality, for though Devlin believes that Rebecca loves him because they like the same music, this ostensibly inconsequential remark becomes rather significant given that music is associated with those over whom the guide exerts authority. And it is music, furthermore, that catalyzes Rebecca's memory of the babies who are taken from their mothers. Hence, the play's structure explicitly connects music with the horrific sounds of the violence that Rebecca describes when recalling her dream. But unlike the song, "Ashes to Ashes", the sound of mothers and their children crying belongs to Rebecca's dream and cannot be made audible.

Though the reference to ashes in the song sung by Rebecca and Devlin does conjure a Christian context in which the return of one's body to the ashes and dust from which it came is a

necessary condition of one's resurrection through the second coming of Christ, the song shifts away from this context, thereby making it necessary to reflect on the topic of ashes as it concerns the play. For example, Jacques Derrida's constant attention to ashes throughout his work appears as an important contribution for considering how to engage the appearance of ashes in Pinter's work. As Derrida writes, "There is ash, perhaps, but ash is not. This remainder seems to remain of what was, and was presently; it seems to nourish itself or quench its thirst at the spring of being-present, but it emerges from being, it exhausts, in advance, the being from which it seems to draw. The remaining of the remained—ash, almost nothing—is not being-that-remains if, at least, one understands by that being-that-subsists" (*Shibboleth* 43). For Angel-Perez, Derrida's reflection on ashes provides the opportunity to reflect on the poetic quality of *Ashes to Ashes*:

> Thanks to this spectral poetry, this ash-poetry, the death camps, without being mentioned even once, acquire an increased presence: they literally invade the reality of 1966 [*sic*] and lock the characters up in a past which is unnatural in so far as it no longer belongs to the past, "There, there are ashes, which take space by leaving space, to make heard; nothing will have taken place, except the place. There, there are ashes: there is place." Derrida says in his celebration of the oxymoron. The text becomes the emblem of this confinement in which the characters wall themselves up and whose final and logical expression is silence, not as if to signal an aporia though, but as the other of language. ("Dibbuks" 159, 160)

To suggest that Pinter's "ash-poetry" somehow makes the Nazi death camps present because it fails to mention them recalls the logic that Pinter's first readers used in order to explain how Pinter's early plays used language. Specifically, Angel-Perez's argument is reminiscent of Esslin's own suggestion that Pinter's language expresses the inexpressible. In other words, just

as Esslin argued that Pinter's early plays can make present that which escapes presence, Angel-Perez argues that by failing to refer directly to the Shoah, Pinter allows the Nazi death camps to appear. Consequently, Angel-Perez's reading determines the play's meaning by referencing a specific historical event. As already indicated, this logical formulation is one that presupposes that language functions according to a referential model, and as we have already seen following Quigley's interpretive gesture, this model has been rigorously criticized throughout twentieth- and twenty-first-century literary criticism. Yet the implication of Angel-Perez's analysis is not simply that it falls back into a method of reading Pinter that may be antiquated. Instead, by analyzing *Ashes to Ashes* in a way that assumes that language functions according to a referential model, Angel-Perez's analysis betrays the post-structuralist criticism that she evokes. Specifically, for Derrida, ashes do not bring into presence what something was and they do not allow the being of what had been burned to become present, albeit in some charred form. Instead, ashes remain from what is not in order to recall only non-being or non-presence (*Feu la cendre* 37, 73). Ashes do not mark the preservation of the object that has been burned, and they do not refer to that which has been destroyed or is no longer present. Rather, they refer only to themselves, remaining without any remainder of what has been burned as they come, precisely, from what is not.

As Freud and Pinter show, the traumatic event, like ashes and the echo that interrupts Rebecca's final testimony, comes from nowhere. Trauma and ashes and, still more, *Traum* and ashes: Rebecca's dream [*Traum*], that is, which in the play appears as if from nowhere, and which is acknowledged by Rebecca only after she has begun her narrative. The play therefore creates a structural connection among ashes, trauma, Rebecca's dream, and the echo. But while the echo may be a figure of trauma, it does not limit the play to a specific traumatic event as the

figure of ashes would always disrupt this process, leaving us to consider the plays mysterious and unreadable quality. This is not to say, however, that the play does not concern the topic of memory, for occupying the position of a mother in this dream, Rebecca opens the ethical imperative to remember and calls to mind the importance of the Elderly Woman's maternal function in *Mountain Language*. Yet, unlike the Elderly Woman, whose silence bears witness to the promise of her son's death that is constituted by the maternal body, it is Rebecca's ability to remember that in her dream she denied ever having a baby that reveals a catastrophic truth, namely, the possibility that people can be taken and killed in such a way that it is as if they had never existed.[15]

While the dream provides Rebecca with the illusion that she may have been present to the traumatic events that she describes, her final words "I don't know of any baby" illustrate the fictional quality of the illusions contained in her dream, while simultaneously speaking of the child's non-being as uncannily encrypted within her. What is remembered, therefore, is not the loss of a child, but the inability to make its disappearance present, the inability, furthermore, to determine whether or not the child ever lived or died. To suggest such indeterminacy is to imply the implosion of memory if it is to be responsible for making an event present. Specifically, without anything to remember as having lived and died, Rebecca is unable to give the event that she recalls a proper name, for example, the Shoah. Rebecca is therefore left to speak of and remember the impossibility that memory could ever do justice to the trauma to which it claims to refer; yet in so doing, Rebecca's final testimony does not betray that which it attempts to remember, but ultimately disavows. Rather, it does justice to the traumas that she receives in her dreams. Through her echoed testimony, Rebecca communicates incommunicability. This is not to say that she communicates the incommunicable, for as we have already seen such a suggestion

would rely on a linguistic model that has been challenged. Instead, it is to suggest that Rebecca communicates the inability to make present the horror of which she speaks, a horror that would demand that ashes somehow spoke and referred to something that could be remembered when they in fact remember nothing but themselves, and materialize the inability to reach beyond themselves in order to make present the life that had burned. For the living, then, there is another trauma to be considered: the impossibility that they could remember and speak of the traumas that affect them, and in so doing rescue what remains of them from the fires of history, or the waters of forgetfulness.

As already observed, the play concludes as the lights within the room in which the play takes place glow brighter as the room becomes darker. The light within the house, in other words, does not bring clarity, but instead produces darkness and silence. In this regard, the play ends by calling attention to the function of language in Pinter's plays, as the silence that closes the plays allows readers and spectators to further reflect on the play, and to grapple with Rebecca's final statement, which echoes in the darkness of the room in which she resides. Though tragic in content, Pinter's play is anything but a tragedy, as it exchanges the resolution often found in tragedies, whether in the form of insight or reconciliation, with Rebecca's rather ambiguous admissions. And as I have attempted to demonstrate, neither Rebecca in *Ashes to Ashes* nor the Elderly Woman in *Mountain Language* suggest that the traumatic events to which they bear witness are subject to representation and, subsequently, the cathartic resolution that tragedy provides. In this regard, Pinter's political plays make a bold aesthetic gesture, as they undermine the classical effort to appropriate pain and suffering into a paradigm that produces pleasure and educates a public. Furthermore, that Pinter's later political plays exclude mention of any specific political conflict testifies to their critical engagement with the re-presentation of

specific historical traumas and violent events for a public's edification and enjoyment. But perhaps more revolutionary is the political gesture made by Pinter's later plays as they situate maternal figures in the position that is responsible for most clearly reflecting and responding to the conflict depicted in his plays. Mothers, and not men, whether they are politicians, soldiers, or fathers, take center stage in order to give voice to a form of memory that resists the manner that theater, and specifically tragedy, has been an used to reinforce normative values (Loraux 19-47). Pinter's political plays, therefore, not only suggest a critical attitude toward the types of politically motivated violence that are depicted in his plays, but they also challenge the politics of theatrical art itself insofar as it has historically ostracized women, and in particular mothers, from the representation of politically motivated violence.

## CHAPTER TWO

## The Language of Grief and the Grief of Language: Sarah Kane's Impossible Theater

> In the end, they no longer need us, those who left too soon […]
> But we, who do need such great
> secrets, we for whom mourning is so often
> The source of blessed progress—: *could* we be without them?
> ~Rainer Maria Rilke, 'The First Elegy', *The Duino Elegies*

### I. The Burden of Survival: Metaphors of Loss in Sarah Kane's Theater

So much has been written about Sarah Kane that it seems easy to accept the trajectory of critical attention given to her plays. With the Royal Court Theatre's production of *Blasted* in 1995, many critics, most notably Michael Billington, lambasted the play for its vulgarity, egregious violence, and failure to refer to an identifiable social reality (Billington, "The Good Fairies" 22). However, *Blasted* did earn Kane the respect of many important playwrights, most notably Edward Bond, Harold Pinter, Carol Churchill, and Martin Crimp. Amidst the conflict surrounding the production of *Blasted,* Sarah Kane's work became affiliated with the so-called "New Brutalist" movement, as well as what Aleks Sierz called "In-Yer-Face Theatre." The now famous description did not define a movement so much as it suggested an aesthetic sensibility, which used explicit language, violence, and sexual behavior in order to interrogate the conditions of violence and oppression in British and European society. While "In-Yer-Face Theatre" was applicable to a whole host of playwrights both in and outside of England, it was common to talk of Kane and her Royal Court contemporaries as though they formed a sort of collective resistance to conservative British politics (Saunders, *AK* 12-15). Regardless of the attempts to think of Kane's plays as somehow contributing to a new theatrical movement or participating in a particular political *pathos*, the oscillation between praise and criticism consistently dominated the critical reception of Kane's early work and only began to improve with the productions of her

more overtly poetic plays such as *Crave* (1998) and *4.48 Psychosis* (1999, and performed posthumously in 2000). Furthermore, with the production of *4.48 Psychosis*, academic scholarship became more interested in Kane: scholars such as Graham Saunders underscored the dramaturgical contexts of her plays in an effort that emphasized Kane's theatrical innovations, while theorists such as Hans-Thies Lehmann discussed her work as it critically engaged dramatic structures and accessible theatrical conventions (ix).

Despite the fact that Kane's plays have sparked controversy, and have furthermore left critics to consider Kane's legacy, David Greig suggests that her work may be read according to the singular interest in the self's struggle to endure and persist in situations of loss. As Greig demonstrates, Kane situates the issue of self-loss within civil war (*Blasted*), the family (*Phaedra's Love*), the couple (*Cleansed*), the individual (*Crave*), and finally the mind itself (*4.48 Psychosis*) (xvi). Following Greig's suggestion, it is moreover striking how often love and the inability to love seem to directly contribute to the problem of loss as it is situated in Kane's work. While this observation is by no means unknown, the precise manner in which love provokes expressions or situations of loss does require further consideration. With such a concern in mind, *Cleansed* offers an explicit attempt to engage the connection between loss and love, a connection that seems to be made through the play's consistent use of violence. Though the violence in *Cleansed* appears to constitute the situations of loss that occur in the play, Kane underscored that the play, "was never about the violence" and that "*Cleansed*, more than any of my other plays, uses violence as a metaphor" (Kane qtd. in Saunders, *AK* 74). Given Kane's remarks, to interpret literally the violence in *Cleansed* denies the play of its metaphorical quality. Yet, commentaries on the play often discuss the play as though it is "about the violence," favoring an interpretation of it that situates characters in opposition to one another, rather than as

part of a broader metaphorical, and perhaps even theoretical, concern with love and, more broadly, the amorous relationship. Exemplifying the scholarly reaction to *Cleansed*, Annabelle Singer argues that the play's violence runs in only one direction: "Carl and Grace are victims of violence but never the perpetrators" (149). Yet, Carl and Grace are not passive recipients of violent actions, as they specifically and explicitly undermine the individuality of those for whom they respectively express feelings of love. By doing so, Carl and Grace's actions toward Rod and Graham respectively allow one to consider the nuanced and rather tenuous portrait of love that Kane dramatizes. Furthermore, like Singer, David Ian Rabey argues that, "*Cleansed* presents power as a one-way street: oppressive and predatory towards the individual, remorseless, searching, deterministic, unstoppable" (*ED* 206). However, the violence enacted by Tinker, the character to whom Rabey refers when critiquing Kane's play, may likewise be appreciated according to the metaphorical function it assumes in the play, particularly since Tinker's actions are extraordinarily precise.

Rather than to suggest that the violence in *Cleansed* creates and is responsible for the situations of self-loss that occur in the play, the metaphorical use of violence in it may suggest the connection between love and self-loss, and therefore concretely presents the play's effort to dramatize what is catastrophic about love. In other words, violence is not what constitutes the experiences of loss among the characters who love each other, but is instead the means by which Kane theatrically presents and elucidates a dynamic specific to love. Concretely, the violence throughout *Cleansed* illustrates not only that death contributes to the necessity of love, but that it is also what love always already anticipates. I will therefore argue that the play's violence demonstrates its concern with death. Specifically, while death is often that which terminates amorous relationships, it is, as we shall see, what makes them necessary. In this regard, the play

may be read to concern a mourning that is at the heart of love: the violence that occurs in the play underscores how all amorous relationships presuppose that one lover will die before the other, and, as a result, leave the one to survive without the beloved other. In this case, Kane's references to Roland Barthes's *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* appear particularly salient, as *Cleansed* uses violence in order to present theatrically the issue of self-loss and survival that Barthes explicitly discusses in his text (Saunders, *AK* 76). And while several Kane scholars have called attention to Barthes's influence on Kane during the time that she wrote *Cleansed*—although even more attention has been given to how the play's violence resembles the Jacobean revenge tragedies of Kyd and Middleton, as well as Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*—there has not been a reading that has investigated the play's engagement with Barthes's work. Moreover, no attention has been given to how Kane's play may complicate or question Barthes's remarks on the connection between love and death that prefigures the catastrophe of self-loss as it is elucidated in his text.

In what follows, I will situate my reading of *Cleansed* according to its engagement with Barthes's text in order to discuss an ethical relation that is at stake in the play since, at least for Kane, the amorous relationship is motivated by the problem of survival and the death of the other. In keeping with David Greig's assessment of Kane's *oeuvre*, the issue of self-loss that repeatedly appears in Kane's works is one that is always coupled with the burden of survival. And this burden does not appear in *Cleansed* alone, but may be encountered throughout all of Kane's work and, in particular, recognized as the issue that concludes each of her plays respectively. But by reading the metaphorical quality of violence in *Cleansed* as what opens up the topic of survival that ends each one of Kane's dramatic works, it is therefore necessary to discuss her final play, *4.48 Psychosis*. Commonly read as a dramatic suicide note, the piece

details the struggle of a predominant voice that is so unhinged by its mortality that it decides to end its life. By virtue of the play's structure, *4.48 Psychosis* places its audience members in the position of the survivor. Yet, while it may not be unfathomable to interpret some connection between the apparent death of the play's speaker and Kane's suicide, we will see that the piece concerns a grief that is both constitutive of and carried within language. Read this way, it is possible to identify a certain trajectory proper to the development of Kane's dramatic writing, for over the course of her career the language of grief that is so integral to plays such as *Blasted*, *Phaedra's Love*, and *Cleansed* transforms into dramatic pieces, specifically *Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis*, which concern a grief that is proper to language itself.

**II: Love's Strife**

Sarah Kane's *Cleansed* premiered at the Royal Court Theatre Downstairs on 30 April 1998. Arranged as a series of scenes rather than as an expository linear narrative, Kane's third play was partially inspired by Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck*, which she had directed at the Gate Theatre in October of 1997. In *Woyzeck*, a series of twenty nine scenes—scenes that are not casually connected, but nevertheless not arbitrarily related to one another—gives shape to the piece's dramatic trajectory. Finding that *Woyzeck* took advantage of the difference between plot and story, Kane constructed *Cleansed* as a series of twenty scenes that comprise four distinct storylines (Saunders, *AK* 41-43).[16] Specifically, the piece concerns respectively: an inmate named Graham and his sister Grace; an ambiguous authority figure named Tinker and his love interest named the Woman and later named Grace; two lovers Rod and Carl; and Robin, another university inmate, and Grace. Making strategic use of dialogue, actions, and images, *Cleansed* connects important details of all four storylines in order to develop its plot and to produce its dramatic effects. Though the play's violence makes it problematic to stage naturalistically, such

violence weaves together the play's four storylines and invites spectators and readers to consider the significance of what the play actively presents, rather than positioning them as passive recipients of information disseminated according to a preconceived aesthetic model or didactic interest. In this way, the formal arrangement of *Cleansed* emphasizes the figurative quality of the violence contained within the play, and calls readers and viewers of it to focus on the associations that contribute to the play's plot, as well as to the broader implications of the work, which overwhelm the oversimplified interpretation of it as an immature exercise intended to shock audiences.

Offering some commentary on the importance of violence in the play, Kane famously cited Roland Barthes's *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* in order to discuss the way that *Cleansed* situates love in each of the play's four storylines. Specifically, troubled by Barthes's analysis of what he calls "Catastrophe," Kane reflected on this moment in Barthes's text, stating that:

> There's a point in *A Lover's Discourse* by Roland Barthes when he says the situation of a rejected lover is not unlike a situation of a prisoner in Dachau. And when I read it I was just appalled and thought how can he possibly suggest the pain of love is as bad as that; but then the more I thought about it actually I do know what he's saying. It's about a loss of self. And when you lose yourself where do you go. There's nowhere to go: it's actually a kind of madness. And thinking about that I made the connection with *Cleansed*. If you put people in a situation in which they lose themselves then you can make that connection between the two as long as you don't start writing things like "Auschwitz 1944"—which would be reductive anyway. (Kane qtd. in Saunders, *AK* 76)

Following Bettelheim, who names catastrophe as an extreme situation of self-loss, Barthes suggests that amorous catastrophe occurs when, "I have projected myself into the other with such force that when I am without the other I cannot recover myself, recuperate myself: I am lost, forever" (*FDA* 60). In the case of amorous catastrophe, the subject forcefully displaces or projects its self into the other, forming an asymmetrical relationship with the other as the subject requires the other's indefinite presence in order for one to achieve self-presence. With amorous catastrophe, the one who survives the death of the other does so with a narcissistic wound, as its ability to achieve self-presence is destroyed since the beloved's death forecloses the other's ability to recognize and bestow upon the lover the self that he or she displaced into the other. Bearing in mind Kane's reference to Barthes, the play's violence may elucidate something catastrophic about love itself, and serve a specific dramatic function as it elaborates the precise manner in which love is made to bear on the issue of self-loss to which Kane referred when mentioning Barthes. Though inaccurate to assume that any of the storylines are subordinate to one another, the Tinker and the Woman and Robin and Grace storylines do seem to take their cues from the Graham and Grace and Rod and Carl storylines, both of which clearly dramatize the narcissistic wound that Barthes mentions in his elaboration of amorous catastrophe.[17] Furthermore, as the Graham and Grace and Rod and Carl storylines frequently reflect each other in a way that is vital to the play's trajectory, the precise way in which the play uses violence to suggest the catastrophe inherent to love may be best encountered in the Graham and Grace and Rod and Carl storylines.

Opening outside the University's perimeter fence in the cold winter snow, the play's first scene introduces the relationship between Grace and Graham when Graham responds to Tinker as he prepares an injection of heroin. Requesting that Tinker give him a lethal dose of the drug,

Graham refers to something that Grace wants as the reason for his decision to die. However, Tinker prohibits Graham from acknowledging the specific content of Grace's want. Eventually acquiescing to Graham's request, Tinker kills Graham by injecting the heroin into his eye. While gruesome, the opening act of violence is neither gratuitous nor arbitrary, as it establishes Graham and Grace's relationship and situates it according to Graham's failure to live up to Grace's unacknowledged want. Hence, the lethal injection that Tinker administers underscores Graham's failure to validate what Grace wants so as to see her for how she wants to be seen, thereby giving to her that which she does not have so as to foster her sense of self.[18] However, it is precisely such engagement that constitutes Graham's request to die, and as a result Graham's relationship with his sister is connected to his death since it is the possibility of validating the way that Grace appears to him that constitutes his demand to die. As the play unfolds, the mortal wound to Graham's eye informs the precise manner in which the Graham and Grace storyline develops, since vision becomes the principal means through which Grace's response to Graham's death occurs in the play. Hence, just as Grace's life contributed to Graham's death, the manner in which Graham dies directly contributes to the way that Grace lives after his death.

The connection between Grace's life and Graham's death becomes increasingly clear when Grace arrives at the University and asks Tinker for Graham's clothes. Rather than request Graham's physical remains, which Tinker has incinerated and which are therefore unrecoverable, Grace's demand that she acquire Graham's clothes suggest that the clothes become a sort of substitute for Graham's incinerated corpse. Though Tinker is reluctant to give Graham's clothes to Grace, he eventually gives them to her. And once fully clothed in them, she suffers a breakdown, which not only enables her to be accepted to the University, but which also leads to the deterioration of her very identity. In the next scene in which Grace appears, Graham returns

and he and Grace share a series of silent stares that connect Grace's silent want with the specific physical location associated with Graham's death, namely, his eyes:

(*Silence.*

GRACE *stares at him.*

*She smacks him around the face as hard as she can, then hugs him to her as tightly as possible. She holds his face in her hands and looks closely at him.*)

GRACE**:** You're clean.

GRAHAM (*Smiles.*)

GRACE: Don't ever leave me again.

GRAHAM: No.

GRACE: Swear.

GRAHAM**:** On my life.

*Pause. They stare at each other in silence.*

GRAHAM: More like me than I ever was.

GRACE: Teach me.

(GRAHAM *dances—a dance of love for* GRACE.) (Kane, *Cleansed*, *Plays* 118,119)

Grace's demands for Graham's clothes and the request to move and behave like the Graham she now sees suggests that her response to his death may be read as a way to recuperate that which Graham's death took from her, which was not just his life, but his specific ability to recognize her for who she sees herself to be. However, in order to recuperate this recognition that Graham's death denied her, Grace must transform the image of herself that Graham sees into the image of Graham as she sees him. For Grace, such transformation is the means by which she will gain the self-presence that Graham's death denied her, since the transformation will presumably

allow her to assume the position that the living Graham inhabited in relation to her. Consequently, Grace positions herself in order to earn the validation that Graham's death denied. However, Graham's statement, "More like me than I ever was" does not provide a proper referent, and therefore does not name just who this "me" is. Instead, the comment articulates a division between the "I" and "me," a division that is not specific to Graham's speech alone, but which also attests to the division illustrated in Grace's persistent attempts to act and appear as the image of Graham that appears to her, even though she cannot pronounce herself to be him.

Though the scene concludes with the rather infamous moment in which Grace and Graham make love with each other, the act of sexual intercourse does not provide the unification and reconciliation that it would seem to suggest. For Singer, however, Graham "has his own secret memories of thinking of her sexually" and that he and Grace "use their sexual difference to gain intimacy, to have sex and discover they have the same rhythm, to come together. Between the two of them, there is only one living body" (153). Yet, the play never gives us any knowledge of what happened between Grace and Graham prior to Graham's death. In other words, it is impossible to decide whether or not Graham really had, in the words of Singer, "memories of thinking of her [Grace] sexually" (153). The shared intimacy, then, is not the articulation of a desire that existed prior to the time of the play, since such desire is unknown and explicitly unrecognized by the play. In other words, Graham not only fails to provide details about the status of his relationship with Grace, but he also neglects to disclose what it is that Grace wants from him. It is important to remember, furthermore, that Graham is dead and while this fact does not suggest that *Cleansed* does not complicate the relationship between life and death that Singer carefully reads in the play, it does ask us to invest more effort into reading the

metaphorical quality of the play so as to ask what is significant about the fact that Grace has sexual intercourse with a living-dead man.

In her elaborate study, *Hysteria, Trauma, and Melancholia: Performative Maladies in Contemporary Anglophone Drama*, Christina Wald introduces one possible answer to the issue of Grace's amorous attraction to her brother. For Wald, Grace's response to Graham's death exemplifies the psychoanalytic concept of melancholic incorporation (203). Identifying this process as one of absorbing the dead other into oneself, Wald goes onto to suggest that melancholic incorporation offers a "counter-fantasy of the body that contests its culturally accepted configuration" (204). She furthermore reads Tinker's role in opposition to the process of melancholic incorporation, which resists Tinker's attempts to "reinforce normative forms of sex, gender, and desire" (205). However, Wald's interpretation of *Cleansed* reads more as an attempt to describe the play as though it exemplified Freud's concept of melancholic incorporation and, furthermore, Judith Butler's concept of gender melancholia. While it is possible to read the play as a critique of hetero-normative identity categories, and though it is very appropriate to liken the type of incorporation proper to Grace's behavior to the Freudian psychoanalytic concept of melancholic incorporation, the play itself calls into question such a concept insofar as it renders problematic the possibility that one could ever hold within oneself the other *as* other (Derrida, "Les morts" 71, 72). For example, the Graham who appears *post-mortem* and who Grace feels to be incorporated within her is not Graham himself nor is it, specifically, Graham that Grace wants to become. Instead, the Graham with whom Grace identifies and recognizes within her is the exact opposite of the one who first appeared in the opening scene, as this *post-mortem* Graham recognizes what Grace wants and attempts to give it to her in the name of love. Grace therefore incorporates a specific version of Graham, namely,

the very Graham that he was unable to become in life. Consequently, Grace does not fully absorb the other into her "self." Instead, she seems to absorb precisely what she lost with Graham's death, namely, his ability to reflect back to her the self with whom she identifies. And yet, Grace cannot recognize the Graham that lives within her in the image of herself that appears to her, a failure that is marked by the fact that the Graham that lives within her is the very Graham that Graham had killed.

Grace's response to Graham's death therefore appears specifically motivated in that she attempts to recuperate that which he was unable to accomplish in life, namely, the affirmation of what she wants so as to affirm who she perceives herself to be. But by feeling within her the very Graham that Graham could not be, Grace cannot recognize herself and therefore remains, as was first the case with Graham's death, unable to realize who she is and who she wants to be. Keeping with its metaphorical quality, the play's violence does not bring an end to the love that Grace and Graham express for one another. Instead, such violence catalyzes Grace's love for Graham, suggesting that death is the condition of love's possibility. Death drives their love and drives their need to love, and as such Tinker's brutality has direct import on the stakes of *Cleansed*, since the violence that he inflicts on Graham and Grace underscores that which is catastrophic about love. Specifically, through its violence, the play dramatizes the insight that while love is an affect associated with the other's ability to confirm the self that one identifies as one's own, it is because death makes this recognition impossible to maintain that love becomes all the more vital. Therefore, while death makes love necessary, it also promises the possibility of self-loss that would occur with death, either because of the other's death (whose absence is unable to confirm the self's presence to itself) or because of the death of the lover itself.

Rather than posit death as an event that is to come and which would therefore project the issue of self-loss into the future, *Cleansed* uses violence throughout Rod and Carl's relationship in order to suggest that love always anticipates the other's death. Therefore, from the very start, the issue of self-loss is of concern throughout the life of those who love each other. Underscoring this concern, the first scene in which Rod and Carl appear emphasizes Carl's need to love and be loved by Rod when Carl asks for Rod's ring so that they might form a sort of marriage pact. Calling to mind the necessity with which Grace spoke of her need for Graham's clothes, Rod's ring serves as a sort of substitute that presumably provides Carl with material evidence that he possesses Rod's love. Though Rod resists Carl's proposition, Carl continues to plead with Rod and claims that he would sacrifice his life if it would save Rod from death. Consequently, Carl posits his future death as an action that articulates the love that he cannot speak or show while living. Though he believes Carl to be a liar, Rod eventually gives Carl his ring, stating "I love you *now*. / I'm with you *now*. / I'll do my best, moment to moment, not to betray you. / Now. / That's it. No more. Don't make me lie to you" (Kane, *Cleansed*, *Plays* 111). Rod's pledge, however, hardly resolves the initial conflict between the two men as it creates a dramatic opposition to Carl's promise. Hence, in the next scene in which Carl appears, Tinker submits him to excruciating torture, which tests Carl's commitment to sacrifice himself should Rod's life ever be threatened:

> CARL**:** (*Opens his eyes*.)
>
> TINKER**:** There's a vertical passage through your body, a straight line through which an object can pass without immediately killing you. Starts here.
>
> (*He touches CARL's anus*.)
>
> CARL**:** (*Stiffens with fear*.)

TINKER**:** Can take a pole, push it up here, avoiding all major organs, until it emerges here.

(*He touches CARL's right shoulder*.)

Die eventually of course. From starvation if nothing else gets you first.

(*CARL's trousers are pulled down and a pole is pushed a few inches up his anus*.) (Kane, *Cleansed*, *Plays* 116-117)

Despite Tinker's brutality, the violence that he inflicts on Carl is quite significant. For example, it appears as though there may be some connection between Rod's proper name and the instrument that Tinker uses to torture Carl. In this case, the object used to torture Carl implicitly refers to the person whom Carl loves, and therefore Tinker's actions use violence to materialize Carl's attempt to appropriate Rod's death for himself. And whereas Carl once believed that he could save Rod's life by possessing his death, the pain that the pole causes Carl is so great that he screams, "Not me please not me don't kill me Rod not me don't kill me ROD NOT ME ROD NOT ME" (Kane, *Cleansed*, *Plays* 117).

Tinkering with the position that Carl wished to assume in relation to Rod, Tinker's actions test Carl's resolve for death and provoke Carl into a situation in which his life is threatened. Importantly, Carl's screams appear unpunctuated in the text and consequently suggest two different meanings. On the one hand, the screams acknowledge Rod as the one responsible for Carl's death (don't kill me Rod/not me Rod, etc.) and, on the other hand, they call Tinker to threaten Rod's life rather than Carl's (don't kill me/ Rod not me, etc.). Importantly, the duplicitous meanings produced by Carl's screams refer to the logic articulated by Carl's first attempt to prove his love for Rod by promising to die for him should his life ever be in danger. Specifically, like Carl's first promise, which identifies Rod as the one for whom Carl would die,

the two meanings articulate when Carl's screams name Rod as the cause of Carl's death, underscoring that in order for Carl to prove his love for Rod it is Rod's life, and not Carl's, that must be threatened.

Carl's commitment to Rod is therefore not something that can be properly demonstrated by his commitment to die, for, as Tinker's actions underscore, it is precisely from death that Carl attempts to guard himself. As a result, the violence inflicted on Carl proves that Rod's death can never be recuperated or replaced by Carl's life. While Carl's response to Tinker is commonly read to betray Rod, the metaphorical function that violence assumes in *Cleansed* complicates the ability to judge Carl's screams in this way.[19] Specifically, while Carl is a liar, he lies not because his words are false so much as because he cannot live up to what his speech promises. Importantly, the play illustrates Carl's inability to recuperate death, either his or Rod's, precisely when Tinker threatens Carl's life, and while Tinker allows Carl to live, he makes him swallow the ring that he had placed on Rod's finger and cuts out Carl's tongue. Though Tinker's actions appear as a punitive response to Carl's screams, the dramatic effect that Tinker produces is quite significant. Specifically, Tinker's behavior not only wounds Carl's physical body, but it also wounds his ability to use language in order assume a subjective position, as he is now unable to say, for example, "I am" or "I love you." Yet, as a result, Carl is also prohibited from speaking of death and addressing Rod as though he is merely an object to be used by Carl in order overcome the loss that he fears death will produce. Like Grace, who is unable to communicate who she is after Graham's death and therefore requires that he help her reconcile the incongruity between who she appears to be and how she feels, Carl begins to depend on Rod in a way that he had previously not done. Specifically, having lost his tongue, Carl begins to use his body in order to create the intimacy with Rod that his speech could never communicate. The effect of this

narcissistic wounding to Carl's body is therefore quite significant for by surviving the possibility of his own death, Carl learns that while love anticipates death, love cannot recuperate the loss of the other who dies. Physically mutilated, Carl bears witness to the impossibility of his first promises to Rod, while nevertheless making his love for Rod all the more necessary even though he bears the knowledge that love always anticipates and is marked by the deaths of those who share it.

As the relationship between Carl and Rod develops, Tinker continuously emerges to take from Carl the part of his body with which he attempts to express his love for Rod. Yet, as Carl continues to lose body parts, Rod's speech begins to sound more and more like Carl's first promises, as he emphasizes the stakes of survival in Rod and Carl's amorous relationship. Reflecting on what he'd say should Tinker test him the way that he has violently tested Carl, Rod states, "He ever asks me I'll say 'Me. Do it to me. Not to Carl, not my lover, not my friend, do it to me.' I'd be gone, first boat out of here. Death isn't the worst thing they can do to you. Tinker made a man bite off another man's testicles. Can take your life but not give you death instead'" (Kane, *Cleansed*, *Plays* 136). While Rod's promise appears as an attempt to save Carl from death, Rod nevertheless emphasizes the fact that death may be a means of escaping from lived horrors worse than it, and calls to mind Carl's initial promise to sacrifice himself for Rod should his life ever be in danger. In response to Rod's promises, Carl begins to dance a "dance of love" (Kane, *Cleansed*, *Plays* 136). However, unlike Graham's dance of love for Grace, Carl is unable to gain traction in the mud, and his dance transforms into a "spasmodic dance of regret," which concludes when Tinker cuts off Carl's feet (Kane, *Cleansed*, *Plays* 136). Though Carl's dance appears differently than Graham's dance for Grace, it is nevertheless similar to it in that it physically presents the problematic at stake in the relationship between Rod and Carl.

Specifically, the dance suggests that their relationship presupposes that either one of them would lurch out of time to leave either man to mourn the loss of the other. However, despite the violent conclusion to Carl's dance, Carl makes love with Rod only after Tinker cuts off his feet. Unable to be reattached onto his body, Carl's severed appendages therefore underscore a crisis identical to Grace's response to Graham's death, namely, that the corporeal means by which Carl attempts to love Rod become the means that disfigure him. Unable to save either himself or Rod from death, Carl becomes committed to the shared moments that he is able to spend with Rod even as Rod, mimicking Carl's first words of love, states, "I will always love you. / I will never lie to you. /I will never betray you. / On my life" (Kane, *Cleansed*, *Plays* 142). Said as the two men make love, these words provoke both men to orgasm simultaneously and in what is more than an exchange of bodily fluids, the positions originally claimed by Rod and Carl appear exchanged as Rod's speech echoes Carl's early promise, inspiring him to gives his ring to Carl to swallow (Kane, *Cleansed*, *Plays* 142).

Unfortunately for Carl, Rod's ring does not guarantee the love that Carl first believed it would promise when he had first requested it, as it is given to Carl under an oath that presupposes Rod's death. Like the love scene between Graham and Grace, the love scene between Rod and Carl fails to produce the apparent reconciliation that it may suggest as Tinker reappears and takes Rod away from Carl (Kane, *Cleansed*, *Plays* 142). When Tinker asks Rod, "You or him, Rod, what's it to be", Rod lives up to his promise, stating, "Me. Not Carl. Me" and Tinker cuts Rod's throat and, like Graham, has Rod's body burned (Kane, *Cleansed, Plays* 142). However noble Rod's decision to die appears, he nevertheless attempts to appropriate the very action that Carl had promised to Rod as the former's greatest act of love, and rather than allow Carl to die as he has endured pain that Rod speaks of as worse than death, Rod dies under the

pretense of an act of love, leaving Carl to suffer. Rather than an attack of unwarranted aggression, Tinker's action appears as a direct response to the promises that Carl and Rod made to one another in the name of love, as each of the man's respective promise admitted the inevitability that either one would leave the other. Without Rod, Carl lives as a witness to the fact that love does not resolve the conflict between life and death, but rather stages it. Far from using his body as a means to resolve this conflict or to recuperate the inevitable loss that it produces, Carl is torn apart as he suffers from one of love's greatest challenges: while love may be named as an effort to preserve another's life, it is only in loving another that one can suffer from the other's inevitable death, which love, no matter how hard it tries, cannot overcome.

**III: To Carry You with Me**

As is suggested by the relationships between Grace and Graham and Rod and Carl, the violence contained in *Cleansed* underscores that love always concerns death, and it is through this connection between love and death that the expressions and images of self-loss that occur in the play may best be followed. In this regard, the play's violence serves a specific dramaturgical function, as it accounts for the conditions through which love leads to catastrophe and the loss of self that amorous catastrophe suggests in Kane's reference to Barthes. Following the significance that violence plays in situating the relationship between love and self-loss in *Cleansed*, it is therefore important to consider the precise engagement between the play and Kane's reference to Roland Barthes's reflections on amorous catastrophe. And, to be even more concrete, while it is certainly possible that Kane's play may be read in relation to or through the interpretive lens of other academic or theoretical examinations of love, it is the explicit inter-textual connection between *Cleansed* and Barthes's *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* that specifically situates how the play offers its own analysis of love. For Barthes, amorous catastrophe follows the logic

of projection in which "I" project my "self" into the other such that when the other dies, "I" am unable to regain my "self" (*FDA* 60). Yet, the issue of self-loss in *Cleansed* does not necessarily follow the logic of projection as it occurs in Barthes's description of "Catastrophe." As made evident by the relationship between Grace and Graham, self-loss appears to occur when the other is no longer there to reflect back to the subject a self that it could take to be its own. In this case, the other is not so much the guardian or possessor of one's self, but rather the condition of possibility of the self's appearance to the subject. Furthermore, the amorous relationships contained in the play do not follow the temporal dynamic suggested by the logic of projection, since the violent actions that occur throughout the play show how love always presupposes the catastrophe of self-loss, rather than posits it as an event that is realized only after one's beloved other is dead.

Given the two storylines of Grace and Graham and Rod and Carl, *Cleansed* complicates the articulation of amorous catastrophe as offered in Barthes's *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*. The importance of this complication, however, requires further clarification. While Kane did not explicitly mention the figure of "Agony" in *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*, it appears as though it may have some bearing on how to appreciate the manner in which the use of violence in *Cleansed* dramatizes love's catastrophic conditions. Important to his reflection on "Agony," Barthes cites D.W. Winnicott's essay, "Fear of Breakdown," and underscores an important passage in which Winnicott asserts that the "clinical fear of breakdown is *the fear of a breakdown that has already been experienced*. It is a fear of the original agony […] and there are moments, according to my experience, when a patient needs to be told that the breakdown, a fear of which destroys his or her life, *has already been*" (Winnicott qtd. in Barthes, *FDA* 38).

For Barthes, Winnicott's observation is rather significant as it speaks to the temporal dynamic at stake in Barthes's commentary on the lover's agony. Therefore, following Winnicott's insight, Barthes concludes his analysis of the lover's agony, stating "[s]imilarly, it seems, for the lover's anxiety: it is a fear of a mourning that has already taken place, at the origin of love, from the moment when I was ravished. Someone would have to tell me: 'Don't be anxious anymore, you have already lost him or her'" (*FDA* 38). As Barthes mentions, the mourning that takes place as the origin of love does so from the moment that "I" was ravished, which occurs when "I" first see the other's image (*FDA* 223). While the beginning of an amorous relationship between two people seems to require the presence of each individual to the other, Barthes, following Winnicott, observes how such presence is always already marked by death or loss. Hence, to be ravished by the other's image is to be penetrated by the fact that the other's image always shows, even when he or she is not immediately visible, that he or she will one day die. Given the composition of *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*, which associates the fragments or figures contained within it rather than determining their precise relation, it may be possible to hear in the term "amorous catastrophe" the "agony" that Barthes's here identifies as particular to the lover's discourse. In other words, rather than follow the logic of projection as the singular condition through which amorous catastrophe occurs, it is possible to connect the loss of self that Barthes's identifies in the figure of "Catastrophe" with the mourning that Barthes locates in or as the origin of love.

Before proceeding with such a suggestion, it is necessary to consider a few issues that seem to trouble the precise manner in which the term "mourning" operates in Barthes's analysis of "Agony." First, Barthes describes the lover's agony as a fear of a mourning that has already taken place. Yet, if the agony persists throughout the time of one's life, as it seems to in the

Graham and Grace and Rod and Carl storylines, then it does not follow that such mourning has taken place in the sense that it is completed. Additionally, Barthes does not indicate precisely how the term "mourning" works in his description of "Agony." While it may be safe to assume that Barthes draws from Freudian psychoanalytic discourse in which mourning names the task through which one frees the energy that one had invested in the other whom one had loved though a process that restores and heals one from the pain produced by the other's death, it is precisely such a retrieval that the agony of love renders problematic (*Trauer und Melancholie, GW X* 429, 430). Specifically, the psychoanalytic conceptualization of mourning would seem to foreclose love's agony to the extent that this agony seems to occur precisely because one cannot free and recuperate oneself from the *ravissement* of which Barthes writes.[20]

Given these issues, while Barthes provides the insight that love may concern mourning, an insight that seems appropriate to the manner in which the violence contained in *Cleansed* repeatedly situates death as love's condition of possibility, the originary mourning of which Barthes writes when discussing the agony of love does not produce in Grace or Carl a reparative process that restores and heals them after Graham and Rod's respective death. Furthermore, the relationships between Graham and Grace and Rod and Carl seem to suggest that the mourning of which Barthes writes persists throughout and even after life, situating the amorous subject as an effect of the other's inevitable disappearance. Hence, to consider mourning as the origin of love is to take into account how the other's death assumes a structural priority over one's ability to assume an identity and pronounce his or her love for the other. This priority not only alerts one to the fact that one has already lost the one whom one loves, but would also tell me that "I" have already lost my "self.'' And this observation appears most clearly in the wounds inflicted on Graham and Grace's bodies, wounds that never heal nor produce the restoration that mourning is

often assumed to produce, even though these wounds inspire each of them to love and to live on after the deaths of those whom they love. The engagement between *Cleansed* and Barthes's reflections on the origin of love therefore suggests that love always bears with it the knowledge that, as Jacques Derrida states, "[o]ne of us two *will have* had to be alone" and that it is this knowledge that not only originates love, but which love cannot unlearn so as to recuperate for the survivor the death that love always prefigures (*Béliers* 22). To follow mourning as the origin of love, therefore, does not confirm that the mourning that has originated love has ended, nor does in suggest the sort of recuperative process that Freud conceptualizes. Instead, to consider mourning as the origin of love is to encounter the recalcitrance between the affirmation of death as the condition of love's possibility and the great need to refuse death so as to be with the one that one loves. And as illustrated in *Cleansed*, this recalcitrance not only situates the position from which Grace and Carl speak and act as amorous subjects, but it also shows, in the strategic use of violence in the play, how love always already concerns survival.

The metaphorical use of violence in *Cleansed* does not bear exclusively on the problem of survival in amorous relationships, however, but it also connects the surviving characters to one another. Specifically, the final scenes in *Cleansed* explicitly weave together the Graham and Grace and Rod and Carl storylines and, consequently, elaborate the ethical implications of survival in the play. For example, in the play's eighteenth scene, stage directions reveal that Tinker has performed a penectomy on Carl, transplanted Carl's penis onto Grace's body, and removed Grace's breasts in an effort to transform Grace into Graham so as to give to Grace the image that she wants to assume for herself (Kane, *Cleansed*, *Plays* 145). Once again, the violence of these procedures is not arbitrary, but rather refers to each character's amorous relationship with the deceased, as Grace's breasts were the organs to which Graham explicitly

directed his affection, just as Carl's penis was the organ with which he last attempted to realize his love for Rod. Implicated to one another through the surgery, the problem of recognition so important to the relationship between Grace and Graham intertwines with the way in which Rod and Carl attempted to secure love through spoken oaths when, upon awaking from surgery, Grace stares at the image of her quasi hermaphroditic body, only to be met by the gaze of Carl, who screams silently. The figure of Grace/Graham therefore stresses the inability to resolve the division between who Grace feels within her and the image of herself that had appeared to Grace prior to the surgery. As a result, the surgical procedure that Grace endures materializes how the unity of self-presence that s/he wants to secure requires the presence of another. Furthermore, it is Carl, whose penis acts as a failed substitute for what Tinker cannot retrieve so as to transform Grace into Grace/Graham, who explicitly testifies to Grace/Graham's inability to recuperate the loss of either Grace or Graham. And it is also Carl who underscores the fact that Grace/Graham is the result of an act of violence that has now deprived Carl and Grace of organs that were once objects of the other's respective love: specifically, unable to be translated into language, Carl's silent scream witnesses in the image of Grace/Graham the unspoken horror contained in both Carl and Rod's speech, namely, that their amorous relationship was always already marked by the necessity that either Carl or Rod would die to leave the other unloved.

The play concludes with Carl (who now wears Grace's original clothes) and Grace/Graham as they sit near the very place where Graham died and where Carl and Rod first met. However, the landscape has been transformed into a post-apocalyptic vision, as rats swarm as the sun's rays become unbearable (Kane, *Cleansed*, *Plays* 149). Unable to move, Grace/Graham holds onto Carl for his support. Left at the now ruined origin of each character's love, Carl and Grace/Graham suffer with wounds that have not healed, wounds that show them

who they are no longer and which remind them of those who have died. Living alone without the other whom one loves, Carl and Grace/Graham are held responsible for those who each have loved respectively. Yet, while the survivor's ethical responsibility, at least according to Derrida, emphasizes the act of carrying the other, and therefore appears more like melancholia, it does not suggest anything like an appropriation of the other, either as lost or found, into the subject:

> I must then carry it, carry *you*, there where the world slips away: that is my responsibility. But I can no longer carry the other of you, if *to carry* means to include in oneself, in the intuition of one's own egological consciousness. It's a question of carrying without appropriating to oneself. To carry no longer means 'to comprise', to include, or to comprehend in the self, but *to carry toward* the infinite inappropriability of the other, toward the encounter of the other's absolute transcendence within myself, which is to say in me outside of me. And I am only me, I can only be, I *must* only be beginning from this strange, dislocated bearing of the infinitely other in me. I must carry the other, I must carry *you*, the other must carry me […] even there where there the world is no longer between us or beneath our feet to ensure for us mediation or to consolidate foundation. I am alone with the other, alone to the other and for other, only for you, that is, yours: without world. I am left with the immediacy of the abyss that engages me on behalf of the other where the 'I must—'I must carry you'—forever prevails over the 'I am,' over the *sum* and over the *cogito*. Before *I am*, I *carry*. Before *being me, I carry the other*. I carry *you* and must do so, I owe it to you. (*Béliers* 76-77)

Importantly, Derrida suggests that to carry the other is to carry the other as *an other* whom "I," prior to any decision that "I" may make to carry, must and do carry as it is the other that gives and makes possible the self who "I" am. "I" owe you "me" even as your death would no longer

guarantee “me” who “I” am. Such debt not only opens up the ethical responsibility of carrying the other, suggesting, perhaps, that love may be a name for the passion or endurance necessary for the interminable work involved when one, even before assuming the position of a subject, carries another. However, such passion or endurance might not be specific to lovers alone for the living always live on to carry. In the end, the figures of Carl and Grace/Graham’s wounded bodies bear witness to the responsibility that Derrida reads in the figure of the survivor. Though Carl and Grace/Graham continue to live, they must do so with the knowledge that death always interrupts the intimacy that it helps to establish, and as such, their scarred and bleeding bodies testify to the narcissistic wound that each has suffered from having loved another. Yet, such knowledge and such pain appears to inspire each of them to support each other, however impossible it may seem, as they hold onto the parts of each other that physically remind each of them of those who have died.

Not alone, however, Grace/Graham and Carl are two of several survivors who inhabit Kane’s plays, plays that do not represent the world, but that rather create a world without world or a world after the end of the world. While Kane’s plays do follow a consistent interest in the self’s struggle to persist through experiences of tremendous pain and loss and while this struggle is consistently connected to the theme of love in Kane’s plays, it is perhaps the topic of survival that most forcefully appears throughout Kane’s work, naming the asymmetry between oneself and another that is at work from the beginning and, perhaps, even before the beginning of love. Yet, it is Kane’s final play *4.48 Psychosis* that appears to concern the issue of survival most explicitly, as it situates it is as the very crisis proper to the speaking subject. But rather than use theatrical conventions such as character, setting, or detailed stage direction to illustrate the agony that survival often produces for those who live on after the deaths of their loved ones, *4.48*

*Psychosis* appears as a series of linguistic landscapes or tableaux that suggest that the issue of survival, and the grief that often accompanies it, may have something to do with language more generally. With this in mind, while it is certainly possible to follow David Greig's suggestion that Kane's plays consistently engage the self's struggle to endure situations of profound loss, the precise function that language serves in Kane's final play may suggest that Kane transforms the language of grief that Greig hears in Kane's plays into the grief of language itself.

**IV: From Page to Stage**

Premiering at the Royal Court's Jerwood Theatre Upstairs, Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* was not produced until 23 June 2000, nearly a year and a half after her death on 20 February 1999. While *4.48 Psychosis* is certainly marked, like all writing, by the death of the one who wrote it, it would be misleading to position Kane's suicide as the privileged event that could decode the play's meaning. As Graham Saunders states, "[T]hinking of *4.48 Psychosis* as little more than a suicide note also risks impoverishing the play: moreover, such commentary runs the risk of providing too reductive a reading, both of the play's content and themes…Of course, the opposite is also true, and that in denying the theme of suicide in *4.48 Psychosis*, the critic can end up imposing a false aesthetic against the original intentions of the writer" (Saunders, *LMKM* 110, 111). Despite whatever incongruity may exist between Kane's last play and her "intentions", it is striking how Saunders iterates the mourner's paradoxical position that Derrida's reflection on Roland Barthes and mourning observed. Be that as it may, the play may also be appreciated as an attempt to realize Kane's dual interest in experiential performance and theater. In fact, Kane herself had discussed *4.48 Psychosis* as a text written for performance, emphasizing it is an effort to bridge the existing divide between the play text and the experiential theater art that she had come to admire (Saunders, *AK* 83). Appearing as a series of poetic tableaux that are unified by the text's

main speaker, the text's sparse stage directions, undetermined time and space, and ambiguous speaking parts give theater artists the opportunity to be explicitly involved in the theatrical realization of the text. Yet, it is ultimately the language of *4.48 Psychosis* that determines the work's status as a text written for performance, as it is through the language that individual spectators or witnesses have the opportunity to react and engage with the personal experiences of the performers. However, rather than assume that the language of *4.48 Psychosis* represents either Kane struggles or the play's voice, the latter which consistently appears throughout the play in order to speak of the grief that contributes to its suicidal thoughts, it may be that the emphasis on language in Kane's play elucidates a grief that is specific to language itself. As David Barnett states, "The poetic excurses of many of the scenes aim far beyond the individual and track a variety of perspectives when viewed as a whole. …The language itself, and not its speaker, becomes the focus" (Barnett 21). As we shall see, the grief articulated by the main voice of *4.48 Psychosis*, a grief that is specifically situated according to the problem of finitude, also appears at stake in the manner that the language of *4.48 Psychosis* functions. Following Barnett's implicit suggestion that the language of *4.48 Psychosis* does not re-present a single speaker to whom one could associate the language of the play, the intensity of *4.48 Psychosis* and its ability to provoke the sort of visceral responses important to Kane's later writing is made possible as the play stages a drama specific to language itself.

While *4.48 Psychosis* lacks many of the identifiable conventions of drama that would enable one to judge whether or not the piece is, in fact, a play, it clearly emphasizes language as it comprises a series of poetic tableaux that traces a predominant voice's struggle to live in a world in which its mortality makes life insufferable (Macdonald qtd. Saunders, *LMKM* 123).[21] As a result, Kane's fifth and final work appears similar to her fourth play, *Crave*, wherein language

itself directly constitutes the play's dramatic intensity. Specifically, abandoning formal indications of setting and time and replacing characters with figures identified by a single letter, *Crave*, like *4.48 Psychosis*, appears more like a well-made linguistic tapestry. Furthermore, the different and rather anonymous speaking parts in *Crave* communicate in such a way so as to give the appearance of dialogue, without ever quite becoming dialogical. While Kane crafted for herself specific meanings for each of the speaking parts in *Crave*, she nevertheless underscored the fact that the abbreviations inhibit each part from adhering to a particular role or identity:

> A,B,C,and M do have specific meanings which I am prepared to tell you. A is many things which is The Author, Abuser (because they're the same thing Author and Abuser); Aleister—as in Aleister Crowley who wrote some interesting books…and Antichrist. My brother came up with Arse-Hole which I thought was quite good. It was also the actor who I originally wrote it for who's called Andrew. M was simply Mother, B was Boy, and C was Child, but I didn't want to write those things down because then I thought they'd get fixed in those things forever and nothing would ever change. (Kane qtd. in Saunders, *AK* 79)

Kane's comments on the language of *Crave* address a broader dramaturgical concern; namely, rather than use language in order to refer to and to signify a specific reality or problem outside of the theatre, Kane suggests that language may be used dramatically in order to create interpretive possibilities that open a play's signifying capability. Hence, the language of *Crave* allows the piece to become its own world or reality, and one that calls spectators, readers, and performers to become actively engaged in the play's signifying potential and efficacy. However, with *4.48 Psychosis*, Kane left behind the faint reference to character suggested by the initials in *Crave*. Instead, Kane's last piece relies on language, and the breaks in language that lead to silence, in

order to shape the play's images, content, and dramatic trajectory (Saunders, *AL* 80). *4.48 Psychosis* therefore speaks to Kane's statement that she found "performance much more interesting than acting; theatre more compelling than plays" (Kane qtd. Saunders, *AK* 95). Importantly, such distinctions may be read as part of Kane's effort to create a text that would open performative opportunities, rather than give actors a specific part or character that would be repeated with each performance of the pieces. In this case, the distinctions between plays and theater and acting and performance seem to hinge on the function of the text's language. Consequently, the appearance of poetic tableaux in the play text, rather than the reliance of character, time, setting, and stage directions, emphasizes Kane's attempt to write a piece for performance since it is through the language of the text that the piece opens creative opportunities, rather than predetermines its theatrical realization.

Despite the dramaturgical importance of language in *4.48 Psychosis*, it is still curious that Kane would write a text in order to engage the issue of performance given the common antagonisms between text and performance. In the first case, Hans-Thies Lehmann's important study, *Postdramatic Theatre*, emphasizes how the play text in European classicism and realism was often assumed to be the authority to which all subsequent performances of the respective play must attend (47). According to the logic of this literary bias, the play text is generally considered to ensure a play's consistency and guarantee its identity across its many possible performances and reproductions, which contributes to what W. B. Worthen calls the "drama as literature" paradigm (*Drama* xvi-xvii). Considering Worthen's observation along with Lehmann's analysis, such a paradigm bespeaks the privileged position that the play text is often assumed to occupy over its subsequent performances:

> From the 'literary' perspective, the meaning, and so the authority, of performance is a function of how fully it expresses the meanings, gestures, themes located ineffably in the structures of the work, which is taken both as the ground and origin of performance and as the embodiment of authorial intention, the work. Though performances may discover meanings or nuances not immediately available through 'reading' or 'criticism,' these meanings are nonetheless seen as latent potentialities located in the words on the page, the traces of the authorial work. (Worthen, "Disciplines" 12)

Worthen's analysis underscores a bias important to the complex interaction between the page and stage, calling attention to the fact that the play's proper form is often assumed to be that of a work of literature to which those who perform the play must refer. However, the epistemological concern at stake with the text's control over its theatrical production is not a one-sided issue. On the contrary, Worthen observes that just as there is the "drama as literature" paradigm, so too is performance routinely assumed to originate the text's meaning insofar as performance is often situated as the play text's *telos* ("Disciplines" 13). Rather than privilege one paradigm or perspective over the other, Worthen acknowledges that the relationship between text and performance indicates a more general anxiety, namely, the inability to locate the origin of a play's meaning so as to subsequently control how and what the play signifies. Consequently, the disjunction between the performance of a play text and the play text itself seems less concerned with essential properties of literature and performance and more concerned with power, whether or not that power is in the form of authoring meaning in text or bringing to life the essence of a play text by performing it on stage (Worthen, "Disciplines" 12, 13).

The antagonism between drama and performance, however, does not just concern an epistemological debate, but also contributes to an aesthetic one. Specifically, the division

between a performance and the play text influences discussions on whether or not a text could cause the visceral reactions often provoked by performance, and therefore contribute to performance's experiential quality. Commenting on this issue, the performance artist Jeremy Weller, to whom Kane often referred when discussing her own interest in performance and experiential theatre, suggested that text fails to make present the life that performance and experiential theatre are so keen to make visible:

> For any given project, I write a lot and give it to both the non-actors and professional actors who are mixed in, but I'm, also looking for that 'life'—the emotion—the rawness to be present. And I wouldn't want to imprison my people in the text. I wouldn't want to refine it to lyrical prose because I think that would squeeze out the life. Whereas I think you're right—and that Sarah had a love for the sacredness of the text and the mixing of the two. I know that was something we both spoke about, and I told her that theatre for me was a realm where you could explore life, but it had to be through other people's lives which would always have to supersede. You can give people text to perform and you can impose limits, but you have to give the performers their freedom. (Weller qtd. in Saunders, *AK* 120)

Though Weller claims that writing is a means involved in his process for creating a performance, he nevertheless implies that "lyrical prose," such as that found in Kane's later plays, seems to impose constraints on the freedom of performers and deprives them of the "life" that they would have otherwise articulated through performance. In this sense, writing seems to be, at best, a derivation of the life that performance actively presents. Furthermore, while Weller comments that Kane worked on mixing performance with lyrical prose in her later plays, it does not seem as though such mixing would accomplish a resolution between the text and theatrical or experiential

performance, nor does it seem as though Weller is able to concede that Kane's final play makes present the "life" that he finds living in performance generally.[22] Weller's comments therefore suggest an incongruity between text and performance that seems to preclude the possibility that one could ever write a text for performance. Specifically, for Weller, text, even in the form of poetry, seems unable to contain or provoke the visceral intensity that he assumes is proper to performance. Consequently, Weller argues that performance names a specific aesthetic event or occurrence that appears normatively distinguished from writing, particularly as it takes shape as a script.

Considering the rather arduous connection between text and performance, whether performance is meant as the theatrical realization of a text or a unique aesthetic form, *4.48 Psychosis* nevertheless engages this issue in two distinct ways. First, it calls into question the assumption that written text deflates the emotion it attempts to convey, whereas performance more fully realizes such emotion and makes it present. While Weller's comments seem to suggest that the "liveness" of performance constitutes its capacity for affective and emotional responses, whereas scripted text deprives performers and audience members of such life, *4.48 Psychosis* troubles such an opposition as it does not carry with it a scripted and determined meaning. Instead, the language of the piece gives to performers the emotional palate with which to transform their personal and subjective interpretation of the work into a performance. Furthermore, the "liveness" to which Weller refers appears to be a false concept since, and Weller's performance and experiential theater pieces admit this, all performance appears generated within a particular context and inspired by an issue or problem that precedes the performance.[23] Hence, to speak of the absolute presence of performance is to essentially forget the fact that such presence is only made possible by an abundance of material that precedes any

particular performance. In fact, it is the performers challenge to develop such material into the very aesthetic event that it is called a performance. In the case of *4.48 Psychosis*, it is the experience of reading and interpreting what appears on the page that gives those who would perform it the material with which to fashion its creative and performative possibilities. Consequently, the language of *4.48 Psychosis* problematizes the normative distinction between text and performance as both are required in order for *4.48 Psychosis* to be, as Kane intimated, a work of or for theater rather than a play. In other words, rather than demand that performers simply enact or reproduce that which is already present within the text, the language of *4.48 Psychosis* necessitates that performers engage textual concerns as well as performative possibilities in order to produce the work.

That *4.48 Psychosis* engages critically with the mutual exclusivity between text and performance is not to suggest that text and performance are identical to one another. Instead, *4.48 Psychosis* challenges the authority that is invested in either performance or in text whenever the two are held in binary opposition to one another, and calls into question the normative judgments that then result. Yet, even as *4.48 Psychosis* seems to unsettle the precise manner in which to discuss the connection between text and performance, the piece itself appears to be unsettled by the way it associates the text with its performance. As David Ian Rabey highlights, *4.48 Psychosis* makes those who perform it inhabit a rather paradoxical position, whereby they "stand in for a voice which insists that the audience 'watch me vanish'" (*ED* 208). For Rabey, performers must take the place of a voice whose words demand certain actions that may be impossible to perform as lines such as "watch me vanish" deny performers the very object that they would need in order to perform the text, namely, the "me" whose voice appears or may be heard in the text and for whom the performer is presumably a substitute. Yet, rather than suggest

that the text of *4.48 Psychosis* possesses that which the performance of the piece fails to embody, it is possible to read how the difficulty that Rabey mentions may be attributed to the manner in which language functions throughout the piece. Consequently, the language of *4.48 Psychosis* not only opens the nearly infinite possibilities for how the *mise-en-page* of *4.48 Psychosis* should translate into the *mise-en-scène*, but it also becomes that which the drama of *4.48 Psychosis* may most directly concern.[24]

**IV: And there's the Drama**

While scholars have been quick to associate psychosis with the conditions that led to Kane's suicide, it is necessary to remember that the issue of psychosis influenced Kane during the writing of *4.48 Psychosis*, and contributed to a particular aesthetic interest that had preoccupied Kane throughout much of her career as a playwright. Specifically, in an interview with Dan Rebellato, Kane discussed psychosis as a state in which the barrier between reality and imagination disappear, and associated this breakdown with her own an attempt to craft *4.48 Psychosis* so that it would dissolve the distinction between form and content:

> I'm writing a play called *4.48 Psychosis* and it's got similarities with *Crave*; but it's different. It's about a psychotic breakdown and what happens to a person's mind when the barriers which distinguish between reality and different forms of imagination completely disappear, so that you no longer know the difference between your waking life and your dream life. And also you no longer know where you stop and the world starts. So, for example, if I were psychotic I would literally not know the difference between myself, this table and Dan [Rebellato, the person sitting next to her]. They would all somehow be part of a continuum, and various boundaries begin to collapse. Formally, I'm trying to collapse a few boundaries as well; to carry on with making form

> and content one. That's proving extremely difficult, and I'm not going to tell anyone how I'm doing it because if they get there first I'll be furious! But whatever it is that began in *Crave* is going a step further—where it goes after that I'm not quite sure. (Kane qtd. in Saunders, *AK* 80)

Importantly, Kane's reference to a psychotic breakdown speaks to her attempt to create a play that would blur the distinctions between form and content. In order to accomplish such a goal, Kane constructed *4.48 Psychosis* to favor different linguistic tableaux or landscapes, which take several forms that include: monologues; doctor-patient conversations; medical questionnaires and clinical case histories; material taken from popular "self-help" psychology books; apocalyptic visions derived and inspired by the Book of Revelation; and disembodied text and numbers (Saunders, *LMKM* 12). This explicit emphasis on language and the myriad ways that it produces the piece's linguistic diversity furthermore contributes to the manner that the play attempts to blur the distinction between form and content. Specifically, the content of *4.48 Psychosis*, which concerns the "voice" of a suicidal subject who is never able to achieve self-presence, reflects the play's form as it takes shape through the diverse means of expression that never quite achieve a singular or cohesive meaning.[25]

While the attempt to marry form and content speaks to Kane's penchant for theatrical innovation, the language of *4.48 Psychosis* negotiates and explicitly concerns what Kane considered to be her rather tired attempt to engage the split between "consciousness" and "physical being" (Kane qtd. Saunders, *AK* 80). Contributing to the manner in which this split appears in the work, a long silence initiates *4.48 Psychosis* and segues into what appears to be a scene of dialog between two people: the main voice of the piece and another whose presence seeks to understand the reasoning behind the predominant voice's grief (Kane, *4.48 Psychosis*,

*Plays* 205). However, the division between these two voices—suggested by the use of dashes to alternate from one speaker to the next—does not necessarily guarantee two differentiated identities. In other words, while the opening scene and those that mimic its structure throughout the play (such as the scene regarding self-mutilation) appear like dialogue written for two separate individual speakers, there is nothing in the play that allows one to decide whether or not the dialogue that occurs is between two separate speakers, or whether or not it is a conversation that the text's predominant voice is having with itself. The opening scene therefore recollects Martin Crimp's *Attempts on her Life*, in which dashes indicate a change of speaker (a fact that Crimp's play explicitly underscores in his text). However, Kane does not explicitly state that the dashes that appear in her play text indicate such a change. Failing to indicate precisely who is speaking or when such speech should occur, the play's implicit reference to Crimp's *Attempts on her Life* serves as a point from which it is able to exceed the alienating effect that is commonly associated with Crimp's play. Specifically, by making it impossible to identify a self or selves proper to the language that appears in the text, the play introduces the split or division between "physical being" and "consciousness" that Kane had stated to be the initial concern of the play.

As the piece progresses, the central voice begins to make several admissions of grief, "I am sad/ I feel that the future is hopeless and that things cannot improve/I am bored and dissatisfied with everything/ I am a complete failure as a person" (Kane, *4.48 Psychosis, Plays* 206). Perhaps examples of Kane's dark sense of humor, these lines nevertheless mark the first appearance of the "I," which articulates a profound sense of failure, helplessness, and dissatisfaction that results in the text's first mention of suicide. However, the text does not simply discuss suicide in terms of personal failure. Instead, the reference to suicide in the text is situated according to the "I's" inability to reconcile itself with its mortality:

At 4.48

when desperation visits

I shall hang myself

to the sound of my lover's breathing

I do not want to die

I have become so depressed by the fact of my mortality that I

have decided to commit suicide

I do not want to live. (Kane, *4.48 Psychosis, Plays* 207)

Importantly, the first appearance of the speaking subject, or "I," occurs with reference to its mortality, which catalyzes its decision to commit suicide. Furthermore, the central voice's first mention of suicide articulates an important double-bind: though this "I" does not want to die, it has nevertheless been so affected by its mortality that it does not want to live. The "I" that therefore appears in the piece does so as an effect of its mortality, which cuts it from itself and plunges it into a relation with itself that it later names "pathological grief" (Kane, *4.48 Psychosis, Plays* 223).

As *4.48 Psychosis* continues, scenes detailing self-mutilation, psychiatric treatment, and heavy prescription drug use appear as attempts to ease the grief of which this "I" gives voices. While this voice does eventually speak of a unification of "physical being" with "consciousness," the mention of such unification immediately articulates a split between it and the self that it identifies as its own:

At 4.48

when sanity visits

for one hour and twelve minutes I am in my right mind

when it has passed I shall be gone again,

a fragmented puppet, a grotesque fool.

Now I am here I can see myself

but when I am charmed by vile delusions of happiness,

the foul magic of this engine of sorcery,

I cannot touch my essential self. (Kane, *4.48 Psychosis, Plays* 229)

In this passage, the text extrapolates on the "I's" appearance, demonstrating that the speaking subject seems to achieve self-presence only when it is able to see its proper self. But as the passage continues, this assumed unity between the "I" and itself presupposes an irreconcilable difference between the two that leads to an explicit separation, which keeps the "I" from touching and possessing its essential self. Reflecting the double bind in which sight shows the "I" to itself while at the same time denies it the ability to touch the self that it sees, the language of *4.48 Psychosis* underscores the grammatical and physical difference between the "I" and the self it sees as its own.

The difference between the "I" and its proper self was also emphasized by the first production of *4.48 Psychosis*, which made strategic use of a mirror by elevating it above the stage and putting it on an angle. As Graham Saunders notes, "the mirror was able to help visualize this dissociation of self-hood as the audience witnessed everything carried out on two separate planes" (Saunders, *LMKM* 116). The use of the mirror in the Royal Court's first production of *4.48 Psychosis* enabled audience members (as well as, no doubt, the performers themselves) the opportunity to witness the separation between the speaking subject, or "I," and the image of the performer that appeared on the mirror. Such an irreconcilable difference between the "I" and the self with whom it identifies, a division that explicitly appears in both

performance and text, may therefore account for the fact that when the "I" first appears in order to speak of its "self," it does so in order to underscore itself as an effect of its mortality. In other words, the text's voice consistently articulates that life is unable to realize and sustain the self-presence that it shows to be possible. As a result, the "I" that appears through the language *4.48 Psychosis* marks a break or fissure between it and its self, again confirming that the "I" is the effect of its inability to become present to itself. And this impossibility finds it clearest articulation as death, which specifically situates the "pathological grief" from which the "I" suffers, since its grief emerges because it is unable to reconcile itself with its finitude.

Emphasizing psychiatric treatment and terminology, as well as the construction of the text and its import on performance opportunities, Alicia Tycer suggests that the issue of pathological grief in *4.48 Psychosis* may be read according to the Freudian conceptualization of melancholia (22). For Freud, the concept of melancholia suggests that one incorporates the loss of a love object within the ego, rather than, in the case of mourning, a process that appropriates the libidinal energy that one had displaced into the beloved other so as to use such energy in the future (*Trauer und Melancholie*, *GW X* 429-431). Elaborating on the importance of melancholia in Kane's last piece, Tycer suggests that by the end of *4.48 Psychosis*, spectators and readers have "lost not only the definable author and/or character, which could be classified as a loss pertaining to the outside world, but may also have experienced a less definable loss within the ego. Therefore, instead of experiencing catharsis, *4.48*'s melancholic after effects linger with readers and audience members long after the play's conclusion" (26). In other words, rather than provide spectators and readers with a resolution that might temper the emotions provoked by the work, *4.48 Psychosis* produces the loss of a definable individual to whom one could associate or attribute the piece. Consequently, the piece causes those who read or watch a performance of

*4.48 Psychosis* to identify with the loss of a specific author and character, an identification that contributes to a possible loss or disintegration of the reader or spectator's self.

Following Tycer's reading, it is important to note that *4.48 Psychosis* ends by once again calling explicit attention to the "I" and its inability to possess the "me" or self with which it identifies. Furthermore, *4.48 Psychosis* ends very similarly to how it begins, namely, with a reference to suicide that, like the first reference, states, "I have no desire for death/ no suicide ever had" (Kane, *4.48 Psychosis, Plays* 244). While the first reference to suicide prompts several attempts to resolve the grief that mortality causes the "I" that appears, the final reference to suicide provokes a different response: "watch me vanish/ watch me/ vanish/ watch me/ watch me/ watch/ It is myself I have never met, whose face is pasted on/ the underside of my mind/ please open the curtains" (Kane, *4.48 Psychosis, Plays* 245). To be sure, the last lines appear melancholic and even suggest that the "I" that appears does so as situated according to a melancholic relationship with its "self," the line "watch me vanish" fails to indicate who is supposed to watch this me as it vanishes and, perhaps more importantly, fails to refer to and make present just who it is that begins to disappear. Consequently, the "me" that appears in the language of the work is, as it were, always already gone prior to any performance or reading of the piece. In other words, the "me" that appears at the end of *4.48 Psychosis* does so only by having always already vanished, an absence that is commemorated by the presence of language as it carries this "me" without leaving any indication or ability to decide who this me is or was and if it existed outside the language of the piece. However, while the "I" that appears in *4.48 Psychosis* does so in order to give voice to the disappearance of a "self" or "me" that it calls its own, this "I," like the "me" that it sees but cannot touch or possess, only comes to life through the piece's language and in the context of suicide. Thought the motif of the voice appears

playfully in the current exposition of the text and often situates the manner in which to read or interpret the "I," one attributes a voice to this "I," because there is no one to whom the language of *4.48 Psychosis* refers. What or who one hears through the language of *4.48 Psychosis* is neither a voice as such nor the voice of a particular speaking subject (the "I"), but rather the sound of a voice's disappearance, the sound, that is, of a voice that is no longer where it appears to be heard.

In the end, the play suggests that the origin of its language is its failure to guarantee self-presence. The language of *4.48 Psychosis*, furthermore, provides those affected by the play with the opportunity to see or hear what sounds or appears to be someone, even though it only indicates the presence of a specific entity to which it refers by failing to explicitly show anyone who would be its referent. To suggest, then, that the play may be read to foster melancholic identifications between it and spectators who witness its performance or readers who read the text seems to deny the function that the work's language assumes in the piece. Specifically, the work's language calls into question the possibility that one could ever fully identify with and incorporate a lost other into oneself without such an identification and incorporation presupposing the narcissistic reactions—such as hearing or encountering one's own experiences during the periods of silence that occur frequently throughout the piece—that Tycer mentions in her reading of the play (26). While it is still true that the work promotes interpretations of it that are largely subjective, these interpretations are not the result of a melancholic identification, which, according to Freudian meta-psychology, presupposes one's ability to identity, at the very least, with a dead or lost other so to subsequently incorporate him or her into oneself (Freud 245, 246). Instead, the subjective reactions and responses promoted by *4.48 Psychosis* are made possible because the play fails to provide the referent of its language. In this regard, the piece

offers a more radical engagement with the problem of absence that Tycer examined, since the language contained in *4.48 Psychosis* marks the subject as having always already vanished, and therefore unable to be subject to melancholic identification and incorporation.[26] As *4.48 Psychosis* states, "Just a word on the page and there is the drama" (Kane, *4.48 Psychosis, Plays* 213). As I hope to have shown, this drama, however, does not name a particular theatrical or literary genre, but rather suggests a drama specific to language itself. In this case, it is not Kane's "pathological grief" that is heard through the piece's language, nor is it her own elegiac relationship to herself that is seen upon the page. Instead, it is the "pathological grief" of language itself that names the drama that the text mentions, as the text preserves the loss of a singular and identifiable referent that one could associate with the play's language. And just as the "I" that appears through the language of *4.48 Psychosis* cannot touch the physical being that it sees and identifies as its own, so too are readers and spectators of the work unable to touch the physical being of any particular subject who they may see or hear through the language of the piece and its performance.

While Kane's effort to transform her appreciation of performance into a play text exploded the conventions that define such a text, it should also be noted that the language of the piece, which lives on in the form of a text, calls into question the ontology of its performance and, perhaps, performance itself. As Peggy Phelan states in her landmark text *Unmarked*, "Performance's only life is in the present….Performance's being, like the ontology of subjectivity proposed here, becomes itself through disappearance" (*Unmarked* 146,147). From a phenomenological perspective, Phelan is not wrong to emphasize the observation that performance only lives in the present, since the performance of any particular piece or work of art appears to take place during a specific time and place. In other words, a performance begins

and it ends, and its temporal and spatial coordinates cannot be perfectly reproduced. It is in this regard that Phelan examines performance's ontology, for it is through the inability to reproduce performance that performance can be said to live in the present. However, Phelan argues that presence, "can be had only through the citation of authenticity, through reference to something (we have hard) called 'live'" (*Ends* 10). Hence, presence presupposes reference, and in so doing, requires a referent, in this case that which is called or thought to be "live." But it is precisely the relationship between performance and presence that *4.48 Psychosis* renders problematic, for the language of the piece marks its referent as having always already disappeared, and thereby challenges the referential structure that Phelan assumes when elucidating the ontology of performance. To be sure, Kane's play is a rather extreme case through which to rethink the ontology of performance. However, the work allows us to reconsider performance in a way that does not assume that the presence associated with its time and space presupposes reference to that which escapes or exceeds—for example life and death—the time and space of the performance. In light of such an observation, to perform *4.48 Psychosis* is therefore not to incorporate the language of the text into an event or an act that makes present the speaking subject that haunts the piece, or that realizes an intended or determined meaning. Rather, the piece's performance makes "present" the impossibility that it could ever make present that which the language of the play marks as having always already "vanished." And it this impossibility that makes possible the infinite ways in which *4.48 Psychosis* may be performed.

While Sarah Kane is often remembered for her plays' violence, it is necessary to consider how Kane metaphorically used violence in order to present complex issues. With *Blasted,* the bomb that exploded in Ian's hotel room also caused an explosion in British theater, and initiated Kane's critical engagement with naturalistic theater. Much like Howard Barker, whom she

esteemed and compared to Shakespeare, Kane's reaction to naturalism and the social realism was productive, as she not only created new theatrical forms that pushed the dramatic text beyond the conventions that made it recognizable as such, but she also radically altered the status of the play text and the relationship that it can have with its performance. Kane's creative accomplishment was, however, specifically motivated by how she engaged with catastrophe. Whether it is mourning the loss of a loved one or the problem of self-alienation, the traumas of lived experience directly contributed to Kane's need to create theatrical forms that reflected trauma's complexity. And by following the progression from *Cleansed* to *4.48 Psychosis,* I have attempted to demonstrate that it is because we cannot ever be fully present to trauma and its affects that we require a theater that allows us to start or to continue the unending process of exploring how we have been affected by trauma. Sarah Kane provides us with such a theater.

## CHAPTER THREE

### From Pain, Poetry: Howard Barker and the Poetics of Catastrophic Theater

> "[W]e delight in looking at the most detailed images of things which themselves we see with pain[.]" ~Aristotle, *Poetics*
>
> "DENMARK: This / The gassed / The bombed / The bayoneted / Not for nothing/ NO / I CALL TO YOU ACROSS THE YEARS / IF IT APPEARED A WORTHLESS SACRIFICE I PROMISE YOU / THAT / WE / PRIVILEGED WITH THIS PERSPECTIVE / WE / SEE THE AWESOME OPERATION OF A DIVINE PLAN/ No / Not divine / Silly / Why did I say divine"
> ~Howard Barker, *Found in the Ground*

### I. Howard Barker's *Theatre of Catastrophe*: towards a Deconstructive Poetics

For over forty years, Howard Barker has been an active and prolific artist. In addition to writing more than sixty theater plays, he has also published poetry, opera libretti, and marionette pieces, as well as completed scripts for film, television, and radio. First finding acclaim with *Cheek* (1970) and *No One Was Saved* (1970), which were both produced by the Royal Court Theatre, Barker's early work, like that of many playwrights at the time, engaged England's socio-political conflicts through social realism and satire. While the Royal Court Theatre would go on to produce Barker's *Fair Slaughter* (1977), *The Hang of the Goal* (1978), and *Victory* (1983), Barker ultimately diverged from the Royal Court's emphasis on social realism, which dominated the theatrical landscape of London in the 1970s and well into the 1980s. During this time, Barker developed his Theater of Catastrophe with plays such as *The Castle* (1985), and *The Bite of the Night* (1986). Alongside these plays, Barker crafted essays and theoretical writings that elaborated his aesthetic vision, situated his work in relation to tragedy, and elucidated his

critique of naturalistic theater, which sacrifices the poetic and metaphoric for a theater that simply mirrors "what is misleadingly termed 'the real world'" (*Arguments* 174). In 1989, Barker published these early pieces as a collection, entitled *Arguments for a Theatre*. Though Barker worked with many theaters and theater companies throughout the 1980s, his work increasingly thrived on ambiguity, and his essays emphasized the theater as a place for creating imaginary worlds, rather than for re-presenting social realities that existed beyond the stage. As a result, Barker often found himself at odds with many of Great Britain's theater companies, such as the Royal Shakespeare Company, which rejected his *Crimes in Hot Countries* (1980) and *The Europeans* (1987) even though they had invited Barker to write the two plays (Lamb 14). Rather than rely on these theater companies to produce his work, Barker and a group of actors and artists, many of whom were from the Royal Court and the RSC, formed The Wrestling School in 1988. An ensemble dedicated to the production of his plays, The Wrestling School has offered Barker the opportunity to create some of his most challenging works, such as *Gertrude—The Cry* (2002) and *The Fence in its Thousandth Year* (2005). However, in 2007, Arts Council England terminated The Wrestling School's funding, forcing the ensemble to look to its allies at Exeter University and the University of Wales, Aberystwyth for support. While subsidies for the Wrestling School have become sparse, in the fall of 2012, the National Theatre produced Barker's *Scenes from an Execution*, which had first been produced by the Almeida Theatre in 1986.

As one might expect, Barker's Theatre of Catastrophe draws from tragedy, for both observe that pain is an intrinsic element of life. However, Barker's engagement with tragedy is one that is often at odds with more traditional interpretations of it. Specifically, while Barker often praises tragedy, stating that it "complicates life, and sends its audience away with that faint

grudge at having been troubled at a level beneath the consciously moral" (*Arguments* 97), he explicitly critiques the interpretation of tragedy that Aristotle gives in the *Poetics*. For Barker, Aristotle interprets tragedy as a social art form that allows a community to exorcise the dangerous emotions of pity and terror through catharsis. Opposed to Aristotle, Barker argues that tragedy, "exists simply because the pain of others, and subsequently our own, is a necessity to witness—not to make sense of, not for a utility value, but as something for itself" (*Arguments* 113). In other words, as Barker mentions in his later collection of aphorisms, *Death, the One, and the Art of Theatre* (2005), Aristotle's conception of catharsis "arrests" the death of the tragic protagonist in order to reinforce social normativity (*DOAT* 68). Opposed to Aristotle's interpretation of tragedy rather than tragedy itself, Barker's emphasis on pain explicitly calls attention to a theatrical context, underscoring that the cultural necessity to make pain visible actually troubles Aristotle's effort to appropriate the theatrical representation of pain in order to elaborate theater's moral qualities (*Arguments* 113).

While Barker's plays emphasize pain, and though he consistently refers to tragedy in his theoretical writings, his catastrophic theater differs from tragedy in that it does not provide the reconciliation that traditionally concludes tragedies. In other words, rather than follow tragedy's *dénouement*, which tracks a play's fall from a moment of extreme pain and suffering to some insight or knowledge, Barker's theater does not yield such solace (*Arguments* 97). Instead, his plays often end abruptly, even arbitrarily. As a result, Barker challenges tragedy's teleological structure, and his plays painful events resist any normative or normalizing discourse that would appropriate them to serve a political or social purpose. And while Barker's protagonists do suffer, their suffering materializes Barker's reflections on beauty as it appears in his catastrophic theater. Mentioning this point throughout his theoretical writings, Barker succinctly clarifies this

argument at the conclusion of *Death, The One and the Art of Theatre*, stating, *"*[i]t is impossible—now, at this point in the long journey of human culture—to avoid the sense that pain is necessity, that it is neither accident, nor malformation, nor malice, nor misunderstanding, that it is integral to the human character both in its inflicting and its suffering. This terrible sense tragedy alone has articulated, and will continue to articulate, and in so doing, make *beautiful*…" (*DOAT* 105). With Barker's often quoted formulation in mind, what most concretely differentiates Aristotle and Barker form one another is how each formulates pain's necessity. Specifically, while Aristotle will, at least according to Barker, situate the tragic protagonist's pain as part of a broader effort to enforce social order, Barker understands pain as an inherent element of human existence.

Barker's reflections on pain and beauty are somewhat difficult to digest, as they may suggest a certain ethical problematic. Specifically, it is unclear just how pain is transformed into beauty, and whether or not such transformation requires the objectification of pain and suffering. As Thomas Freeland observes, "However solemn he may try to be, Barker still aims to use pain in the service of (poetic) beauty—is there not endemic to the enterprise already an ethically suspect abrogation of basic decency?" (95). For Freeland, however, Barker's ethically offensive gesture may be read as the "artistic point" of his aesthetic. In other words, whereas Aristotle conceptualizes catharsis as the proper vehicle to enforce dominate social values, Barker creates works that enable each spectator or reader to confront how one's own personal experiences with pain contribute to and perhaps even found one's self-perception and subjectivity. Barker's commitment to the connection between pain and beauty originates from the recognition that tragedy itself aimed to transform and make beautiful the pain and suffering of, for example, poetic and historical heroes. Yet, Barker does not completely disregard tragedy's concern with

either historical or poetical figures. Instead, Barker subjects history and poetry to his imagination, and creates a theatrical mode that imagines alternative histories and dramatizes a poetic commitment that is directly situated in relation to the poetics of tragedy. As we shall see, the history depicted in Barker's *The Europeans*—which remains one of the clearest examples of Barker's first catastrophic plays—can be read as an allegory of European historicity as it dramatizes the agonistic dynamic that is involved in creating what is remembered as history. Furthermore, Barker's recent *Blok/Eko* (2011) refers to several key epic and lyric poets and figures in what appears to be an amalgamation that dramatizes Barker's theatrical aesthetic itself.

Barker's effort to make pain beautiful therefore respects pain as a fundamental and even necessary condition of lived existence. And while suffering is often the result of catastrophic acts frequently judged to be evil, unnecessary, and egregious, in Barker's theater pain is, to borrow a phrase from Nietzsche, beyond good and evil. Yet, despite this clarification, Barker's claim that his theater aims to make pain beautiful remains rather ambiguous, if for no other reason than it is unclear what Barker means to suggest by the term, "beauty." In *Arguments for a Theatre*, Barker specifically addresses the definition of beauty in his writing by examining *The Europeans*:

> If a theatre of Catastrophe takes as its material the individual and the individual's ability to effect self-identification in a collective or historical nightmare, the moment of beauty is also the moment of collision between two wills, the will of the irrational protagonist (the non-ideological) and the will of the irrational state (the officially ideological). In my most recent play, *The Europeans*, commissioned by the RSC but deemed unsuitable for its public, the maimed casualty of a war between empires makes public her atrocity in an attempt to prevent her pain becoming subsumed in the anodyne reconciliations which pass for public history. Refusing to permit her biography to degenerate into a statistic, she

> delivers the child which is one of the products of her ordeal, in a public space, struggling against even the midwives to establish the primacy of her experience over public interest. (*Arguments* 59)

Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, Barker's conceptual reflection on beauty focuses on social and political conflict. In other words, despite Barker's effort to untangle the theatrical presentation of catastrophic events from a political context—a struggle made most apparent by Barker's critical engagement with Aristotle—Barker refers to a political context in order to articulate the moment in which beauty appears in his plays. It is only when offering the example of Katrin's suffering that Barker returns to pain and to his argument that the theatrical articulation of pain makes possible the appearance of beauty in his work. As a result, Barker's comments leave a chasm between the conceptualization of beauty as it is at stake in his work, and the example that he uses to illustrate such a theory.

While it is certainly unclear how to judge the difference between Barker's effort to conceptualize beauty and the example of Katrin as a figure of catastrophic beauty, scholars have gravitated to the line of thought developed by Barker's reflection on *The Europeans* in order to discuss the concept of beauty as it appears in his work. Most notably, Karoline Gritzner associates the concept of the sublime with Barker's notion of beauty. In her essay, "Towards an Aesthetic of the Sublime in Howard Barker's Theatre", Gritzner states that the "sublime's presence as an idea and feeling of boundless power (of the Other outside or within) becomes the source of an incomprehensible, terrifying yet fascinating *jouissance* (an enigmatic and ecstatic, heightened form of pleasure) for many of Barker's tragic protagonists" ("Sublime" 84). And as Gritzner observes, Barker's characters often call these heightened and enigmatic experiences "beautiful" ("Sublime" 84).[27] Given such an exposition, it is nevertheless strange that Kant

would serve Gritzner's analysis, particularly since for Kant the sublime names an experience in which the imagination fails to comprehend an overwhelming experience, leaving reason to think that which exceeds the imagination's capacity (§25, 169-172). In other words, whereas for Kant the sublime testifies to reason's supremacy over the imagination, for Barker's catastrophic theater the imagination is of primary concern and it supersedes rationality. Such an observation, however, is not specifically intended to challenge Gritzner's reading of Kant and its application to her analysis of Barker. Instead, I hope to have shown the possibility that Barker's theater may critically engage Kant's aesthetics as it offers a different schema with which to consider the connection between beauty and the sublime in Barker's work. In fact, Gritzner demonstrates this possibility when stating, "[i]n Barker's tragic aesthetics of the sublime the erotic experience and the encounter with death, the anguish of love and ecstasy of pain, provoke an affirmation of autonomous subjectivity (the freedom of the ego) while at the same time implying its fragmentation and dissolution" ("Sublime" 92).

To be sure, Gritzner's analysis expands Barker's interest in the "individual's ability to effect self-identification in a collective nightmare". However, she also stresses the fact that in Barker's plays the self's assumed autonomy, and specifically its self-identification, is fragmented and undermined. In fact, just as Barker's protagonists consistently affirm the pain that they experience and will it is as necessary to the process of self-definition, Barker also writes that a catastrophic theater is a "theatre of pain, but one without obligations to reconciliation or harmony" (*Arguments* 97). Gritzner's reading therefore revisits Barker's use of the term "beauty" to describe an agonistic situation in which pain both gives and fragment's the subject's autonomy; and as a result, Gritzner is able to demonstrate how the term "sublime" may better signify Barker's catastrophic aesthetic. It is in this regard that Gritzner's analysis observes a

crucial tension in Barker's work, for while pain may catalyze his characters' efforts toward self-definition, it also undermines their autonomy and the possibility that such self-definition could ever be achieved. In other words, in the Theatre of Catastrophe, the tension between self-discovery and self-loss does not find dialectical resolution. It is, in fact, a conflict that serves as the condition of possibility for Barker's Catastrophic Theatre.

This latter tension to which I have drawn attention is in no way a criticism of Barker's aesthetic theory or his plays. Instead, I suggest that this tension defines the manner in which Barker situates his aesthetic as uniquely European. For Barker, to be European is to hold together simultaneously opposing concepts so as to allow them to co-exist antagonistically with each other ("Crisis", *Interviews* 129, 130). With this conflict in mind, I follow Thomas Freeland and Elisabeth Angel-Perez, both of whom suggest that Barker's plays may be appreciated for their "deconstructionist…method" (Angel-Perez qtd. in Freeland 97). However, my appreciation for such a method, if, in fact, the term, "method" is appropriate when describing deconstruction, does not concern whether or not Barker's plays and theoretical writings deconstruct European theater traditions, despite the fact that this possibility is thoroughly and convincingly elucidated throughout much of Barker scholarship.[28] Instead, I argue that Barker may be read as having created a deconstructive poetics. It is with this in mind that my own analysis of Barker's work will abandon the Kantian aesthetic that I referred to as I observed, following Gritzner's analysis, the tension between self-loss and self-discovery that inhabits Barker's work. Instead, to attend to Barker's deconstructive poetics is to follow how pain makes necessary the struggle to find a language that transforms suffering into poetry. For Barker, this transformation requires the imagination. However, Barker does not assume that the theater has the ability to know or to imagine everything, since, "Death is the limit not only of life but also of imagination and

therefore the stop of poetry […] we cannot imagine the state of death—it is, along with infinity, impossible to envisage, and where death or the after-life has been represented artistically the poverty of its representation only serves to demonstrate the absurdity of the effort" (*DOAT* 30). Yet, although death marks the limit of poetry, Barker's plays repeatedly concern death, and it is the impossibility that death could be envisaged and transformed into an object of knowledge that gives catastrophic theater its necessity, opening up the possibility of theatrical art itself and mandating that its poetry, like death, be "concerned with what is not self-evident" (*DOAT* 34).

As we shall see, beauty in Barker's theater is not simply the appearance of the conflict between the individual's will and an ideological society. Instead, beauty appears most explicitly in Barker's plays when pain transports a character to a position that couples self-identification with self-loss. Therefore, Barker's deconstructive poetics may be best observed in that his character's response to pain necessitates the poetic nature of his plays, consequently expressing the conflict between self-loss and self-identification that Gritzner's reading underscored. However, this poetics does not resolve the tension between self-definition and self-loss, but instead suggests that death ultimately undermines the possibility that this tension could ever be resolved or sublated. In fact, over the course of his career with The Wrestling School, Barker's plays increasingly emphasize the irreconcilable quality of this tension. In what follows, I will engage Barker's deconstructive poetics by reading *The Europeans: Struggles to Love*, to which Barker often refers in order to draw attention to beauty as it is developed in his work. Furthermore, the play is also one of Barker's first and clearest examples of his Theatre of Catastrophe. Having discussed *The Europeans*, I will proceed to examine Barker's most recent and ambitious work, *Blok/Eko* (2011). The play concerns a tyrant Queen, Eko, who orders the execution of all doctors and who believes that poetry should be the only resource that brings her

subjects solace from their pain and affliction. While *The Europeans* is one of Barker's earliest and clearest examples of his *Theatre of Catastrophe*, *Blok/Eko* uses a meta-theatrical construct in order to examine the very conditions of his theatrical aesthetic.

**II. History as Catastrophe: Howard Barker's *The Europeans***

First written for the RSC in 1987, Howard Barker's *The Europeans* did not take the stage until 1993, when Barker's ensemble, The Wrestling School, produced it at the Aberystwyth Arts Center. Taking place in Vienna just after the 1683 Battle of Vienna, the play follows Leopold I, the Emperor of Austria, who, after the Holy Roman Empire's victory over the Ottoman Empire, makes it his priority to create a national art. For Leopold, art should restore the Holy Roman Empire to its former glory, rather than showcase the pain that his people suffer after the siege. Juxtaposed to Leopold is Katrin, a young girl from the country who has been raped, impregnated, and mastectomized by a group of Ottoman soldiers.[29] Consistently turning to Katrin throughout several of his theoretical writings and interviews, Barker's reflections on her suffering not only make her an exemplary character for his catastrophic theatre, but also suggest a connection between her pain and the broader traumas that Barker associates with history:

> The leading woman character in *The Europeans* has been raped, maimed and made pregnant by the Turks during the war. And, at the beginning of the play, she tells the story of her maiming to the Christian bishops' enquiry into atrocities. So, she narrates what has happened to her, and quite unashamedly, so the State has a record. But the expectation on the part of the government is that she will leave it at that. She refuses to do so and says, 'I am about to give birth, but I will do this in public, in front of an audience'. The more she refuses to allow her own suffering to be subsumed within history, the more unpleasant she becomes to the regime. […] I believe the experience of

> history is an experience of pain; the words are interchangeable. Just as the individual, in the years following trauma, likes to recall the trauma, so does society insist on reproducing its dislocations, but always in a laundered way, which invokes necessity—struggle is a word much beloved of the left. It has lost its meaning, become stripped of its pain, and cloaked in anodyne romanticism—and anaesthetizes memory. (*Arguments* 48)

To be sure, Barker moves rather quickly from his commentary on Katrin to his broader interest in history. However, as suggested by his remarks, the two are not unrelated. In the first place, *The Europeans* calls to mind a historical battle, and places the regime that forms after the Second Battle of Vienna in opposition to an individual who has experienced profound pain. Moreover, it is precisely because of Katrin's suffering and the suffering of those involved and affected by the war that Leopold strives to create peace.

What is therefore at issue in *The Europeans* is the dramatization of pain as history and vice versa. Yet, while the play is paradigmatic of many of Barker's early catastrophic works in that it emphasizes a protagonist's pain as what might found an aesthetic that resists social normativity, it also resembles plays such as *Victory* (1983), *The Castle* (1985) and *The Bite of the Night* (1988), as it marries historical events and periods such as Restoration England, the Crusades, and the Trojan War respectively with fictional characters and actions. As indicated by the separation between the play's primary title and subtitle, *The Europeans: Struggles to Love*, the play juxtaposes Leopold's response to his victory over the Ottoman Empire after the second siege of Vienna to Katrin's suffering and the love that it causes Starhemberg to have for her. The fact that the play neglects to give the proper titles to both Leopold and Starhemberg, and furthermore combines historical facts with fictionalized dialogue and characters, calls us to consider the metaphorical, rather than strictly literal, quality of history.[30] Moreover, the play

demands that we remember the connection between pain and history—to call to mind the intense physical anguish that is often required to make history—rather than ameliorate it through rhetoric, satire, or comedy.

As already observed, the effort to remember pain as history and history as pain belongs to the play's main protagonists. For example, in the play's opening scenes, Leopold's reaction to war torn Vienna after the siege is juxtaposed to Katrin's pain as she has been raped and physically deformed by a group of Ottoman soldiers. Specifically, while Leopold laughs at the suffering that he witnesses, Katrin confesses what has happened to her to a group of nuns and priests in order to find words to describe the brutal actions that she has endured:

KATRIN: In my own words. (*Pause*).

Words of my own. (*Pause*)

The poor have neither words nor drawers. (*Pause*)

Oh, for literacy, oh for numeracy, oh for any pack of lies! (*Pause*)

So the four soldiers said—(*Pause*)

No.

No. There may not have been four. And they may not have been soldiers. But they did have weapons and the Turk does not wear uniform so for the sake of. (*Pause*)

Let's say four. (*Pause*)

The four soldiers said lie down—well, they didn't say it, no, they did not say the words they indicated by very simple gestures this was expected of me, words were dispensed with, words were superfluous though much language was expressed on either side, by me, by them, but words not really, no. (*Pause*).

Consequently I lay my face down in the relatively sympathetic grass. OF COURSE I AM NOT IN THE LEAST ASHAMED DESCRIPTION COMES EASILY TO MEbut can I have a glass of water? The dryness of my mouth suggests anxiety but I have had a dry mouth since my throat was cut, some channel or some duct severed something irreparable and anatomical. (*A* NUN *places a glass of water by the chair and withdraws*.) […]

It's you who are ashamed of me but I forgive in all directions then one of them threw up my skirt excuse me—(*she drinks*.)

Or several of them, from now on I talk of them as plural, as many-headed, as many-legged and a mass of mouths and of course I had not drawers, to be precise—(*Pause*). I owned a pair but for special occasions. This was indeed special but on rising in the morning I was not aware of it, and I thought many things, but first I thought—no, I exaggerate, I claim to know the order of my thoughts WHAT A PREPOSTEROUS CLAIM—strike that out, no, among the CASCADE OF IMPRESSIONS—that's better—that's accurate—cascade of impressions—came the idea at least I DID NOT HAVE TO KISS. (*Pause*). The lips being holy, the lips being sacred, the orifice from which I uttered my most perfect and religions thoughts only the grass would smear them but no. (*Pause*)

My mouth which I had held to be the very shape and seat of intimacy they smothered with wet and fluid—I don't think you could call them kisses—YES, YES, KISSES, THEY WERE KISSES I try to hide behind language, oh, the language I do twist like bars of brass to shelter in, no, they were KISSES because a kiss can be made of hatred—kisses, yes, oh, yes… (Barker, *TE*, *Plays One* 95, 96)

Katrin's testimony illustrates a feature common to Barker's Theatre of Catastrophe: namely, her attempt to recollect what happened to her causes her not only to investigate herself, but also to struggle for the right words with which to speak of her pain. In fact, her testimony directly connects her injuries, in particular the one to her throat, with her rather tortured effort to find her "own words." The result of this effort is two-fold: first, Katrin re-examines the manner in which she perceives her experience, choosing to focus on it as a series of cascading impressions, rather than as an ordered sequence to which she is purely present; and second, she reflects on how the words that she had used prior to having been raped now acquire a different signifying potential. This latter process is most evident in her sustained concern with the word, "kisses," the signification of which changes from an act of intimacy and devotion to one that can suggest hatred and violence. At issue in Katrin's testimony is not simply the discovery that "kisses" could contain hatred, but, in tandem with this recognition, the observation that her speech had in the past imprisoned her within certain social constraints. Hence, her effort to find "words of her own" in order to speak of the trauma through which she has lived catalyzes her need to undermine the social system in which she takes part, insofar as that system now pities her and seeks to pacify her pain in a way that would ultimately eradicate its history. Through her testimony, Katrin's effort to speak of the violence that was inflicted on her becomes an exercise of self-exploration that radically alters her self-perception and appreciation of language.

As the play progresses, Katrin dedicates herself to making her wounded body visible throughout Vienna. Going so far as to enter an "Institute of Science" in order to become an object of study, Katrin hopes that the image of her body drawn by those who observe her will be distributed throughout the city and showcased in public places. Her decision to have her body reproduced in the form of an image and disseminated across Europe suggests something of the

play's meta-aesthetic quality, insofar as the representation of Katrin's body stresses Barker's interest in the connection between pain and the cultural necessity to transform and bear witness to it through art. Juxtaposed against Katrin's eagerness to show her pain, and consequently herself, to others, Leopold and his wife disfavor the publication of violence, and even go so far as to gather a group of academics to discuss how art may be used to represent the Holy Roman Empire as glorified and prosperous. However, Starhemberg—fascinated with Katrin and very much enamored with her because of the manner in which she affirms her suffering—interrupts the conversation between Leopold and his artistic advisors, and like Katrin, demands that pain be the subject of the empire's new art:

> STARHEMBERG: What I need. And what there will be. I need an art which will recall pain. The art that will be will be all flourishes and celebration. I need 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 need 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 new woman but only from the pieces of the old. The new man and new woman will insist on their utter novelty. I ask a lot. The new art will ask nothing. And now I am going to bed…
>
> EMPRESS: I do not think, Starhemberg, you have quite grasped the temper of the times, has he? I think what Europe needs is rococo and a little jazz (STARHEMBERG *gets up, bows, is about to leave, but stops*.)
>
> STARHEMBERG: During the war, while the group rose under the shellfire and the sky was black with rising and falling and rising and clods, and rising and falling flesh, and everything was racing from itself, the eye from the socket and the arm from the

> joint, you heard in the factional silences a signing record going round, deep in a cellar, and the lips of the soon-to-be-dead were mouthing sentiments of banal happiness…
>
> EMPRESS: And why not…? (*He bows, goes out.*) WHY NOT. (Barker, *TE*, *Plays One* 135, 136)

To be sure, Starhemberg wishes for an art that will replace the sentiments of banal happiness and celebration, sentiments that the Empress and Emperor wish to express in the empire's new art, with an art that will free the self as it challenges one to speculate on the conditions that constitute one's self-perception. Influenced by Katrin, Starhemberg believes that it is the recollection of pain through art that will destroy the Empire's trivial values. Yet, Starhemberg's speech, much like Katrin's eagerness to have the image of her scarred body distributed across the empire, appears to function as a sort of elucidation of the conditions that Barker associates with catastrophe itself. For example, in conversation with David Ian Rabey, Barker details catastrophe as something that is willed and not simply endured (*HBED* 55), and it is this sentiment that informs Starhemberg's "need" to have art remember suffering through an art of extravagance and pure introspection. Furthermore, Starhemberg's vision of a new aesthetics is itself in direct opposition to the dominant social values and mores of his society, which hold art as a means of entertainment, joy, and laughter. In this regard, Starhemberg clearly articulates another detail specific to Barker's definition of catastrophe, specifically, the will to affirm personal pain in an effort to "effect self-individualization in a collective and historical nightmare" (*Arguments* 48).

As the play advances, Starhemberg's speech about the future of art after the Battle of Vienna transforms into one of the play's explicitly meta-theatrical moments, as Katrin, despite the protestations of Leopold, gives birth to her child in a public square. Surrounded by an

audience consisting of Leopold, the Empress, Starhemberg, Orphuls the priest, a Midwife, and townspeople, the birth of Katrin's child is not only a public event, but also a theatrical one:

LEOPOLD: It's cold. I shan't say for all of it. And what's her game, in any case? I told Elizabeth this had to be illegal. No, she said, not yet! (*The* AUDIENCE *is drifting in.* LEOPOLD *spots the* PAINTER.) Here is the vantage point! (*He propels the* PAINTER *to the front*.) This also is a battle! And now it rains! She gets all she asks for! (*He pulls up his collar. Umbrellas go up.* KATRIN *appears, supported by the* MIDWIFE. *Silence descends. She looks into the crowd. Pause*.)

KATRIN: Not as many as I'd hoped. Don't they like the spectacle? Not the numbers I'd predicted, but—(*A spasm of pain doubles her. The* MIDWIFE *goes to assist her.* KATRIN *pushes her away*.) NOBODY HELP ME BIRTH THE CHILD**.** (*Pause. She steadies herself*.) Can everybody se all right? Some people—over there—the view's restricted, surely? (*Pause. She stares into the* AUDIENCE.) I bring you hope. I bring you history. (*She is doubled again. The* MIDWIFE *goes to assist but is repelled*.) WHAT ARE YOU—

MIDWIFE: Only helping, lady—

KATRIN: No, that isn't it—

MIDWIFE: Helping—

KATRIN: THAT'S NOT WHAT IT IS. (*Pause. The* MIDWIFE *looks to* LEOPOLD, *to* ORPULS).

MIDWIFE: This is how we get in labour—all abusive, but we don't mean anything—

KATRIN: I DO MEAN SOMETHING.

MIDWIFE: I know darling, but—(*A further spasm. She staggers*.)

> LEOPOLD: I can't watch this! (*He half-turns away*.) I can't watch this! Do something, somebody! (ORPHULS *goes to move, with the* MIDWIFE*, but* STARHEMBERG *blocks them, drawing a knife*.)
>
> STARHEMBERG: I'll burst the spleen of anyone who nears her bed. (*A pause*. )[…] Her pain she needs. Her suffering she requires. NO THIEVING BY THE COMPASSONATE! (*Pause. Katrin struggles on the bed*) […] They pretend to pity her, but they steal her pain. Don't chair her in some madhouse. (Barker, *TE, Plays One* 138, 139)

As David Barnett observes, the scene is a "metatheatrical episode" in which "an audience watches an audience watching a performance of pain, a striking metaphor for his [Barker's] theatre that seems to ask what can be achieved through theatre" (470). The birth of Katrin's child, therefore, realizes Starhemberg's aesthetic, which the play's audience is called to observe. Specifically, Katrin transforms the birth of her child into an artistic event that calls to mind the argument that Starhemberg had with Leopold about the future of European art. It is therefore through a theatrical frame that the play's audience is made to see Katrin's effort to transform her suffering into a work of art. As a result, the birth of Katrin's child helps to clarify the importance of pain in Barker's work, as it suggests his aesthetic project is interested in allowing the effect that pain has on his characters to be shown and made visible. In other words, Katrin creates a theater to showcase her pain because the theater is, at least for Barker, the one cultural destination where pain is allowed to appear, and where individuals, in bearing witness to the pain that appears on stage, might also bear witness to the pain that affects their lives, and perhaps even constitutes their own self-perception.

The meta-theatrical quality of the scene, however, does not only appear observable with Katrin and her effort to generate an audience for the birth of her child, but it also involves Leopold, who finds and occupies the scene's "vantage point." And, as Leopold states, it is from this point that he makes his painter paint the image of Katrin's labor. The scene therefore suggests an implicit reference to the aesthetics of European Classical theatre—a reference made all the more justified given the historical period in which the play takes place—during which time theater entertained European nobles and royalty. Furthermore, according to classical aesthetics, the work of art ought to function as a direct representation of the King and his presumed moral values. Hence, Leopold's interest in inhabiting the one place capable of seeing all that surrounds him, and his subsequent demand that his position be the one from which his painter represents the birth of Katrin's child, suggests his desire to transform the child's birth into a work of art that would reflect him and his aesthetic sensibilities. In other words, the *mise-en-scene* is constructed such that Leopold physically inhabits the King's proper point of view. By making the birth of Katrin's daughter a theatrical event, Barker therefore consciously calls attention to two distinct modes of aesthetic production: in the first place, Katrin's eagerness to create a theater in which pain takes center stage and, on the other hand, the Emperor's attempt to represent Katrin's labor in a way that corresponds with his ideology. In this moment, the collision between the will of the so-called irrational protagonist (Katrin) and the will of the irrational state (Leopold) is not only carried out by the content of the scene, but also by the *mise-en-scene*. However, as the scene demonstrates, Leopold is unable to direct his gaze upon Katrin as she gives birth to her daughter. Consequently, rather than destroy the scene that Katrin has created, Leopold's blindness allows the birth of Katrin to continue as a public event.

Much to Katrin's dismay, however, the birth of her daughter does not garner the result that she anticipated, and rather than emerge as a symbol born from Katrin's agonizing mutilation, her child is quickly seized by Leopold and christened with the name "Concilia." Leopold's actions therefore undermine Katrin's efforts to bear publicly her pain and to create an event in which others might witness her suffering. Allergic to Leopold's diplomatic act, which appropriates Katrin's child as a symbol of reconciliation between the Holy Roman Empire and the Ottoman Empire, Katrin believes herself cheated of the horrors through which she had lived and which define who she is. Hence, the conflict staged earlier between Starhemberg and Leopold repeats in the conflict between Leopold and Katrin, for rather than accept Katrin's pain as what defines her, Leopold immediately uses it as a vehicle for peace and reconciliation, effectively negating her struggle for autonomy and meaning. Consequently, the future that the child promised Katrin, a future that would memorialize her pain and affirm her unwillingness to forgive those who did her wrong, is transformed into one that serves the Empire and its rather populist demand for joy among its constituents and peace.

The play's subtitle, *Struggles to Love*, certainly fits Katrin and Starhemberg's relationship. And while Leopold ultimately takes Katrin's daughter, Starhemberg commits himself to Katrin's cause, and keeps the Midwife from assuaging Katrin's pain during childbirth. Yet the dedication that Starhemberg shows to Katrin is not limited to the actions that he takes to help Katrin deliver her child without the aid of pain suppressants. Instead, Katrin's pain and Starhemberg's affirmation of it materializes the love that the two express for each other:

> *A room in Vienna, shuttered. The bell ceases. Into the obscurity,* STARHEMBERG *walks slowly. He removes his clothing, item by item. He goes to a chair, and sits*. KATRIN *is*

*discovered, already naked, in a chair distantly opposite his own. They gaze, unfalteringly.*

KATRIN: I show myself to you. I show myself, and it is an act of love. Stay in your place!

STARHEMBERG: I was not moving. Only looking.

KATRIN: You were not moving, no…(*Pause*) I am in such a torment it would be an act of pity to approach me, pure pity, but you will not, will you? I know because you are not kind, thank God, you spare us kindness, and your body is quite grey, it is so far from perfect, spare us perfection also! You are a beautiful man, so beautiful my breath is stiff as mud to breathe, don't come near me.

STARHEMBERG: You shudder…

KATRIN: Yes, may I call you love, whether or not you love me I must call you my love, DON'T GET UP!

STARHEMBERG: I shan't get up…

KATRIN: I am in the most beautiful Hell. Praise me a little, mutter me a bit, describe, describe Christ in Heaven's sake, I could gnaw your knees to blood, and you mine, I know you could—

STARHEMBERG: Yes…

KATRIN: I would rather take one look from you than pulp a night in hopeless effort, there, I'm better now, much better…(*Pause*) It's odd, but though I have done all that suggested itself to me, I never looked at any man but you, I think. Looked, I mean. I never knew to look was love. (*Pause*) WHAT DO YOU SEE? WHAT DO YOU SEE? (Barker, *TE, Plays One* 146, 147)

The speculative dynamic constructed in this scene extends the meta-theatrical construct that is present during the birth of Katrin's child, Concilia. Specifically, just as Katrin demanded that the birth of her child should be viewed in public, so too does she define the gift of love as an act in which one allows oneself to be seen by another. Showing her mutilated body to Starhemberg, Katrin in turn looks upon Starhemberg's naked body, and concludes, "I never knew to look was love." Of course, while Katrin's conclusion appears genuine, it nevertheless articulates what has been at involved throughout much of her character's behavior insofar as she continuously and willfully subjects herself to the looks of common people, clergy, and political figures in order to be recognized for how she recognizes herself. Starhemberg's presence therefore helps Katrin become more conscious of her own desire, even though he does not immediately respond to her question. Yet, the act of looking at another is ultimately rendered ambiguous with her final question to Starhemberg, "WHAT DO YOU SEE?" The question is not only asked in a very literal sense, providing Starhemberg with the opportunity to validate Katrin and speak of his love for her. But it also implies a broader interrogation of what is involved when one sees someone else, and what is required of one to look faithfully upon another.

Rather than immediately answer her question, Starhemberg instead suggests that they should travel to the Empire's frontier land, Wallachia, in order check the military forts and create a "new Europe" (Barker, *TE, Plays One* 147, 148). Though the opportunity to reside on the frontier excites Katrin, and furthermore offers her the possibility to live her life away from the social constraints and values of Vienna, this hope is compromised when Jemal, a Turkish commander, visits the fort in which she, Starhemberg, and Concilia reside. Rather than attack the commander, Starhemberg instead emphasizes that he and Katrin must love each other, and gives

Concilia to Jemal as a gift, bringing the play to its conclusion and forcing Katrin to re-examine her values once more:

STARHEMBERG: The child's a Turk. (*Pause*)

JEMAL: A Turk?

STARHEMBERG: Of Turkish fathers whose untimely executions left her stranded in this foreign territory… (KATRIN *shudders*. STARHEMBERG *holds her closer*.) How do we escape from History? We reproduce its mayhem in our lives…

JEMAL: I refuse your gift!

STARHEMBERG: Refuse and you die. And my hostage officer, him too

(STARHEMBERG *takes the* CHILD *from* KATRIN, *who is as if petrified*. *Suddenly she is seized by a physical delirium.* SUSANNAH *embraces her, overcomes her, stills her. She emerges, smiling, from the ordeal*.)

KATRIN: In any case, she might so easily have been seized in a raid.

STARHEMBERG: (*giving the* CHILD *to* JEMAL, *who hesitates*): It happens all the time… (*He holds the baby out*.) You will convert her to the true faith, obviously…

KATRIN: And who knows what might have befallen her if she stayed in Vienna? Smallpox? Carriage accidents? Anything! (JEMAL *takes the* CHILD.) And in a year, it will be as if I never knew her! (*She looks at* JEMAL. *He returns her look, then turns on his heel and goes out. The cry of the* SENTRIES *is heard*.)

THE WATCH: One bo — dy and a child! One bo — dy and a child!

KATRIN (*to* STARHEMBERG): Look at me. What do you see? (*He gazes at her. Suddenly, an eruption of fireworks, explosions and coloured lights, cheering from the entire fort*. *The* EMPRESS *enters with the court, in riding cloaks*.)

EMPRESS: Starhemberg, who never answers the Imperial Despatch! Starhemberg, obscure in Wallachia! But we will not be deprived! (*She embraces him*. LEOPOLD *enters*.)

LEOPOLD (*Greeting* KATRIN): The Mother! And the Child! Where is the child? (*He looks from* KATRIN *to* SUSANNAH.) Concilia, where's she? (*A burst of fireworks*.)

SUSANNAH: She's been returned.

LEOPOLD: Returned?

KATRIN: To her creators. She's with them. (*The* EMPRESS *looks from* KATRIN *to* STARHEMBERG.)

EMPRESS: Starhemberg—

KATRIN: He—

EMPRESS: Starhemberg…?

KATRIN: Wait! (*A firework trickles down the sky*.) Let me finish it. (*she speaks with infinite calculation*.) He has—made—restitution—of—their property—(*Pause*) for which—I—merely was—(*Pause. She grins*.) Curator…(She grips LEOPOLD *by the arm*. *He is horrified*.) Congratulate me!

LEOPOLD: Concilia…!

KATRIN: Congratulate me, then!

LEOPOLD**:** CON—CIL—IA! CON—CIL—IA! (*Lights rise and fall.* KATRIN *walks unsteadily to* STARHEMBERG. *The embrace. They kiss*.) I LAUGH! I LAUGH! (Barker, *TE*, *Plays One* 154-156)

Deprived of her child, Katrin loses the very thing that materialized what her pain had created. And while Starhemberg's act may at first glance appear cruel, it is, at least for him, an act that

subverts Leopold's authority, undermining his effort to keep the child as his own in order to transform Katrin's suffering into something that brings restitution to the Ottoman Empire's defeat. More importantly, the act is also one of love, for he and he alone is able to recognize Katrin's dependence on the child, and subsequently frees her from this attachment by giving Concilia to Jemal. As a result, however, Katrin experiences loss, not just of Concilia, but also of her very sense of self insofar as her child's life brought her meaning and justified her suffering. However, Katrin's grief is immediately coupled with her greatest insight, namely, that she does not, in fact, own what her pain has produced. Hence, the loss that Katrin first experiences is later replaced by a sense of pride for having acted as the child's curator. The curious usage of the term "curator" once again associates Katrin's function as a mother with her interest in art, suggesting that her daughter, Concilia, is an aesthetic object that she temporarily protects.

Much as it starts, *The Europeans* concludes by pitting Leopold and Katrin against one another. Specifically, just as Leopold laughs at the sight of war torn Vienna in the play's opening scene, so too does he laugh after discovering that Starhemberg gave Concilia to Jemal. And while Katrin is at first distraught to witness her daughter in the hands of Ottoman soldiers, she eventually kisses Starhemberg and confirms her love for him. While the kiss that Starhemberg and Katrin share calls to mind the narrative that she created to describe how the Ottoman soldiers tortured her, this final kiss appears to restore her mouth as a sacred orifice. Yet, despite its ostensibly redemptive conclusion, Katrin and Leopold's antagonistic relationship suggests something about European history itself, a possibility that is confirmed by the play's very title. In other words, it is possible to read *The Europeans* as an allegory of European history itself. Specifically, the fact that Leopold's affect is incongruous with what he witnesses—the sight of dead and malnourished bodies is not inherently comical, neither is a kiss shared between two

people who love each other—calls us to consider just what Leopold's laughter might signify. To be sure, Leopold's laughter is consonant with his later effort to produce a European aesthetic that would bring cheer to his people, rather than allow them to bear witness to the pain that they have endured. Yet, given Barker's own reflection on theater's cultural necessity, Leopold's laughter may signify the recurring European drive to assuage pain, whether it is personal or historical. And the repetition of this drive may also be connected to the fact that the conflict between "Europeans" and "Ottoman's," which is also to say the "West" and the "East" or "Christians" and "Muslims, is one that has consistently recurred to create history. In other words, Leopold's laughter aestheticizes a connection between Europe's inability to bear witness to pain, and its great capacity for inflicting it. It is against this history—a history that speaks of the failure to bear witness to pain as it repeats the great effort taken to subject a nation's "enemies" to pain—that Katrin and Starhemberg situate themselves. This is not to suggest that pain can be avoided: the moments that Katrin and Starhemberg most explicitly challenge their social context are also moments in which pain carries them to the limit between self-discovery and self-loss. In fact, the play explicitly prioritizes those moments in which this conflict between self-loss and self-discover is held is suspension, focusing on Katrin's discourse on having been raped, the public birth of her daughter, Katrin and Starhemberg's amorous gestures, and Concilia's return to the Ottomon soldiers. Yet, it is precisely by affirming pain as integral to human experience that Katrin and Starhemberg learn to love one another, rather than repeat the violence that Katrin endured and that Starhemberg enacted in battle.

As I hope to have implied, the antagonism between Leopold and Katrin is not one that finds resolution. European history, at least according to Barker's play, is contradictory, and it is constituted by the complex and agonistic encounter between a drive to forget pain and a drive to

bear witness to it. I hope to have shown that this conflict never becomes a formal dialectic. Instead, this conflict is itself necessary for the creation of what is called history. However, Barker's play is much more than an essay on Europe's historicity. Specifically, the play's meta-theatrical components emphasize the theater as a place in which pain is allowed to be visible. Yet, suffering can not only overwhelm one who experiences it, but it can also escape history insofar as we are often without the proper means with which to record or contain pain. Barker's theater, therefore, radically breaks from the mimetic paradigm often associated with theater, for rather than re-present that which is either historically verifiable or empirically known, the Theatre of Catastrophe concerns that which may overwhelm history itself. It is no surprise that Barker turned to *The Europeans* throughout his theoretical writings and interviews in order to give his readers an example of beauty in the Theatre of Catastrophe. In fact, while Barker prefaces *Arguments for a Theatre* by stating that "theory follows practice," the very content of *The Europeans* not only reads as a sort of dramatic rendering of his theoretical writings, but contains passages that articulate specific ideas formulated in them

Though the connection between practice and theory may appear rather literal in Barker's early catastrophic plays—in other words, several of Barker's early characters speak as if they are reciting passages from Barker's theoretical work—as Barker's career continued with The Wrestling School, he developed new aesthetic techniques, making gesture, complex stage directions, and *haute couture* costuming integral components of his plays. Furthermore, in plays such as *Gertrude—The Cry* (2002), *Dead Hands* (2004), *The Fence it its Thousandth Year* (2005), and *Found in the Ground* (2009), the language Barker gives his characters is not in the form of prose, as it is, for example, in *The Europeans*. Instead, dialogue appears in the form of poetry and is often without punctuation, thereby forcing actors and readers to find the proper

rhythm of the language.[31] Discussing the importance of rhythm in his work, Barker cites Nietzsche, stating that:

> Nietzsche's insight that meaning and rhythm were synonymous is borne out by all my experience with actors. When an actor is bluffing, i.e. saying something the meaning of which he has not got, it is immediately obvious in the handling of the inner pace of the speech—we are talking of a highly developed and poetic form here. You [as an actor] are born with this sense of rhythm. It is a gift of God. The overall meanings of plays are unknown to the actors because they are unknown to me. All they require to know is their emotional condition in scene. ("On The Wrestling School", *Interviews* 183)

As Barker indicates, his plays neither articulate a preconceived meaning, nor do they represent a perfectly clear and identifiable social condition. Instead, the signifying efficacy of his plays is produced through the rhythm of their language. Hence, with rhythm comes meaning and in discovering the meaning of a certain passage, particularly by how one emotionally responds to and intuits what one reads, one finds rhythm. The cyclical nature of this argument contributed to Barker's continued effort to enhance and enlarge the scope of the Theatre of Catastrophe: his most recent plays have not only become increasingly theatrical, as they contain rather large scale actions that require rather serious artistic resources, but they have also become more consciously literary due to their poetic content. In fact, Barker's most recent play, *Blok/Eko,* explicitly confirms this observation, as the play's speaking parts are written as lines of poetry, and its extensive stage directions often detail multiple actions to be performed simultaneously by the play's ensemble of more than 70 actors. To be sure, *Blok/Eko* demonstrates Barker's effort to create new theatrical techniques, and as we shall see, it exemplifies Barker's most recent effort to create a plethoric theater that extrapolates from and expands the conventions created in his early

catastrophic plays. Yet, for all of its formal innovation, *Blok/Eko* returns to an issue that Barker discussed often in his early theoretical writings, namely, that of Aristotle's concept of catharsis.

### III. Catastrophe and the Plethoric Text: Howard Barker's *Blok/Eko*

The main component of Howard Barker's Plethora/Bare Sufficiency project, *Blok/Eko* premiered at Exeter University's Northcott Theatre in the summer of 2011. However, Barker's interest in plethora is not itself new as his writings on the subject appeared in his first work of theory, *Arguments for a Theatre*. For scholars such as David Ian Rabey, plethora appropriately names Barker's effort to create a theater that overwhelms its audience, causing individual members of it to speculate on the conditions that constitute one's subjectivity. Plethora describes a state in which audience members have a "sense of witnessing *too much*" and of "being *out of control*" (Barker qtd. in Rabey, *HBED* 20). And, furthermore, because of its "illegality", Barker's Theatre of Catastrophe breaks social conventions and emphasizes theater as a place where the imagination is allowed to fabricate images that yield introspection, ambiguity, and anxiety (Barker qtd. in Rabey 20). As Karoline Gritzner emphasizes:

> The theatre of plethora, the theatre of exaggeration and excess, approaches the formal condition of formlessness. When we confront it, when we participate in it, we feel our intellect waver, our senses overflowing, because we can only respond to the 'too much' by listening to our instincts. […]The question is no longer what it means but what it does. Participating in it is also a mode of doing; it is an action, which leaves me breathless, exhausted and exhilarated, lost for words but also restless and energized. […][T]he theatrical gestures are not sociological. They do not represent a reality; they *are* a reality—autonomous and sovereign. (*Poetry* 344)[32]

Regardless of whether or not an individual affectively responds to Barker's plethoric text in the manner that Gritzer mentions, what is crucial in her analysis is the observation that Barker's theater disengages from the mimetic paradigm that so often determines theatrical art. Validating this observation, plethora does not just name a certain theatrical practice, but also concerns a textual form that can be described according to specific platitudes. For example, the plethoric text allows for the sound of the voice to be an overwhelming experience, giving speech the opportunity to induce cacophony. (Barker, "Platitudes" 251). Concomitantly, as plethoric speech is intended to overwhelm its audience and, perhaps, performers, it erases any trace of subtext, and "breaks down the barriers between the conscious and the unconscious", allowing the characters to speak freely and uninhibitedly (Barker, "Platitudes" 252). Furthermore, the plethoric text does not operate according to a preconceived teleology; instead, its ending is "arbitrary, a surgical act perhaps as violent as any within the narrative itself" ("Platitudes" 253).

Yet, as Barker observes, the features that make the plethoric text recognizable are, in fact, relative to the theatrical conventions of any given time ("Platitudes" 251). In other words, the platitudes that Barker goes on to associate with the plethoric text—speech's capacity to create an overwhelming experience, the play's arbitrary conclusion, and the avoidance of subtext—are themselves not essential properties of the plethoric text *as such*. Instead, these three qualities are historically situated in opposition to naturalism, and therefore become conventions that are integral to Barker's plethoric theater ("Platitudes" 251). While it is therefore true that the specific conventions proper to Baker's plethoric texts have preoccupied scholars, these conventions may have inhibited scholars from acknowledging a radical thinking involved in Barker's elucidation of plethoric theater. Specifically, the play is filled with moments that allow the voices of actors to create overwhelming experiences that, at times, produce cacophony. And rather than rely on a

hidden subtext to determine what the play makes visible, *Blok/Eko*, like many of Barker's early plays, dismisses subtext in order to allow characters the opportunity to use language in order to explore their inner-most desires. Finally, the play itself concludes somewhat abruptly, and does not resolve the conflicts internal to it. Readers or spectators of *Blok/Eko* would therefore immediately recognize the aesthetic platitudes that Barker identifies when distinguishing the plethoric text from a naturalistic play text.

What is therefore of the upmost significance is the implication of Barker's description of the plethoric text: by arguing that the plethoric text can only be identified relative to the theatrical conventions of any given time, Barker introduces contingency into his theory of plethora and makes possible a future in which his own texts may no longer be considered "plethoric." Barker's remarks therefore imply that plethora is precisely what promises a future for theater itself. Furthermore, it is precisely by engaging critically with the aesthetic norm specific to its respective historical context that the plethoric text produces an agonistic posture; and it is this posture that makes it necessary to create unprecedented aesthetic practices or commitments that can be identified as plethoric. Aside from the specific conventions that Barker creates in order to distinguish his theater from naturalism, Barker's *Blok/Eko* makes possible a future for theater by engaging with the Aristotelian concept of catharsis. Though *Blok/Eko* does not explicitly mention catharsis, it recalls the term perhaps in spite of itself: catharsis, in the first place, is a medical term that in the context of Aristotle's *Poetics* emphasizes the healing nature of art and specifically the poetic art of tragedy; and *Blok/Eko* concerns a world in which poetry and poets, rather than medicine and doctors, are the only sources available to individuals suffering from disease and injury. In fact, Sarah Goldingay recently argues for poetry's medicinal quality, affirming the possibility that Barker's *Blok/Eko* calls us to consider the

healing power of poetry (354-356). Yet, while Aristotle treats tragedy's transformative powers as a positive experience, describing the conditions that enable theater to distill and purge one of the dangerous emotions of a pity and terror from a very specific audience, Barker's *Blok/Eko* produces conflict and anxiety. Furthermore, *Blok/Eko* demonstrates the fact that in Barker's catastrophic theater, the poet must suffer if he or she is to write great poetry.

The fact that Barker's poetics should lead back to Aristotle immediately implies the play's meta-theatricality, suggesting that while *The Europeans* may be read as the dramatization of Barker's aesthetic theory, *Blok/Eko* may be read as the theatrical realization of the very conditions that make his theater possible. It is in this regard that we may more thoroughly confront Barker's critical engagement with naturalism. For Barker, the naturalistic project to teach its respective public how to live undermines theater's creative and critical potential. Yet, this interpretation of naturalism is one that implicitly recalls Aristotle's poetic theory, and draws attention to the implications of catharsis as it appears situated in Aristotle's broader metaphysics.[33] What therefore distinguishes Barker's *Blok/Eko* from naturalism is not reducible to the specific conventions that are proper to either Barker's play or the theatrical genre against which Barker situates his work. Instead, to take seriously Barker's claim that the plethoric text can only be recognized because of its oppositional relationship to its historical context demands that we reflect on what issue situates the difference between naturalism and Barker's plethoric theater. As we shall see, it is ultimately Barker's response to death that differentiates his plethoric theater from naturalistic theater, as well as from an Aristotelian commitment that continues to survive in the naturalistic theater that Barker consistently rejects.

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Howard Barker's *Blok/Eko* concerns a tyrant Queen, Eko, who orders the death of all doctors since she, as her loyal servant and former poet Blok asserts, knows the "SICKNESS OF THE DOCTORS" (29). As the play advances, it becomes clear that the "sickness" associated with medical professionals pertains to the violence that they do to the body in order to prolong life, which consequently numbs the intensity of one's lived experiences. Rather than value the practice of medicine, Eko instead privileges poetry, a fact that Blok's servitude confirms insofar as his character is that of the Russian lyrical poet, Alexander Blok.[34] In fact, throughout the play, poetry appears as Eko's only means of communication, and she must therefore rely on Quota to speak for her on matters that do not inspire her to sing. Elevating poetry above all other art forms, Eko regularly awards prizes for poetry. But rather than give these prizes to the best poet, Tot, she instead gives it to the play's most superficial and pleasant of poets, Pindar, the Greek lyricist.[35] As a result, the play immediately pits Tot against Pindar, and while Tot pleads with Eko that he should be given a prize so as to escape from his poverty, Eko does not pity Tot's circumstance, and instead demands that he suffer. Though very much ingratiated to Eko, Pindar nevertheless questions Eko's decision to exterminate all doctors, and furthermore takes Quasidoc, one of the last surviving doctors, as his prize. The dichotomy between Pindar and Tot therefore reveals something integral to the play's stakes. On the one hand, Tot is condemned to live a life of suffering without respite. However, he is also able to transform his suffering into art, and in so doing, he writes the most beautiful poetry. On the other hand, the most famous and decorated poet, Pindar, does not suffer and, consequently, his poetry is the least important. Blind to poetry's healing powers and to the connection between suffering and poetic talent, Pindar consequently wishes for the return of doctors since he believes that they are capable of saving the lives of those whom suffer under Eko's rule.

With the antagonism between Tot and Pindar, Barker marks an important shift from his earlier plays, such as *The Europeans*, to his more recent work. Specifically, in *The Europeans*, Katrin's pain and the beauty that she is able to create from it are continuously situated in opposition to a specific political organization, namely, the Holy Roman Empire, as well as its normative values. However, in *Blok/Eko*, such an opposition appears absent. Instead, the play's conflict revolves around Tot, whose suffering inspires him to write great poetry, and Pindar, whose happiness keeps him writing mediocre poetry only intended to fulfill his narcissistic impulses. Furthermore, while Pindar calls for the violence against doctors to end, and is unable to recognize the power in poetry that Eko affirms, Tot himself becomes violent, killing a shopkeeper. Therefore, while Pindar and Tot both appear to be criminals, the former because he has questioned Eko's law and the latter because he has killed another man, only Tot is made to suffer. In fact, his punishment, seven years in prison, is necessary, for Nausicaa tells Tot that his incarceration is vital to his growth as a poet. Again, Eko allows Tot to suffer, perhaps not unjustly in this instance, because she knows that Tot's suffering directly contributes to his ability to create poetry, and as the play proceeds, Eko's knowledge is confirmed: Tot returns from his prison sentence having lost an arm, but also having acquired a new and more profound poetic voice. While Tot struggles to understand the importance of his poetic power, particularly as he finds himself without any recognition of his accomplishment, his return generates a series of rather important scenes, which clarify the play's interest in poetry, particularly given Tot's own poverty. In the first case, though Tot does not receive any awards from Eko—she knows that money and fame would only inhibit Tot's ability to become a great poet—he is recognized by her when she recites his verse. However, the consolation that Eko appears to give Tot does not

match his need for money and food, and again it is Nausicaa who appears to inform Tot that Eko knows how gravely he suffers:

> The Queen knows how poorly you would sing if / like Pindar / you got prizes / you know / do you not / the perverse pleasure she obtains from mocking him with her hyperbole? /
>
> TOT: I wish she'd mock me similarly /
>
> NAUSICAA: Yes / how could it be otherwise? / If you rejoiced in your condition you would be a liar of another kind / Tot /
>
> (*Now TOT slaps NAUSICCA, sending her sprawling. The relief he derives from this act is, however, curtailed when she suffers a fit as a consequence of his temper. She twitches. TOT's single fist clenches and unclenches.*)
>
> TOT: DOC-TOR /
>
> (*He calls aimlessly*.)
>
> DOC-TOR /
>
> **65**
>
> *TOT's attention is so firmly fixed on NAUSICAA he is unaware of shadowy figures clustering about the perimeter of the stage. Only as NAUSICAA's fit diminishes does he sense their presence. At last she is still.*
>
> TOT: (*Sensing danger*.) Doctor / ha / what's that? / doctor / I haven't used that word since / God knows when / scum / filth / in their white coats / I DO KNOW WHEN / I DO KNOW WHEN / white coats / unbuttoned / flying like streamers in the wind / as if urgency condemned them to abolish buttons / as if / like angels' wings / the flapping of their overalls announced their merciful appearance / WHEN THIS ARM CAME OFF / THAT WAS WHEN / DOCTOR I / what? / I / what was it I? / What

was the manner of my / can't remember / DOCTOR I / first word / no / not the first / the first was / CHRIST / FUCK / JESUS / any number of expletives / can't be precise / then / yes / DOCTOR I BAWLED /

(*He laughs, insincerely*.)

A /

(*TOT feels unsafe under the gaze of encroaching figures*.)

A /

(*He squirms*.)

Residual / invocation / triggered by shock /

(*He feels himself compelled to justify himself further*.)

Did I want a doctor? / EMPHATICALLY NOT /

(*He is inspired by his own invention to invent further*.)

Did I want the intensity of this experience to be diminished? / Did I want some drab mechanic with his toolbag / some flesh-fixer with an itching scrotum and half-a-dozen words designed to terrify the terrified / did I want his jargon and bad breath contaminating the terrible meeting of Tot and his ally Death / I did say ally / yes / in this instance he visited / and did not stop

(*He lifts his eyes to the figures*.)

So doctors / in my case / a curse

(*He shakes his head, as if renouncing hope*.)

Don't send me back to prison /

**66**

*To TOT's relief and amazement, the crowd of figures begins to laugh, spontaneously, and even to clap. TOT looks from one to another, and starts to laugh himself. NAUSICAA, as if she had never fallen, skips to her feet.*

NAUSICAA: THE POET BRINGS US HEALTH / THE POET BRINGS US HEALTH

(*The crowd drifts off, turning and saluting TOT as they depart*.)

BY DYING ALL THE TIME / BY DYING / AND COMING BACK AGAIN

(Barker, *BE* 70-72)

Like *The Europeans*, *Blok/Eko* contains a number of important meta-theatrical moments. However, while *The Europeans* often presents Barker's aesthetic theories on stage, the meta-theatrical moments in *Blok/Eko* reflect on the conditions of that make poetry itself possible, and the scene in which Tot recalls having his lost his arm appears to be one of the play's most salient moments. To begin, Tot must devise a way to argue against doctors, and must do so in front of an audience that reacts to his speech as though it is a performance. Furthermore, Tot's recantation, primarily influenced by the appearance of the crowd, clarifies the implications of Eko's decision to applaud poetry and destroy medicine, as he emphasizes the connection between the body and language. Specifically, recalling the moment that his arm was severed from his body, Tot briefly recollects the words that his pain had caused him to scream, and opposes them to his subsequent demand to receive medical attention. In a somewhat indirect way, therefore, Tot's reflection helps to position the language of poetry against the language of the doctors. As he suggests, doctors are "flesh-fixers" who work to keep death away from their patients. Rather than allow a patient the opportunity to give voice to his or her pain or to react to the sounds that one's body makes, doctors instead subject patients to predetermined jargon, which does very little to react to the way that any particular patient may respond to a specific

medical emergency or condition. Consequently, the logic of Tot's speech implies that the task of the poet is to attend to his or her pain in order to transform it into poetic discourse. While the crowd agrees with Tot's sentiment, and even goes so far as to salute him as they depart, it is Nausicaa who interprets the crowd's reaction as a sign of the people's health. Through a specifically theatrical construct, the play shows its audience the connection between Tot's suffering and the crowd's health, the latter of which is indicated by the pleasure they express after hearing Tot's speech.

The relationship between pain and poetry should come as no surprise to the play's readers or audience members given Barker's aesthetics. However, the fact that poetry acquires a certain therapeutic quality that is associated with the enjoyment that it produces is rather significant, given that it is Aristotle, against whom Barker often situates his Theatre of Catastrophe, who first considers art's therapeutic potential through the analysis of catharsis. Yet, before Aristotle discusses the manner in which tragedy can best accomplish its cathartic effect, he first investigates the conditions that may make *catharsis* possible. Hence, in order to offer a philosophical justification of *mimesis* (representation), Aristotle observes two important factors that may contribute to poetry's origin:

> Two natural causes seem to have generated the art of poetry as a whole. First, mimesis is natural to human beings from childhood. They differ from other animals in this way, as human beings gravitate toward mimesis and learn their first lessons through it. Also everyone delights in representations. A common occurrence illustrates this: we delight in looking at the most detailed images of things which in and of themselves would cause us pain, such the shapes of the most despised wild animals and corpses. The cause of this is that learning is most pleasant, not only for philosophers but for others as well, though

> they only take small pleasure from such learning. This why people enjoy looking at images, for by observing the image they learn and infer what the represented element is and that a certain person represents another person. But if one has not lived what is represented, its image will not produce pleasure as a representation, but rather because of its aesthetic accomplishment, such color or some like cause. (*Poetics* 2.1, 36, 37)

In the first case, Aristotle argues that representation is natural to human beings, a statement that he bases on the observation that all human beings tend to learn their earliest and most important lessons by imitating the behavior of those around them. As a result, representations, such as poetry, are natural to human beings and contribute to their development and to the maturation of their intellect. In the second case, Aristotle observes that individuals enjoy representations. Rather than focus on comic or joyful forms of representation, much of the *Poetics*, or at least the material from it that has survived, attends to scenes of pain and death as are found in tragedy. Yet, what is of utmost importance is the fact that Aristotle's second reason for the origin of poetry concerns the fact that as mimetic objects, plays enable individuals to take pleasure in what would otherwise be excruciating or unbearable, and they teach spectators something about what they most fear. As already indicated, Aristotle's effort to locate the origins of poetry is ultimately connected with his effort to argue that tragedy's goal is to produce catharsis, distilling and tempering the emotions of pity and terror. Hence, poetry's origins, at least according to Aristotle, serve tragedy's ultimate goal: in the first case, tragedy represents that which is unbearable and painful in life as it is lived outside of the theater, and by doing so, causes spectators to pity the tragic protagonist, while at the same time becoming terrified of what the protagonist endures. In the second case, through the provocation of pity and terror, tragedy is able to teach its audience how to comport themselves to such emotions. As a result of these insights, Aristotle dedicates

the later portion of his *Poetics* to describing tragedy's various aesthetic conventions (plot, characters, diction, thought, spectacle, and song), observing the ways that they can be used to create the cathartic effect that he believes is proper to tragedy.

Aristotle's commentary on the origin of poetry and catharsis is therefore relevant to *Blok/Eko*, particularly because Tot's speech poeticizes what many of those around him have experienced, namely, physical anguish and suffering without the intervention of doctors. Furthermore, as the previously recalled scene shows, Tot's ability to speak about his own pain and transform the experience of having lost his arm become a sort of theatrical event that the crowd finds pleasurable. Yet, while both Aristotle and Barker may discuss the connection between pain and poetry, each one of them responds to it in a radically different manner. Specifically, the implications of Aristotle's analysis far exceed his aesthetics, particularly as he argues in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that in order for individuals to make good moral decisions, they must be able to control the emotions of pity and terror, and react in proportion to the event or act that triggers an emotive response (*NE* II. v. 1-vi., 14). Consequently, Aristotle's analysis of tragedy is always already appropriated into the ethical and political dimension of his broader metaphysics, as it describes the manner that theater arouses pity and terror and concludes by suggesting that theater's most important function is to absolve spectators from these dangerous emotions. In other words, catharsis is not a purely aesthetic term; instead, it names a reaction whereby a citizen is ultimately able to control those emotions that interfere with one's ability to make ethical and political decisions. However, Barker's theater in general, and *Blok/Eko* in particular, undermine Aristotle's concept of catharsis as a valid response to tragedy and poetry more generally. In the first case, though Tot's speech to the crowd seems to express Aristotle's insight that representations of pain and suffering can cause pleasure, the enjoyment that the

crowd's members experience is confirmed by their emotional excitation. In other words, Tot's poetry arouses the emotions of the crowd: rather than causing the crowd to pity him or live in fear of him, Tot makes them laugh and therefore precludes the purgation and distillation of emotions that Aristotle implies when conceptualizing catharsis. Furthermore, Tot is a criminal, whose poetry is enhanced by the suffering that he has endured for his criminal behavior. Consequently, the speech that Tot gives the crowd is influenced directly from his experiences in prison, and Tot's ability to improve as a poet is connected to the consequences of his criminal behavior. With this in mind, Tot's character lacks the necessary traits that would cause the play's audience to pity him and find him terrifying: Tot has murdered a man, and while he lives in poverty, his actions are done consciously and not as the result of a tragic error or unconscious mistake (*hamartia*) that would cause the play's audience to find Tot unfortunate. Tot's poetic purpose is never situated in agreement with a moral or ethical goal, and his poetry does not aim to create representations that may alleviate and assuage the emotions of his fellow citizens. Instead, Tot aims to fulfill Eko's demand that he write poetry, poetry that is influenced by his criminal violence and the result of the suffering that he endures as an impoverished criminal.

To be sure, Tot does not guarantee that the play as a whole can be read in opposition to Aristotle's *Poetics*. In other words, while Tot's speech may not produce a cathartic reaction, it is still possible that the play might. Yet, in order to do so, the play would have to meet Aristotle's insights into tragedy's origins, since it is these origins that theoretically justify catharsis as a philosophical concept. However, *Blok/Eko* engages critically with the common metaphysical conceptualization of plays as merely mimetic objects that refer to and represent a specific truth or situation that exists outside of the theater. In fact, the play calls into question the very conceptualization of theater as a solely mimetic art, and most explicitly accomplishes this during

a series of scenes that juxtapose Tot's ability to recognize the importance of Eko's decision to murder all of the doctors against Blok's inability to witness Eko as she dies:

TOT: She brought back cries / birth / sickness / even love / because with all these sounds returning / sounds the doctors had smothered under chemistry / came a longing for the sound / the woman sound / in fucking / and madmen / oh / like wolves on frontiers / some nights / ha / frantic choruses / all right / I'll have you / my one hand in your belly / let the tits queue / swelling with anticipation /

(*He roughly turns QUASIDOC, who exults*.)

**70**

*The dying EKO is hauled through the floor, but swiftly now, as the public rushes in, partially obscuring TOT/QUASIDOC's copulation, and crying out with pity or despair, the whole assembly acquiring the ecstatic quality identified by TOT and creating dissonant music.*

**71**

BLOK: (*Limping miserably on the perimeters*.) Can't watch / can't watch /

QUOTA: Darling / she says / oh / darling / where are you? /

BLOK: Can't watch /

QUOTA: (*Cradling EKO's head on her pillows*.) Then the Great Song of Death / she says / never will be written /

BLOK: By me / no /

(*A cry from EKO startles BLOK*.)

THE POET CAN ALSO DESERT HIS STATION /

(*He suffers, his hands are fists of shame*.)

I cannot witness this / I love you / and why I cannot / I do not know /

QUOTA: Go down to the garden / she says / place yourself under the window / hear what you hear / and when it's over / a handkerchief / wet with her tears / will fall / a sign / then climb the stairs again / and kiss her / if any many knows how to kiss / she says / it's you / this kiss she'll feel / though she will not be here / neither will she be gone /

(*BLOK turns to leave*.)

BLOK / BLOK /

(*He stops*.)

She says / she says /

(*QUOTA frowns with the effort of interpretation*.)

THIS IS THE ORIGIN OF THE SONG

(*QUOTA half-laughs for EKO. BLOK, troubles, turns, and encounters Pindar by him.*) (Barker, *BE* 77, 78)

Drawing attention to the return of corporeal sounds after Eko's decision to destroy the medical profession, Tot articulates a version of health that is reminiscent of the one indicated by the crowd's reaction to his poetry. Specifically, in both cases, health is not indicated by the absence of sickness, but is instead suggested as an affirmation of the body's capacity to feel and experience excitation. As a result of this observation, Tot overcomes his self-righteousness, which had prohibited him from accepting Quasidoc's earlier advances, and the two begin to copulate as Eko's dying body emerges on stage. At once, the sound of the crowd's mournful cries converges with the sounds of Tot and Quasidac, creating a scene in which the response to both pain and pleasure synthesizes to create a "dissonant music" that is irreducible to the sound made by any particular character on stage.

These scenes, however, do more than contain or exemplify specific conventions of Barker's plethoric theater. Instead, and in keeping with what situates *Blok/Eko* in opposition to Aristotle and subsequently naturalism, Blok, the one who should poeticize the death of the tyrant Queen given his skills and service to her, cannot bear witness to her as she dies, and instead seeks shelter from the image of Eko's dying body. As the scene shows, it is his love for her that ultimately causes him to betray her. The interaction that occurs between Blok and the dying Eko does not simply concern love's inability to make a beloved fully present to a lover, an observation that Katrin and Starhemberg's relationship in *The Europeans* demonstrates. Instead, it begins to point toward the play's concern with death itself, and particularly with the connection between poetry and death. Obviously, the play situates poetry as what aims to express the suffering of Eko's people. However, as Eko's death proves, the relationship between pain and poetry is always threatened by death. Death, as we have already observed Barker mention in his theoretical texts, marks poetry's limit; and while poetry cannot re-present death, it is ultimately death that makes poetry necessary. Hence, as the play advances, Tot and Pindar once again interact antagonistically, and do so according to how they interpret Blok's actions. While Pindar believes Blok is a traitor, Tot applauds him and argues that Blok must poeticize his crime, rather than simply be judged as a coward (Barker, *BE* 90, 91). However, Blok is unable to follow Tot's direction, as the words of Blok's potential poem cause him to choke. In a rage, Tot begins kicking Blok in order to force the poem out of his body, an effort that ultimately kills Blok and further confirms Tot's criminality (Barker, *BE* 92, 93).

With both Blok and Eko dead, medical doctors regain the social significance that they had possessed prior to Eko's rule, and with no one to kill the doctors, Tot, Nausicaa, and Pindar are left to live within the ruins of their society. Furthermore, Pindar no longer receives Eko's

disingenuous awards, and repeatedly attempts to prove the poetic integrity of his work. Tot, on the other hand, chooses a different path, and ultimately decides to kill himself:

PINDAR: HE'S /

(*He heaves, as if with sickness*.)

HE'S /

NAUSICAA: Tot /

(*A group of wheelchairs passes over the stage, as if on a seaside promenade. Mild, dim conversation intermittent*.)

PINDAR: HE'S /

NAUSICAA: Tot / Tot /

(*TOT lurches away from BRADY, pulling at the mechanism*.)

TOT: Good-bye /

PINDAR: NOT GOING TO /

(*TOT has thrust the barrel of the gun to his chest.*)

NAUSICAA /

NAUSICAA: (*At her most commanding*.) TOT /

PINDAR: ARE YOU? / YOU ARE NOT

(*TOT chooses not to pull the trigger at once. He looks at PINDAR*.)

TOT: You say I'm not / precisely to induce me /

NAUSICAA: Tot /

TOT: I could not go / I could not do / what this is / and leave him thinking / he was the cause of it / as if Pindar dared Tot / and Tot / proud as a schoolboy /

BRADY: Good point /

TOT: Shot himself out of bravado / no

BRADY: Good point / it needed clearing up /

(*TOT pulls the trigger. The sound of the shot expands, mixing and transforming into a pure note which runs beneath TOT's adieu. The occupants of the wheelchairs stare*.)

TOT: Immense / piano / dust / in sun / falling / dust falling / biscuit / cracked / the lino / scrubbed / boots / hand / old hand / so old / the hand / dropped it / the domino / floor / cat / dirt / wound / scab / five / immensely old / dip it / dip / the biscuit/ dip the biscuit in the tea / five / dots / five / apron / flowers / stable / Joe / bites never / five dots / the domino / kicks / never / Joe / nice loaf / kind animal / a nice loaf / please / say please / nice/ loaf/ crust/ mother / apron / red light / red light / piano / did she / girl / mother / piano / horse / the maiden's prayer / apron / apron /

(*TOT is dead*.) (Barker, *BE* 114-116)[36]

Depriving Pindar of the ability to claim responsibility for his death, Tot kills himself upon realizing the possibility that Pindar may be attempting to produce a momentous feat unaccomplished by his poetry. Yet, unlike Blok, who chokes on his words, Tot unleashes a discursive torrent immediately after shooting himself and confirms Gritzner's reading of poetry in *Blok/Eko* as "a (painful and blissful) de-individualizing force of nature" ("Poetry" 343). In other words, whereas Blok ultimately succumbs to silence when faced with Eko's death, Tot is instead inspired to speak when confronting his own. Yet, Tot's last words, his self-eulogy as it were, appears incomprehensible when compared to the beautiful language that he had believed to have been stuck in Blok's throat. The great poem of death, which appears to be the very work of art that Tot has been groomed to speak, does not here appear to poeticize death in a way that would finally and definitely transform death into an aesthetic object. Instead, it is the sound of

the shot as it is fired that achieves the sort of perfection that eludes Tot's poetry. Tot's final words therefore place Barker's readers and audience members in a rather difficult situation, for not only do they seem completely arbitrary with respect to what has hitherto transpired in the play, but the scene that Tot describes appears incoherent, as the slight hint of a narrative about his past is continuously interrupted by the mention of concrete objects, particularly an apron. To be sure, Tot's final words seem to fulfill one of the platitudes assigned to the plethoric text, as his speech not only overwhelms comprehension, but also seems to allow Tot to speak from a place between life and death. In so doing, Tot's final words confirm one of the plethoric text's platitudes as they collapse the divide between the unconscious and consciousness.

Despite the ambiguous content of Tot's final words, his speech does, in fact, sound rather reminiscent of Barker's reflections on his own childhood and how it shaped his theater. Hence, in an interview at the University of Paris-Sorbonne in October of 2007 with scholars including Elisabeth Angel-Perez, Barker discussed his upbringing and its relation to his plays:

> EAP: You've written about 70 plays, several collections of poems, two important volumes of theatre theory, but you're also a wonderful painter. In your paintings, you do use a number of recurring objects, like tables or trays, and I was wondering how this relates to the use you make of objects in your plays? Is there a link at all?
>
> HB: I find it terribly difficult to talk about that but I'll try. I have a great liking for white sheets, for example. But there's a personal origin for that. The women of my family were laundresses. So I saw a lot of sheets as a child. There's also great beauty in the white sheet—a laundered sheet is strangely disturbing in the milieu of the theatre, because the theatre is a very dirty place. There's dirt and dust everywhere and when actors come to rehearsal they come in dirty clothes, and I always say to actors, "No, would you please

> try to wear nice clothes in rehearsals because it changes the milieu?" So, if you use pristine sheets as part of the setting design, it produces a shock. It's an enchanting visual image. ("About Things on the Stage", *Interviews* 139, 140)

While it is certainly difficult to determine whether or not the final lines that Barker writes for Tot are in fact inspired by Barker's own upbringing, the juxtaposition between the dust and dirt of the theater and the clean white sheets that so often populate Barker's set designs is inscribed in Tot's final words. But while it may be impossible to determine whether Barker inscribes his own personal history into *Blok/Eko* through Tot's character, it is this possibility that makes present the question of the poet's death and its relation to art. In other words, it is by questioning the connection between Barker's life and Tot's death that the relationship between the artist and his or her death becomes an issue, and one that is central to the play and the conditions that contribute to its poetics. In the world of the play, it is death that makes poetry necessary, and it is the threat of death that inspires the greatest and most accomplished poetry. But poetry cannot make death present, even as it may make the poet's life necessary. Hence, what is at issue in *Blok/Eko* is not simply the inability to represent death through art, but more specifically, the impossibility that art could make present the death of the artist, even though every work of art anticipates and bears that death.

For a play that engages serious aesthetic questions, going so far as to appear as a theatrical answer to Aristotle's *Poetics*, *Blok/Eko* nevertheless concludes rather modestly: Nausicaa, unwilling to walk on the ground, requests that Pindar carry her for the rest of her life (Barker, *BE* 122). Much like Barker's reflection on the dust and dirt of theater, as well as Tot's final words, Nausicaa reacts to the ground's filth and consequently wishes to remove herself from it. Similar to many of Barker's later plays, the ending may at first glance appear

unexpected, as it does not suggest anything like a resolution or the effect of some cause that had taken place prior to it. And yet, the image of Pindar carrying Nausicaa is quite striking: devoting his life to Nausicaa, Pindar "finds the resources in himself to negate his own existence" and promises to carry her always (Barker, *Blok/Eko* 122). The final image suggests something of the function or purpose of Pindar's poetry itself, which, unlike Tot's work, simply entertained his audience, keeping their bodies, as it were, very much away from the grime and filth of the world that Tot's poetry depicted.

Yet, the play's ending does not concretely or explicitly confirm such a conclusion. Instead, it leaves open the possibility that Barker's theater itself may keep the feet of its audience members and readers above the ground of the world outside it. However, it is necessary to qualify such an assertion. Specifically, *Blok/Eko* concludes by emphasizing a rather interesting accomplishment that further develops the aesthetic stakes of Barker's catastrophic theater: it underscores how the play situates its audience and readers in the same position that his early catastrophic protagonists occupied. In other words, whereas characters such as Starhemberg and Katrin, for example, undergo experiences that both explode each character's self-perception while simultaneously causing them to discover hidden or repressed content, Barker's plethoric theater displaces these actions into specific theatrical conventions that cause individual audience members to experience a sense of self-loss that is coupled with the opportunity for constant self-speculation and discovery. As Barker states in an interview with Mark Brown, "I've never comprehended catharsis either, as an aesthetic category. […] If good art wounds you, I want that to be experienced continuously, nor resolved" ("Art is about going into the dark" *Interviews*, 195). In a way, then, the trajectory from *The Europeans* to *Blok/Eko* is one that comes full circle. But this circularity does not suggest anything like redundancy. Instead, by following this

trajectory, it is possible to observe how Barker's project develops, as it makes death not just a matter that his protagonists have to face, but one that is at stake for his readers and spectators even though, or perhaps because, it remains radically inaccessible to them. By situating its audience in this position, Barker's *Blok/Eko* distinguishes itself from Aristotle's interpretation of tragedy and its legacy in naturalistic theater, and furthermore expands the scope of Barker's catastrophic theater. As a result, though Barker explicitly writes against the dominant theatrical aesthetic of his historical context, it is precisely by doing so that he creates a future for theater itself.

# NOTES

## Introduction: Catastrophic Theater and the New Dramatic Text

[1] To be sure, the pessimism that Nietzsche here associates with the Dionysian suggests the influence of Shopenhauer on Nietzsche's early work. However, as Nietzsche's thought continued, he ultimately rejected Shopenhauer and the conceptualization of tragedy as a pessimistic art form. For example, in 1886, Nietzsche published a new edition of *The Birth of Tragedy* that included the brief text, entitled "An Attempt at Self-Criticism." In that text, Nietzsche challenges his early romanticism, criticizes Wagner, and dismisses the idea that tragedy presents a pessimistic worldview. Instead, Nietzsche discusses Dionysus and tragedy as an achievement of the highest order, and one that bears witness to humanity's will to affirm life and triumph over experiences of pain or trauma. The meaning of the Dionysian to Nietzsche, furthermore, most succinctly appears articulated in *Twilight of the Idols*:

> For it is in the Dionysian mysteries, in the psychology of the Dionysian condition, that the *fundamental fact* of the Hellenic instinct expresses itself—its 'will to life'. What did the Hellenic individual establish for him or herself with these mysteries? *Eternal* life, the eternal recurrence of life; the future promised and consecrated in the past; the triumphant Yes to life beyond death and change; *true* life as collective continuation of life through procreation, through the mysteries of sexuality. […] Affirmation of life even in its strangest and sternest problems, the will to life rejoicing in its own inexhaustibility through the *sacrifice* of its highest types—*that* is what I called Dionysian, *that* is what I recognized as the bridge to the psychology of the *tragic* poet. *Not* so as to get rid of pity and terror, not so as to purify oneself of a dangerous emotion through its vehement discharge—as Aristotle understood it—: but, beyond pity and terror, *to realizing in*

> *oneself* the eternal joy of becoming—that joy which also encompasses *joy in destruction*. (*GD, KS Bd. XI*, 159-160)

[2] It should be noted that the mythology that Nietzsche refers to in this section of *The Birth of Tragedy* is of somewhat unknown origins. The appearance of Zagreus does occur in the Orphic tradition, but the precise mythology that Nietzsche describes is unclear. As Geuss and Spears note:

> A myth to the effect that Dionysos, under the name 'Zagreus', is torn apart and then reassembled occurs in some late Hellenistic sources. Whether this is a survival of an older (perhaps secret) doctrine about Dionysos, as Nietzsche assumes, or a late innovative embellishment of earlier traditions is, given the state of our knowledge, undecidable. Walter Burkert […] states that one cannot trace this myth back before the third century BC, but is generally sympathetic to 'indirect evidence' that it is older. (52)

Furthermore, it is rather interesting that Nietzsche does not refer to the more commonly known mythology, presented in, for example, Euripides's *The Bacchae*. As is more widely known, Dionysus is the progeny of Zeus and Semele, Princess of Thebes. Tricked by Hera, Semele responded to Zeus's offer to give her anything she desired by telling him to reveal himself to her. Unfortunately for Semele, Zeus appeared to her as the bolt of lightning, which killed Semele and left her unborn child to die. However, Zeus rescued the child from Semele, sewed him into his groin, and later released the child from his body when he was ready to be born. However, throughout Nietzsche's writing, this more popular mythology does inform Nietzsche's thinking on the Dionysian.

[3] As will become evident in the chapters, I use the terms "Absurdist Theater" and "In-Yer-Face Theatre" without much seriousness and only to refer to playwrights whose work has been associated with each movement respectively.

**Chapter One: A Mother's Touch**

[4] This is by no means a universal claim, for Beckett occasionally set his plays in domestic settings. For example, *Krapp's Last Tape* and *Endgame* take place in domestic spaces, as do some of his short plays, such as *A Piece of Monologue*. But plays such as *Waiting for Godot*, *Not I, Come and Go,* and *Footfalls* seem to create their own space, rather than to depict or to require a setting or a place that either exists or could be imagine to exist outside of the theater.

[5] It should be noted that this study is not the first to address Pinter's remarks on silence and echo. In fact, Charles Grimes connects the passage quoted in this paragraph to his reading of *Ashes to Ashes* (217). However, Grimes's concludes that the silence that occurs in *Ashes to Ashes* may be used to read retroactively many of Pinter's plays to depict powers triumph over dissidence. To be sure, this observation does appear accurate: throughout many of Pinter's political plays, those in positions of authority consistently enact violence against those to whom they are opposed. However, as I hope to show, silence need not be interpreted as a signifier of defeat, for the silences throughout *Mountain Language* and the echoes throughout *Ashes to Ashes* suggest a critical capacity of Pinter's plays that escapes a purely antagonistic framework.

[6] I emphasize the connection between language and the heart since Pinter consistently refers to it throughout many of his later, political plays. Specifically, in plays such as *Party Time* and *Ashes to Ashes,* the heart is positioned against those who act violently and cause suffering. In this case, those characters who carry out violent acts or who are associated with violent regimes are unable

to hear the beating of others' hearts, and this deafness appears analogous to the Officer and Sergeant's inability to see and react to the Elderly Woman's bloody hand. Therefore, the emphasis on the heart in this sentence should serve as a cue to underscore just how important the heart is in Pinter's plays, for it is an internal organ to which Pinter frequently refers in order to underscore poetically an intrinsic feature of politically motivated violence and aggression. It should also be noted that an echocardiogram uses sound waves to create an image of the heart. The fact that the heart and echoes are related to one another will become more important in Pinter's *Ashes to Ashes*.

[7] For many Pinter scholars, such as Charles Grimes, the language contained in *Mountain Language* functions quite similarly to the manner in which Quigley suggests it does in Pinter's early plays. As Grimes states, "*Mountain Language* conducts its political analysis by featuring signature elements of Pinter's dramas: language as attack and as silence. Language is the domain of the powerful in this play: specifically, the verbal violence of the Sergeant and Guard strikes a familiar tone to readers of Pinter" (91). In other words, the national military uses language as a weapon in order to control and ultimately to enforce a law upon those whom they have imprisoned or with whom they come in contact. However, as Stephen Watt warns, caution must be used when discussing whether or not language functions solely as a weapon in the play. Specifically, Watt suggests that the outlawing of the mountain language destroys the mountain people's voices, as well as the voices of those incarcerated by the military (50). Both Grimes and Watt provide valuable commentary on the importance of language in the play. However, as we shall see, the issue of language and its function in the play is a slightly more ambiguous business. Specifically, it is not just a question of the function of language in the play so much as it is a question of what is at issue in the difference between the mountain language and the language of

the capital, and this difference, as indicated by the references to Lyotard that begin this section, will help to account for the nature of the conflict depicted in the play.

[8] Silverstein, albeit according to a different logic, seems to suggest as much when he states that "linguistic authority depends upon the power of violence" ("Impasse" 432). Following Lyotard's differentiation between a performative and a prescriptive utterance, my analysis aims to examine the conditions that make such linguistic authority dependent upon violence (*PC* 9, 10).

[9] I use the term "maternal function" only in reference to how the Elderly Woman's positions herself as a mother, and not, as it were, in reference to any particular conceptualization of the Mother. To emphasize Rebecca's dream and the echo that comes forth as Rebecca recalls the dream is not to belittle what she has to say, as if to suggest that what she says is false or untrue. It is, instead, to indicate something of theater's ability to bear witness to catastrophe. As such, Rebecca's words, like the Elderly Woman's silence in *Mountain Language*, appear as a meta-theatrical reflection. And like Elderly Woman's silence, Rebecca's testimony suggests that theater may be necessary precisely because it is the one space in which its participants confront, through an illusion, the inability to recuperate or to make present, and therefore represent, those whose lives have traumatically disappeared.

[10] In light of this admission, *Ashes to Ashes* certainly conjures images of the Shoah and its legacy. Furthermore, as Hanna Scolnicov remembers, "In German, a guide, including a tourist guide, is a '*Führer*'. This word not only served as Hitler's title, but also formed part of rand-definitions such as '*Sturmbannführer*' in the S.A., or '*Oberstgruppenführer*' in the S.S. […] Albert Speer himself was granted the rank of *Oberstgruppenführer*. Among his ministerial charges, he was responsible for transport, especially the railway system"' (3). Furthermore, that Rebecca speaks

of a guide suggests that "Pinter finds here a way to write on the Shoah without writing about the Shoah" (Angel-Perez, "Dibbuks" 151). However, the play does not explicitly state the identity of the guide to whom Rebecca refers, nor does it associate him with a specific historical event or period. In fact, rather than remember specific historical figures or events, Rebecca only responds to Devlin's inquiries by referring to her own daily experiences.

[11] It is entirely possible that Pinter even knew of Freud's reference to railway disasters when writing *Ashes to Ashes,* for one of Pinter's most famous portraits was done by Lucian Freud, Sigmund Freud's grandson. Hence, Pinter may have used the image of babies being taken from the arms of their mothers along a railway station in order to connect it with the examination of trauma as it appears in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

[12] On this point, the play appears to elaborate on a concern raised in my reading of *Mountain Language*. Specifically, the Officer's declaration of the death of the mountain language would have to fail, precisely because the language that one speaks is not, in fact, the result of an autonomous act. One has no choice but to learn how to speak, if they can speak, in their "mother tongue," and this rather extraordinary passivity to language, which is furthermore required for the speaking subject to emerge, is not something that can be undone or mitigated by the declaration of a law. This law to speak in the "mother tongue" precedes the law of the state, and it may be, furthermore, founded on the pre-natal touch that I described in the section on *Mountain Language*.

[13] Throughout Lyotard's later writing, the figure of the infant and the period of infancy play a prominent role. Though I have merely found inspiration in a singular moment in Lyotard's writing on infancy, it is still necessary to underscore the fact that while Lyotard's writing on

infancy is crucial to my analysis, his essays on infancy far exceeds the scope of this essay. Having mentioned this, I must recall the prefatory statement to *Lectures d'enfance*, wherein Lyotard writes of infancy as, "[W]hat does not speak. An infancy that is not an age of life and that does not pass. It haunts discourse. The latter does not cease to put it aside, it is its separation" (9). As my reading hopes to demonstrate, the child in *Ashes to Ashes* is a figure that haunts discourse, troubling the very ability to determine who he or she was and to what event it is that Rebecca refers. The figure of the stolen infant therefore suggests a far more radical and catastrophic possibility that haunts all interpretations of the play that are but efforts to determine what event the play represents and, in doing so, how it opens up the possibility to remember the respective event. Throughout my reading of the play, I have attempted to engage critically with this method of analysis, which, in the end, tells us very little about the play itself and attempts to determine its meaning by connecting it to some factual historical event.

[14] Perhaps somewhat tangential, Devlin's response refers to dust is rather interesting. Specifically, while I discuss the song in the context of Christian burial service, the reference to dust also conjures the Jewish ritual of Sotah, which is documented in *Numbers* 5. 11-31. The ritual takes place between a priest, husband, and wife, and occurs when the husband fears that his wife may have committed adultery:

> The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the Israelites and say to them: If any man's wife goes astray and is unfaithful to him, if a man has had intercourse with her but it is hidden from her husband, so that she is undetected though she has defiled herself, and there is no witness against her since she was not caught in the act; if a spirit of jealousy comes to him and he is jealous of his wife who has defiled herself; or if a spirit of

jealousy comes on him, and he is jealous of his wife, though she has not defiled herself; then the man shall bring his wife to the priest. And he shall bring the offering required for her, one-tenth of an ephah of barley flour. He shall pour no oil on it and put no frankincense on it, it is a grain offering of jealousy, a grain offering of remembrance, bringing iniquity to remembrance. Then the priest shall bring her near, and set her before the Lord; the priest shall take holy water in an earthen vessel, and take some of the dust that is on the floor of the tabernacle and put it into the water. The priest shall set the woman before the Lord, dishevel the woman's hair, and place in her hands the grain offering of remembrance, which is the grain offering of jealousy. In his own hand the priest shall have the water of bitterness that brings the curse. Then the priest shall make her take an oath, saying, "If no man has lain with you, if you have not turned to uncleanness while under your husband's authority, be immune to this water of bitterness that brings the curse. But if you have gone astray while under your husband's authority, if you have defiled yourself and some man other than your husband has had intercourse with you," let the priest make the woman take the oath of the curse and say to the woman—"the Lord make you an execration and an oath among your people, when the Lord makes your uterus drop, your womb discharge; now many this water that brings the curse enter your bowels and make your womb discharge, your uterus drop!" And the woman shall say, "Amen, Amen." Then the priest shall put these curses in writing, and wash them off into the water of bitterness. He shall make the woman drink the water of bitterness that brings the curse, and the water that brings the curse shall enter her body and cause bitter pain. The priest shall take the grain offering of jealousy out of the woman's hands, and shall elevate the grain offering before the Lord and bring it to the

> altar; and the priest shall take a handful of the grain offering, as its memorial portion, and turn it into smoke on the altar, and afterword shall make the woman drink the water. (Meeks 209, 210)

If the woman has not "defiled" herself, the bitter waters give her fertility, whereas if she has committed adultery she loses her reproductive organs. What is striking about the ritual is that it is the only Jewish ritual where God allows his name to be spoken and erased, which is completed when the priest washes the curse that contains God's name into the bitter waters. I reference this ritual as the connection between Devlin's jealousy and his reference to dust resembles it.

[15] In a sense, this violence appears reminiscent of Arendt's concept of radical evil. For Arendt, radical evil names a form of violence that makes human beings superfluous (*Totalitarianism* 457-459). However, Arendt seems to alter her thinking about evil throughout her career, moving from the work on radical evil to the exploration of what she calls the "banality of evil" (*Eichmann* 250-252). To be sure, a more thorough engagement between Pinter's political plays in general and Hannah Arendt's work is possible, and several of Charles Grimes's chapters in *Harold Pinter's Politics: A Silence Beyond Echo* do accomplish such an engagement. However, while the "evil" documented in Rebecca's dream does appear somewhat congruous with Arendt's thinking, I hope to have shown that the sort of violence depicted in Rebecca's dream and ultimately realized in her statement, "I don't know of any baby," seems to exceed even Arendt's engagement with evil.

**Chapter Two: The Language of Grief and the Grief of Language**

[16] As Kane would articulate in an interview with Dan Rebellato, plot is the order in which events are sequenced, whereas story is the narrative that those events create (Kane qtd. in Saunders, *AK* 43).

[17] Consider the fact that Tinker visits the Woman, whom he names Grace, after Grace's visit to retrieve Graham's clothes and Carl's attempt to secure Rod's love. Addressing the Woman in a manner similar to the way that Carl addressed Rod, Tinker promises to take care of the Woman and asks her to trust him. When she refuses him, Tinker makes one final plea, stating, "I'll give you whatever you want, Grace" (Kane, *Cleansed*, *Plays* 123). By naming her Grace, Tinker displaces into his relationship with the Woman the authority that Grace had invested into Tinker, which results in Tinker's later efforts to give Grace what she wants so that Tinker may be loved by the Woman. Also, consider that when Tinker and the Woman finally make love with one another, they interact and speak with one another in terms that mimic Grace and Graham as the scene is riddled with stares that recall the issue of recognition so important to the play. Furthermore, Robin falls in love with Grace only after she mandates that he wears her clothes and writes to her Father that she will stay in the University. In order to earn Grace's recognition and love, Robin expresses remorse over Graham's death and asks Grace about her previous lovers. Unwilling to accept Robin's grief, Grace then tells Robin that she has had a boyfriend who had bought her chocolates and then tried to strangle her. However, Tinker questions Robin about the letter that he wrote to Grace's father, which Tinker then sets on fire. In what appears like an effort to identify with Tinker, Robin then visits the room within which Tinker watches the Woman. This experience causes him to break down in tears and Robin sees what the Woman reveals about Tinker, namely, his failed attempt to gain the Woman's love, which reflects Robin's own inability to obtain Grace's affection. Robin then mimics Grace's former lover's actions by bringing her chocolates. Unfortunately, Tinker undermines Robin's plan and forces him to consume each chocolate in the box. Finally, Robin musters one last attempt to gain Grace's attention when he threatens to hang himself with Grace's tights. When Grace fails to

notice him, the chair is ambiguously pulled out from underneath him. Robin dies when Graham pulls his legs as he hangs from the noose.

[18] To be sure, the opening scene immediately supports Kane's assertion that the play is not about violence, and that violence is used metaphorically. Concretely, Graham's death seems physiologically impossible, as the injection would realistically lead to blindness rather than death. That Graham therefore dies from an injury that would otherwise lead to blindness suggests something of his inability to recognize and see Grace as she wants him to see her. As we shall see, the issue of the other's ability to see the self as it wants to be seen is a problem that is at stake throughout all of the play's amorous relationships.

[19] Carl's screams are commonly read to betray Rod (Lublin 121; Wallace 94). As I've hoped to show by considering the metaphorical function that violence assumes in *Cleansed*, there is an ambiguity in his screams that complicates the ability to judge them as an act that simply betrays Rod.

[20] Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, it is on this point that *Cleansed* seems to engage Barthes's *La chambre claire*. Consider, for example when Barthes's, writing about his mother's death, states "On dit que le deuil, par son travail progressif, efface lentement la douleur; je ne pouvais, je ne puis le croire ; car, pour moi, le Temps élimine l'émotion de la perte (je ne pleure pas] ; c'est tout. Pour le reste, tout est resté immobile." [It is said that mourning, by its gradual work, slowly effaces pain; I could not, I cannot believe this; because, for me, Time eliminates the emotion of loss [I do not cry]; that is all] (*LCC* 118).

[21] I am not suggesting that language is not important in Kane's other plays. As I elucidate, language serves a particularly important role in *Crave*, for example. However, *Blasted*, *Phaedra's Love*, and *Cleansed* do not make language the primary convention or dramaturgical

means through which each play respectively situates its aesthetic stakes. While language is certainly important in these plays as it contributes to the dialog and stage directions within them, Kane's first three plays do not exclusively use language or specifically concern language itself.

[22] Weller's comments suggest a much broader concern, namely, the relationship between life and performance. The connection between the two no doubt exceeds the scope of this essay. However, this connection is consistently at stake throughout much of Artaud's writing, who Kane cited as the direct influence on the composition of *4.48 Psychosis* (Saunders, *AK* 38). In this respect, Weller's commentary appears situated according to a post-Artaudian interest in creating theatrical art and performance that would capture the intensity of life and lived experience, an interest that often appears, as it does in Weller's argument, to suggest that performance, and not poetry or a play text composed in a literary form, is able to make present life's intensity. However, one might wonder whether or not Weller's argument itself squeezes the "life" out of Kane's final work.

[23] I borrow the term "liveness" from Philip Auslander's *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*. While I am not engaging explicitly with any of the specific arguments that he elucidates in his study, the term "liveness" is a convenient way to discuss the assumption that informs the manner in which performance is often assumed to concern "presence" and "life."

[24] W.B. Worthen discusses the numerous ways in which the play's *mise-en-page* troubles its *mise-en-scène* (*Print* 155). While Worthen uses this distinction to elaborate the difficulties that are produced between the text of *4.48 Psychosis* and its performance, I have referenced this distinction in order to begin to analyze the play's more general concern with language.

[25] Lauens De Vos also underscores this problematic, and through Lacanian psychoanalytic discourse suggests that the attempt to unify the subject with the self that it perceives as its own is

indicative of that subject's inability to accept that such division constitutes the speaking subject in the first place (141). While De Vos very carefully shows the connection between Lacanian psychoanalysis and *4.48 Psychosis*, his study often applies Lacanian terminology onto Kane's plays in a manner that can, at times, distract from a reading of either Lacan or Kane. While he is right to mention the presence of a, as he describes, persona, the presence of this persona, or rather voice, is actually always already marked as absent by the language of the piece. I therefore hope to show how the grief caused by this division does not belong to a specific voice or persona, but rather to language itself.

[26] For Jacques Derrida, the psychoanalytic elaboration of melancholic identification and incorporation risks obliterating the other's alterity insofar as they assume that the other is identifiable and subsequently integrated into the melancholic subject (*Fors* 17). While this point is argued very early in the essay, specifically with regard to my response to Christina Wald's analysis of *Cleansed*¸ I am here suggesting, alongside Derrida's critique of psychoanalysis, that melancholia must protest against its conceptualization within psychoanalytic discourse since it names a state that preserves or maintains loss and the absolute alterity of the other, who is either dead or absent (*Béliers* 73). Therefore, while I am not disregarding the connection between melancholia and *4.48 Psychosis*, I am suggesting that the elucidation of the piece's melancholic qualities may be best accomplished by attending to Derrida's critical engagement with psychoanalytic discourse.

**Chapter Three : From Pain, Poetry**

[27] To be sure, much could be made of Gritzner's own reading of beauty and the sublime in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. For example, Kant, as Gritzner mentions, distinguishes the sublime from beauty. As a result, it is somewhat perplexing as to the why Gritzner would use the term

"beauty" to describe what she argues is the "sublime" nature of Barker's work. In other words, it is not entirely clear that the Kantian framework that Gritzner uses to begin her reading of Barker adequately reflects the analysis that she gives of Barker's plays, and this discrepancy may be furthermore understood when considering that Kant never situates the power and pleasure that Gritzner associates with the sublime to anything like the "Other outside or within" and the Lacanian term, "*jouissance*," which describes a pleasure that transgresses a law while simultaneously requiring that law's existence as it is condition of possibility (93-97). But to return to the issue at hand, for Kant, the power that one experiences when confronted with either the mathematical or dynamic sublime is one that comes from scenarios of either great magnitude (mathematical category) or those that demonstrate nature's dominance over us (dynamic category) (§26, 172-180; §27, 184-189). The sublime therefore names an experience in which the imagination fails to think an overwhelming experience, leaving reason to comprehend that which exceeds the imagination's capacity (§25, 170, 171). For Kant, this experience is pleasurable, as it indicates reason's power to think infinity and triumph over the imagination. But it is painful as well, as it indicates the imagination's inadequacy and nature's power over us (§27, 180, 181).

[28] In truth, to describe deconstruction as a method is not quite right. As Derrida states, deconstruction is not a method, in part because the technical nature of the term "method" reduces a deconstructive engagement with a text to a series of rules and procedures ("*Lettre à un ami japonais*", *Psyché II* 12). I therefore use the term "method" rather loosely, doing so to connect my reading of Barker with, as well as distinguish it from, academic scholarship on his work.

[29] The name, Katrin, may suggest some conversation between Barker's play and Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children*, insofar as Mother Courage's daughter is named Kattrin. Given Barker's tenuous relationship with Brecht's aesthetics—Brecht, for Barker, is the epitome of

didacticism in theatre, and his compulsion to use the theatre as a means to promote social change and "enlighten" his audience stands diametrically opposed to Barker's effort to promote his audience into a state of introspection—it is entirely possible that Barker wrote *The Europeans*, or at least Katrin's character, as a direct response to Brecht. Katrin also calls to mind Kätchen von Heilbronn, the main female protagonist of Kleist's 1810 play, *Das Kätchen von Heilbronn*.

[30] Leopold was the name of several European emperors, including Leopold I of the Holy Roman Empire, to whom the play refers to given its specific historical setting; and again, given the play's historical context, Starhermberg undoubtedly refers to Ernst Rüdiger von Starhemberg, but also brings to mind the Austrian conservative politician, Ernst Rüdiger Camillo Starhemberg

[31] However, Barker has recently incorporated obliques into the dialogue of plays such as *Hurts Given and Received* (2010) in order to help actors identify the dialogue's rhythm.

[32] The description of plethoric theater that Gritzner gives directly refutes the possibility that Barker's theater could create an aesthetics of sublime, insofar as plethoric theater, at least according to Gritzner's reading, causes the intellect to waver. The dissolution of the intellect or, in Kantian terms, reason, is the exact opposite reaction that one experiences when confronted with the sublime.

[33] To be clear, it is Barker who understands naturalism to be a normalizing aesthetic that teaches audience members how to act properly in their social and historical context.

[34] That the tyrant queen is named "Eko" is rather significant. While the play does not determine or explain how Eko and "Echo" are connected to one another, there are two examples that may help to open up the possibility of situating Eko's character in the play. First, in an effort to test their poetry, troubadour poets would often recite their lyrics at the edge of a forest. If the recited poem echoed back to them, then their poem was considered satisfactory. If they did not hear the

poem echo, it was unsuitable. Echo, much like Eko herself, is therefore figured as the judge of lyric poetry's virtue. Furthermore, the Ovidian account of Narcissus poeticizes Narcissus's encounter with Echo. In this regard, while Barker writes Pindar as a figure of populist poetry, he may also write Blok as a narcissistic figure: just as Blok esteems Eko as a figure of perfection, so much so that he betrays her on her death bed, so too did Alexander Blok view his wife, Lyubov Mendeleev, as the ideal woman with whom he neglect to have sexual relations. Consequently, he betrayed his wife and engaged in numerous extramarital affairs.

[35] As has already been demonstrated, the proper names of Barker's characters are rather important. This is true not only in *Blok/Eko*, but throughout all of Barker's work. It should therefore come as no surprise that the name, "Tot" is rather revealing. In the first place, *tot* is the German adjective, meaning dead, and *Tod* is the German noun, meaning death. Furthermore, Tot's name recalls the Egyptian god, Toth. According to Ancient Egyptian mythology, Toth is the god of both writing and death. More specifically, Toth, the god of hieroglyphics, also dresses the dead, records the weight of souls, and measures the days that belong to the lives of both gods and mortals. Therfore, Toth, as Derrida observes, *enumerates* history (*LD* 104). The fact that Barker's Tot is explicitly made to suffer, so much so that he often lives at the threshold between life and death, in order to write suggests that in his proper name is inscribed a mythological and linguistic history that is consonant with his actions.

[36] The repetition of the word loaf recalls *The Europeans*, specifically Act I, Scene III.

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