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Sacred Tragedy

An Exploration into the Spiritual Dimension
of the Theatre of Howard Barker

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Declaration

This thesis is submitted to the University of Warwick in support of my application for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. It has been composed by myself and has not been submitted in any previous application for any degree.

Abstract

Although Barker began in the early 1970s as a Marxist satirical playwright, by 2005 his approach had shifted in focus to such an extent that he felt able to define his theatre as having 'many of the characteristics of a religion.' This study investigates the relationship between Barker's theatre and religious and spiritual ideas, focusing on two key influences: the medieval Christian mystical theologian Meister Eckhart and religious and mythic elements of ancient Greek tragedy.

Barker's dramatic engagement with Abrahamic monotheism reveals his interest in early biblical portrayals of God and his appropriation of dominant Christian tropes, notably apocalypse and rebirth. The specific influence of Eckhart's *apophatic* theology, his Neoplatonic conception of the One and his doctrine of 'detachment' are shown to inform aspects of Barker's work, including his theoretical text *Death, The One and the Art of Theatre*.

Greek tragedy is examined as a religious and ritual event, establishing parallels with Barker's view of tragedy as a sacred art that challenges rational and moral ideals by generating ecstatic emotions through an imagined proximity to death. Greek narratives that centre on an encounter with the dead, *nekylia* and *katabasis*, are explored in connection with Barker's drama, along with ritual initiation in Greek mystery cult. Finally there is an investigation into the immoral, ecstatic, erotic, and thanatic aspects of the female protagonist in Greek tragedy and how these aspects of the tragic female continue and are appropriated in Barker's contemporary tragedy.

Eckhartian mystical theology and elements of classical tragic spirituality help to give Barker's theatre a unique and mysterious dimension. The recurring antagonistic female archetype of 'the one' in Barker's drama expresses core aspects of this spirituality: sexual ecstasy, proximity to death, and detachment from morality and ideology.

Tragedy is a sacred art.

Howard Barker

Chapter 1

Introduction: Howard Barker and Religion

God's silence is too terrible for men.

(Howard Barker, *The Ecstatic Bible*, 2004b, p. 168)

Howard Barker's professional writing career began in 1970 and he was part of a significant wave of post 1968 British playwriting that produced provocative socialist drama, clearly influenced by Brecht's Marxist epic theatre and the British post-war interest in social realism.¹ However, in the early 1980s Barker started to question his own political beliefs and this led to increased scepticism about the merits of using theatre as a medium to present socialist ideology. In 1986 Barker published an article in *The Guardian* entitled 'Forty-nine Asides for a Tragic Theatre' where he declared that, 'We are living the extinction of official socialism. When the opposition loses its politics, it must root in art' (Barker 1989, p. 11). The 'art' that Barker chooses to root his oppositional politics in is tragedy, a theatrical form that he argues allows access to a deeper sense of existential truth beyond or beneath political ideology, as Barker explains:

¹ The first professional play was *One Afternoon on the 63rd Level of the Pyramid of Cheops the Great* (1970) for BBC Radio. An iconic example of post-war social realism is of course John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* in 1956. Sean Carney argues that the fusion of these two styles leads to a new tragic form, 'contemporary English tragedy grows out of this hybrid birth, the conjunction of realistic content and formal theatricality' (Carney 2013, p. 7).

Tragedy offends the sensibilities. It drags the unconscious into the public place. It therefore silences the banging of the tambourine which characterises the authoritarian and the labourist culture alike.

(Barker 1989, p. 13)

This engagement with tragedy rapidly led to the formation of 'a modern form of tragedy' (Barker 1989, p. 53), which Barker named the 'Theatre of Catastrophe' and by 1988 a new theatre company was formed, The Wrestling School, solely dedicated to the staging of Barker's contemporary tragic texts.² In 1989, the first of three editions of a manifesto that sets out Barker's vision for his contemporary version of tragic drama was published under the title *Arguments for a Theatre*.

As Barker moved away from socialist satirical theatre towards tragedy, the plays expressed a growing interest in religious and spiritual subject matter. Whereas his dramas of the 1970s were preoccupied with twentieth century and contemporary politics, his plays of the 1980s increasingly searched further back into European history as a way of reassessing the present. As a character in Barker's first Theatre of Catastrophe play (Barker 2007, p. 33), *The Europeans*, explains, 'to know who we are, we must know who we were' (Barker 1990c, p. 29). It seems to be this sustained engagement with

² The Theatre of Catastrophe is first referred to in an article in *The Guardian* on 22 August 1988 entitled 'The Consolations of Catastrophe', explaining the vision for this new theatrical form (Barker 1989, p. 51-55). The Wrestling School's first production was Barker's *The Last Supper*, which opened on 3 March 1988 at the Royal Court Theatre, London, directed by Kenny Ireland (Barker 1988c).

European history and myth and Barker's disenchantment with politics that contribute to the spiritual and religious sensibility in his plays. Christian clerical characters: priests, monks, popes and prophets, feature in many of his texts from the 1980s onwards. These characters, forced into rigorous self-examination and redefinition by the catastrophe of war or violent social upheaval, emerge from the ashes of orthodox Christianity, with a more existential spirituality. Barker's Theatre of Catastrophe therefore offers a radical excavation of moments in Europe's spiritual heritage and the deconstruction of monotheistic ideas and narratives inform the tragic and atheistic spirituality that Barker offers in its place.

The interest in religious ideas in Barker's drama is such, that in the early part of the twenty-first century, in both theoretical writings and responses to interview questions, Barker defines his theatre in relation to religious ideas. Most strikingly in 2005, in *Death, The One and the Art of Theatre*, a poetic and theoretical text that sets out a more concentrated theatrical vision than *Arguments for a Theatre*, Barker explains that 'the art of theatre has many of the characteristics of religion' and its 'methods are akin to prayer' (2005a, p. 2). In an interview with David Ian Rabey in a collection of essays on his work, entitled *Theatre of Catastrophe* (2006), Barker responds to questions on this connection, stating, for example, that 'I think of these plays as types of prayer' (Barker in Gritzner and Rabey 2006, p. 34). In his autobiography *A Style and Its Origins* (2007), Barker observes that this spiritual focus also extends to his conception and approach to performance, 'He had a vision of acting as a form of religious practice' (Barker 2007, p. 28), and the context surrounding this

comment suggests this was a view he held in the early stages of the formation of his theatre company The Wrestling School.³ The idea of a form of theatre related to religion and prayer does not have obvious affinities with the socialist ideology that informed Barker's earlier satirical drama. In fact the tradition of Marxist and socialist drama is often hostile to religious ideology, viewing it as a delusion generated to manipulate and pacify resistance to the dominant classes.⁴

The point of departure for this study is an interest in this movement from political theatre to a theatre that can be compared to religion. It therefore strives to identify and consider some of the spiritual elements in Barker's drama and theory and how these features offer an alternative focus to the overtly political intentions of his early work. It pursues a line of enquiry premised on the idea that because the more spiritual focus occurred at the same time Barker engaged with tragedy, perhaps the form and approach of tragic drama encourages or allows the expression of positions that are more spiritual, in contrast to the political and moral tenets of a more structured and unequivocal ideological position.⁵ Tragedy as a dramatic form first emerged within the pagan religious context of Ancient Greece and so a major part of this study examines potential parallels with the spiritual aspects of Attic

³ In his autobiography Barker writes under the alter ego Eduardo Houth and therefore refers to himself in the third person, presumably as a way of achieving a level of critical distance from his own experiences. This need for distance is alluded to in the text itself when discussing the movement from being the writer to the director of your play: 'The artist – if he is an artist – must assume another aspect of himself in order to view his own creation' (Barker 2007, p. 42).

⁴ For example the three ineffectual gods in Brecht's *The Good Person of Szechwan* (1943), who are unable to alter the underlying monetary structures of capitalist society that make moral behaviour so problematic for the protagonist Shen Teh: 'Alas, that is beyond our powers. We cannot meddle in the sphere of economics' (Brecht 1993, p. 11).

⁵ For example: Marxism, socialism, humanism, or any belief system that holds certain ethical principles as non-negotiable.

tragedy and the Theatre of Catastrophe as a way of understanding Barker's theatre as a spiritual event. Different aspects of this relationship are considered in Chapters 3, 4, and 5. The initial part of the study looks at the influence of Abrahamic monotheistic religion on Barker's work, with a particular focus on Christianity. Barker has acknowledged a specific influence on his spirituality from within this religious tradition through the German medieval mystical theologian Meister Eckhart (Barker 2007, p. 116) and so Chapter 2 carries out a detailed consideration of relevant elements of this theology and how Eckhart's ideas can be seen to inform Barker's drama, poetry, and theoretical writings. Despite this clear preoccupation with religion, Barker acknowledges that he is 'probably' an atheist. However, he immediately qualified this statement by distancing himself from the aggressive connotations of the term, 'although the word 'atheist' worries me because it implies a conscious hostility to religion which I don't have (Barker 2011b, p. 19). For Barker, there is 'probably' not a god, but in his attempt to create a theatre that approximates aspects of religion and religious practice, he is disinclined to criticize those who choose to adopt an orthodox approach to religious ideas and experience. If the religious strand of Barker's work is not centred on belief in a divine being then it must clearly lie elsewhere. This introductory chapter will consider Barker's comments about religion within his writings and plays and the movement from political theatre to spiritual tragic drama.

Tragedy and Religion

In *The Death of Tragedy* (1961), George Steiner argues for a culturally and historically specific conception of this form, presumably countering a more universal perspective that relates to tragedy's high art cultural status:

All men are aware of tragedy in life. But tragedy as a form of drama is not universal. [...] [The] representation of personal suffering and heroism which we call tragic drama is distinctive of the western tradition. It has become so much a part of our sense of the possibilities of human conduct, [...] that we forget what a strange and complex idea it is to re-enact private anguish on a public stage. This idea and the vision of man which it implies are Greek.

(Steiner 1961, p. 3)⁶

This idea of tragedy as particularly Greek in its perspective informs this study in its engagement with Greek tragedy as a spiritual and religious form as a way of shedding light on the spiritual aspects of Barker's tragic drama. Having argued for tragedy as essentially being Greek in its worldview, Steiner then distinguishes the Greek perspective from the dominant Western religious tradition of monotheism:

⁶ The highly influential conception of tragic art, and all significant art, as universal originates from Aristotle's *Poetics* (Aristotle 1996, p. 16).

Tragedy is alien to the Judaic sense of the world. The Judaic spirit is vehement in its conviction that the order of the universe and of man's estate is accessible to reason. The ways of the Lord are neither wanton nor absurd [...] Tragic drama arises out of precisely the contrary assertion: necessity is blind and man's encounter with it shall rob him of his eyes.

(Steiner 1961, p. 3)

The idea of monotheistic order continues in increasingly secular form in the Enlightenment's defining embrace of reason and science, and Steiner alludes to this legacy through the specific example of Karl Marx: 'Marxism is characteristically Jewish in its insistence on justice and reason, and Marx repudiated the entire concept of tragedy. "Necessity," he declared, "is blind only in so far as it is not understood" (Steiner 1961, p. 4). Steiner's observations on tragedy and religion offer a useful starting point for this study because he offers an overview of some of the key ideas it engages with; ideas whose complex and long historical gestation are difficult to express succinctly. The form and subject matter of tragedy originates from classical Greece, and Barker's return to tragedy has a number of notable elements from this early tradition. These include poetic and philosophical language (in contrast to the dominance of realistic language in contemporary theatre), the use of a chorus, imagery of death and the dead, the focus on female characters of high social status, and the use of characters who are supernatural or the resurrected dead. How these components interact with or are used to express a bleak

vision of reality as primarily unknowable is a significant part of this study. Barker's hostility to the dominance of reason and ideology in contemporary society, which is discussed below, show his rejection of another dominant strand of Western culture that arguably originates in monotheism and its associated ordering and rationalising of existence and the world. This need for order can be seen to stem from the fundamental human need for meaning. As Michel Onfray observes in *In Defence of Atheism*: 'Creation of the divine coexists with terror of the void in a life that must end (Onfray 2007, p. 14) or as a character in Barker's *The Ecstatic Bible* reflects: 'God's silence is too terrible for men' (Barker 2004b, p. 168). The monotheistic tradition and its powerful influence on western notions of order and reason is a common point of conflict for Barker. However, the strands of Christianity that have greater affinity to the tragic view, namely the mystical and *apophatic* (or negative) theological tradition, inform Barker's work, as clearly identifiable through its relationship to Eckhart's theology.

Barker's crisis of faith

Reviewing his life in 2007 Barker chooses to highlight a spiritual and emotional drive informing the creation of his theatre, rather than the socialist ideology that is the overt focus of his earlier plays. He reveals that his predisposition is due to a long-standing discontentment with society, resulting in spiritual internalisation and a search for inner ecstatic states, 'He thought his time sordid and suffered an emotional and physical distaste for it, preserving his ecstasies for the spiritual and sexual life he created for himself.

He craved solitude' (Barker 2007, p. 9). The historical journey of Barker's theatre is from the political to the spiritual and this gradual transition can be seen in his plays, poetry and theoretical writings from the 1980s onwards. The first edition of *Arguments for a Theatre* (1989) engages directly with this crisis of faith and how his socialist ideas are unravelling through his engagement with tragedy. This is particularly notable in the essay 'Ye Gotta Laugh' (1986):

I always knew socialism was tragedy. I had represented it as tragedy early on, in *Fair Slaughter* [1977]. I had repeatedly studied its failure. But in the breaking of the politics of the time, I needed to know what meaning socialism had for me. I risked finding it had no meaning.

(Barker 1989, p. 16)

In his English Civil War play, *Victory* (1983), Barker shows an awareness of the destructive nature and agony induced by loss of faith in the previously faithful. Bradshaw 'the Widow of a Polemicist' has just stolen a wallet from those deeply loyal to her husband's cause:

SCROPE You must not injure people in their faith.

BRADSHAW Why not? What's so precious about faith? Why can't it take a kicking like anything else? I do them a favour. They get an education, and I get a wallet. Cheap at the price

(Barker 2006a, p. 43)

Bradshaw's act will have a profound impact on those devoted to the puritan cause. Whereas Scrope, who was her deceased husband's secretary, is horrified at the damage inflicted on their faith, Bradshaw attempts to perceive loss of faith as an education. This idea will come to inform the project of the Theatre of Catastrophe in its relentless challenge to core moral and ideological values. Faith, of course, has a key position within Christianity and Barker examines loss of faith in greater detail in *Rome* (1993). In this play the devastating effects of faith's collapse are imagined happening to the founder of monotheism himself: Abraham, and considered in the next section on *Genesis*. For Barker in the 1980s it is faith in socialism that is becoming the problem, and in his 1985 dramatic poem *Don't Exaggerate* he engages directly with the crisis of (his) socialist ideology. In this text, Barker's questioning of the notion of truth suggests the limitations of rationalism, not only in Marx but also in any worldview:

The truth lies somewhere between
The coarse emotion and the calculation
Don't ask me where
Don't keep on about the truth
Don't
The truth is dying
Yes it's dying

It is praised so much
Which is not to deny its existence only
Don't keep on about the truth

[...]

Truth is not stable
Any more than passion
Truth will expire
Just as quickly as desire

(Barker 1985b, p. 1 and p. 11)

It is important to note here that Barker is not denying the existence of truth, only its instability. It would therefore appear to be not an expression of radical scepticism towards reality but instead a crisis of ideological truth: a loss of faith. Barker notes the significance of this poem in the first edition of his *Arguments for a Theatre*: 'The importance of *Don't Exaggerate* in my theory of theatre lay in its employment of contradiction and digression as means of returning the onus of moral decision to the audience' (Barker 1989, p. 80). The complication of any clear moral position, and by extension the ideological framework in which these positions sit, is one of the central tenets of Barker's Theatre of Catastrophe.

Barker and *Genesis*: return to the beginning

In Barker's 1978 play *The Love of a Good Man*, set two years after the First World War in Passchendaele, a location described by a character in the play as 'not ground so much as flesh' (Barker 1980b, p. 7), a Bishop is presiding over the graves of the many dead. He becomes overwhelmed by the horror of so much suffering leading him to divert from a more traditional sermon to claim that 'God is so very fond of pain' (Barker 1980b, p. 53). The Bishop's attempt to understand why his God must have allowed so much agony to occur during the war does not lead him to posit atheism, but instead he responds with a provocative question, 'I do not deny the existence of the person God. I merely ask what sort of character He has' (Barker 1980b, p. 54). This questioning response to suffering and the trials of existence is adopted by a number of characters in subsequent Barker plays: rather than denying God's existence they instead choose to reformulate and re-imagine the personality of the divine. The result is that their idea of 'God' seems to function as a poetic projection of the complexity and suffering of human existence, leading them away from orthodox monotheism's notion of an ethical God. This is very much in line with Barker's theatrical project that aims to create 'moral confusion in the audience' (Barker in Spencer 1990).

Barker argues that the limitations of the ethical nature of the Christian God are problematic because he fails to encompass all of human experience, 'We have never really come to terms with the Christian god, because he has repudiated malice, it is not part of his will' (Barker 1997, p. 216). Instead

Barker gravitates towards pagan and early Jewish traditions that present gods that partially correspond to negative aspects of existence, 'We know the Greek gods were without conscience, that the Old Testament God was jealous and vindictive' (Barker 1997, p. 222). For this reason Barker is mainly inspired by ancient and ethically problematic conceptions of divinity and their associated myths and literature, 'the great narratives of antiquity – almost entirely tragic in character – possess moral ambiguities' (Barker 1997, p. 173).

When looking at the influence of the Hebrew Bible on Barker's drama it is interesting to note that the five narratives he selects, with one exception, come from the book of *Genesis*.⁷ There is general consensus among biblical scholars that *Genesis* is composed primarily of three sources (Hendel 2013, p. 17). The earliest sections of *Genesis* comprise two contrasting traditions, the Priestly or 'P' source and the Yahwist or 'J' source. The Elohist or 'E' tradition begins later with Abraham.⁸ Ronald Hendel summarises the differences between the two sources that provide diverse strands from the creation myths onwards, 'P's is a world – and a narrative – of clarity, order, and nested hierarchy. J's is a world of emotions, ambiguity, and ethical complexity. P portrays a transcendental God, a cosmic deity, while J portrays a deity with the human traits of regret, anger, compassion, and delight'

⁷ The exception is the play *Judith* (1990), which dramatises the climatic moment of the apocryphal book of the same name. The four episodes from *Genesis* are: *Rome: On Being Divine* (1993) from *Genesis* 22; *Lot and His God* (2012) based on the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in *Genesis* 19; *I Saw Myself* (2008), which includes monologues that explore Eve's transgression in Eden in *Genesis* 3; and *All this Joseph* (written 2000), an unpublished play based on *Genesis* 39:7-9, and considered by David Ian Rabey in *Howard Barker: Ecstasy and Death* (Rabey 2009, p. 166).

⁸ Hendel 2013, p. 18. Bill T. Arnold, in his 2013 biblical commentary on *Genesis*, engages with some of the challenges and debates around this model, including arguments for a more complex relationship between texts previously separated out as J and E (Arnold 2009, p. 15). However, this does not alter the clear division between J (or JE) and P sources referred to here.

(Hendel 2013, p. 23). Barker's description of the Old Testament God as 'jealous and vindictive' would seem to be referring to the anthropomorphic and more ethically ambiguous god of the J tradition and it is this idea of the divine that influences Barker's drama, and probably the reason why *Genesis* is where he looks for inspiration. This anthropomorphic conception of God occurs not only through language in Barker's theatre, but also more directly via characterisation, either in the form of God himself or an angel.⁹

In Barker's *Rome: On Being Divine* (1993) we have God's incarnation as a vagrant called Benz, who is first encountered in a scene set within the world of the Hebrew Bible, where the audience is offered an even darker and disturbing version of the famous Binding of Isaac from *Genesis* 22.¹⁰ In this biblical narrative, God commands Abraham to sacrifice his only son Isaac, before dramatically halting the proceedings in the climatic moments of the ritual to accept a ram instead. This gruelling test of obedience to his God is a foundational moment in the life of the first patriarch of middle-eastern and western monotheism, so it is fitting that Barker introduces his incarnation of God through this event. The ethically questionable nature of God's command for Abraham to murder his son is another reason why Barker would have an interest in this narrative. In fact Barker's fascination is such that he plays out

⁹ In *Lot and His God* (2012), an Angel, Drogheda, is sent to warn Lot and his wife, Sverdlosk, to leave Sodom before it is destroyed. Later in the play God himself possesses a waiter in order to speak directly to Lot.

¹⁰ For an examination of Barker's versions of this biblical story in a comparison with Kierkegaard's treatment of the Binding of Issac in *Fear and Trembling* see John Baker's article, "To Inflict Impossible Pain": the Binding of Isaac, Divinity, and Kierkegaard in Howard Barker's *Rome* (2013). Although Baker convincingly establishes clear connections and differences in the two adaptations, he has a tendency to read the scenes as though the playwright is trying to express a moral judgement on Abraham's religious fanaticism. In line with Barker's anti-parable approach that aims at intensifying morally problematic elements, my analysis instead focuses on how the irrational complicates a moral reading and in doing so amplifies the darker mythic and spiritual elements of the narrative.

this same event twice, showing different attempts by Abraham to make sense of his God's request. One explanation for this problematic biblical episode is that it shows Judaism's complete rejection of child sacrifice, separating it from some of the nearby pagan religions.¹¹ In Barker's first version of the story, Abraham has worked himself up into a religious frenzy and sings 'Oh the sunset is an insane bull / Which bellows as it mounts the clouds / Oh see the blood run down the sky / I am God's waterfall' (Barker 1993c, p. 205). This use of bull imagery to express the divine suggests that Barker's First Abraham is struggling with the transition to the more ethical and ordered religion of what will become Judaic monotheism, the bull a common pagan symbol for divinity (for example, when in *Exodus* 32:1-4 the followers of Moses degenerate into idolatry it is a golden bull-calf they create).¹² Abraham's immoral God relates to Barker's own scepticism towards a divinity that fails to represent the cruel and irrational aspects of existence. When challenged by Isaac as to why he is doing this, Abraham's response shows his desire to embrace the irrational, '**No reason**' (Barker 1993c, p. 207, emphasis his); and when pushed further by Isaac he equates this irrationality and his notion of divinity with love, '**the bull that rides the sky, love, yes!**' (Barker 2007, p. 207, emphasis his), complicating a familiar Judaeo-Christian term with dark connotations. Therefore, when God in the form of Benz finally appears to change the command to a ram instead, Abraham is horrified, exclaiming that, 'It is not the same' (Barker 1993c, p. 2007). After launching into another version of the

¹¹ 'Infant sacrifice was widely practiced in Canaan and in the Phoenician colonies of N Africa [...] in critical times as a way of averting divine wrath' (Brown, Fitzmyer, and Murphy 1990, p. 26).

¹² 'In ancient Near Eastern iconography bulls figure prominently either as representations of gods, e.g. Bull El in the Ugaritic texts, or as animal thrones of deities standing upon their backs' (Brown, Fitzmyer, and Murphy 1990, p. 59).

song that this time symbolises his dying faith in his God, 'The dying bull is stamping, stamping', Abraham expresses the terrible blow this ethical compromise has inflicted on him, 'You ask for everything. And I want to give you everything. (*Pause*) And now you say, not everything, after all...' (Barker 2007, p. 207).

In Barker's Second Abraham, we seem to be given what is to some extent an inversion of the first episode. This time Abraham attempts a nihilistic approach to deal with the emotional challenge of the command, trying to convince himself and Isaac that death is preferable to the, 'wholly random nature of existence that neither pities nor consoles' (Barker 1993c, p. 228). God in this version shows himself to be cruel and uncompromising, rejecting Abraham's strategy as a futile attempt to make sense of the irrational force of existence that he represents. This time it is Benz who gives 'no reason' for his actions and rebukes Abraham for failing to submit unconditionally, 'in all clarity, in the fullness of understanding, to the wholly irrational act. You were to kill your son without the benefit of philosophy. You were to make no sense of the deed, but to endure the purest pain. For my sake' (Barker 1993c, p. 229). The God that the Bishop in *The Love of a Good Man* described as being 'so very fond of pain' is thus more fully realised here in the Second Abraham, inexplicably demanding that pure pain is simply endured by man. This terrible demand moves beyond even the immoral anthropomorphism of pagan gods and vindictiveness of early monotheistic divinity. It is too much for both Abraham and Isaac who attack Benz, with Isaac eventually strangling him. Abraham looks upon the dead God bemoaning that 'now things will be hard ... Now we

will have only ourselves to blame' (Barker 1993c, p. 230). Although it appears that God is dead he in fact returns again as the vagrant Benz in the play's main location of Rome, where Christian monotheism is under threat by a barbarian incursion. Benz in this now Christian environment will be explored in Chapter 2 of this study, in relation to the theology of Meister Eckhart.

Christian redemption and class in Barker's theatre

Four days before the publication of 'Forty-nine Asides for a Tragic Theatre', Barker published in *The Times* (6 February) an imaginary conversation between himself and the playwright Thomas Middleton to coincide with the opening of Barker's radically adapted version of Middleton's *Women Beware Women*. This conversation includes an observation that connects Barker's own drama with Shakespeare's theatre, relating them both to the Christian notion of redemption:

BARKER: We require a different form of tragedy in which the audience is encouraged, not by facile optimism or useless reconciliation, but by spectacle of extreme struggle and the affirmation of human creativity. Failure is unimportant, the attempt is all.

MIDDLETON: This would explain your redemption of the low-life characters. Sordido in your version is a lout with a

mission, and the Ward a study in pain. I think you are even more Christian than Shakespeare dared to be.

(Barker 1989, p. 25)

Whereas on the one hand Barker in 1986 is arguing both here and elsewhere for the pagan theatrical genre of tragedy, this different form of tragedy, influenced by Shakespeare, expresses the anti-hierarchical approach of Christianity: a desire to 'save' each individual regardless of their social status. This redemption is achieved in Barker's tragic theatre by attempting to give each character full imaginative expression in language. The impulse in Christianity to redeem 'low-life' and marginalised individuals is expressed in the Sermon on the Mount with Christ's inversion of traditional hierarchies, e.g. 'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God' (*Luke 6: 20 New International Version*). This inversion of hierarchies coheres effectively with a democratic political system and perhaps helps to explain the growing attraction to democracy and democratic ideals in Christian Europe in the twentieth century. Barker's tragic dramas usually provide bleak and cruel experiences for the characters and they are therefore not clearly 'redeemed' through the *action* in any conventional sense. In this respect Barker is clearly at odds and challenging a Christian and/or democratic conception of morality, i.e. democratic ideals do not provide a solution to the problems encountered in the play. However, Barker's avoidance of subtext and realistic and clichéd language allows the majority of his character's highly expressive poetic and philosophical language that deliberately attempts to unsettle conventional

ideas and opinions. This approach allows for a freedom of speech and expressive sophistication for lower class characters, that would seem out of place, or at least more painstaking to convey, in realist based drama. This concern with giving full expression to marginalised voices is observable in Barker's early response to social realism in theatre:

Saved was one of the first plays I ever saw in the theatre – and I myself was not a writer then. So I suppose that seeing the life of my own class and background could be represented on the stage made me want to write a play – and, perhaps, write it better. I do remember feeling that Bond's presentation of the South London working class was abominable and contemptuous. The inarticulacy, the grunting and the monosyllabics, being accepted as a portrayal of working class people did offend me and may have inspired me to write CHEEK [1971] which did lend articulacy to the characters.

(Barker in Lamb 1997, p. 31)

This Christian element to Barker's drama therefore initially came about right at the beginning of Barker's writing career as a response to what he saw as the limiting nature of social realism. The continuation of this Christian-Shakespearian approach is observable in Barker's later plays. Commenting on a production in 2002, Rabey suggests that Barker has improved on Shakespeare in this respect. Rabey compares Barker's radical reworking of

Hamlet, entitled *Gertrude – The Cry* (2002), to the Shakespearian original and suggests:

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the characters are principally viewed externally, and the audience's viewpoint is associated with Hamlet's. In *Gertrude – The Cry*, even the relatively minor or supporting characters – Isola, Ragusa, Cascan, Albert – are given dramatic opportunities to express surprising depths to their characters.

(Rabey 2009, p. 173)

However, there is also a movement away from the expression of the working class voice in the Theatre of Catastrophe due to the types of narratives Barker often chooses to stage. Barker's plays in the 1970s and early 1980s often centred on working class protagonists in a contemporary or more broadly twentieth century setting. In contrast, the Theatre of Catastrophe's engagement with history and classical texts has increasingly tended towards the characterisation of the ruling and middle classes. In a summary of Barker's drama from 1988-2010, Rabey observes that, 'Characters [...] often have a regal quality or background' (Rabey 2009, p. 4). The democratic impulse towards non-central characters having a stronger voice in the drama is counter-balanced to a significant degree by the decline of vocal and fully realised working class characters in Barker's drama. So despite Barker's focus on low-life characters in 1986, there is a corresponding retreat from those at the lower end of the social scale within the *dramatis personae* of the

Theatre of Catastrophe because classical texts and narratives of important historical events often focus on the dominant and ruling classes (as in the example of *Hamlet*).

Despite Barker's working class origins (Barker 2007, p. 17), the lower status characters, as is often the case within traditional theatre, suffer from marginalisation in relation to the main action of the play. Initially they moved into a more choric form of expression, for example choruses of soldiers in *The Last Supper* (1988) and *Rome* (1993), and revolutionaries in *Hated Nightfall* (1994).¹³ When the use of a chorus in Barker becomes less common in the late nineties, there is a further decline in the working class voice. So although the characters in *Gertrude* are minor in terms of the action of the play, there is only one working class character portrayed, the loyal servant Cascan, and through him the previously socialist Barker now engages with the ecstasies and loyalties of servitude, rather than the oppressive aspect. This shift in perspective relates to the movement from the political to the spiritual; referring to Cascan Barker/Houth observe, 'the role [...] was the highest development yet of Barker's fascination with the servant as a type of semi-religious vocation' (Barker 2007, p. 72). Rabey's observation that marginal roles, 'are given dramatic opportunities to express surprising depths to their characters,' shows how desire for equality of expression continues to play a role in Barker's theatre, but this marginality is primarily in relation to the central focus of the play's action rather than socio-political.¹⁴

¹³ The role of the chorus in Barker is considered in Chapter 4 of this study.

¹⁴ More recently this reduction of the working class voice has been counterbalanced in Barker's 2012 play *Blok/Eko*, where the protagonist is a working class poet called Tot who is deliberately made to suffer by the female despot Eko in order to enhance his artistic talent.

Although the connection with the form of tragedy and the idea of redemption continued in Barker's theatre, the concept in a more moral and metaphysical sense is arguably specifically rejected in 1994. This occurs in the Preface to his epic drama, *The Ecstatic Bible: A New Testament* (2000), where the absence of redemption is due to the absence of God:¹⁵

The Ecstatic Bible is a testament not to the presence of God in the universe but to his absence, consequently a testament to the absolute solitude of Man. In this landscape of chaos and arbitrary will, instinct dominates human action, an instinct often savage, sometimes tender, but never morally constrained ...

[...]

[T]he priest's pursuit leads him through torture, war and servitude, mangling his body and his hope but never causing him to ask reason for his pain – or, and here perhaps is the play's terrible illegality – demanding a solution to it ... in this he is neither ancient nor modern, neither demanding that God pities him nor society improves itself...

[...]

[F]or the Priest on whom so much ill-luck falls – a testament to endurance, not suffered without meaning, but never redeemed (there is nothing Christian here) and unencumbered with any fatuous effort to *comprehend*...

¹⁵ *The Ecstatic Bible* was written between 1993-1994 (Barker 2004b, p. 2).

(Barker 2004b, p. 7-8)

Here we see Barker's rejection of both Christian pity and the secular progressive beliefs of humanism.¹⁶ Although Barker is still offering an equal voice to the characters, and the vast number of characters (over a hundred) means that in this play the different classes are included, they are not 'redeemed' within the action of the drama because, for Barker, redemption in the world is not possible, it is a Christian generated illusion. The rejection is both of the Christian ancient concept of 'redemption' and the modern enlightenment belief in explaining and understanding the truth of reality. In *Death, The One and the Art of Theatre* Barker expresses the position that his atheistic, but equally anti-ideological, stance produces: it is one that can only express contempt for the world:

In Christian culture the apology is the last act of life, as apology characterizes the Christian life in all its moments. Beyond the Christian era we can no longer be satisfied with the apology as the precondition for entering death. We can only go into death with a contempt of life, with a sense of life's poverty. Without God we may dare to say life is not worthy of *us*.

(Barker 2005a, p. 21)

¹⁶ Barker's *Arguments for a Theatre* makes it clear that humanism in its manifestation as 'humanist theatre,' is the polar opposite to his 'Catastrophic theatre' (Barker 1989, p. 91). In *A Style and Its Origins* he views Renaissance humanism positively and therefore selects a different but related term to describe current ideas he is critical of, 'it differed so profoundly from the ideological humanitarianism that he found so sickly in his own time' (Barker 2007, p. 97).

This railing at existence itself reflects the latter stages of Barker's oppositional stance, and what began as a Marxist assault on the failings of capitalist society ends, post-ideologically, with an assault on the actual poverty of existence itself. The challenge of responding to existence outside of faith and ideology informs the existential crisis that is the spiritual environment of his Theatre of Catastrophe. Barker's summary of *The Ecstatic Bible* as 'a testament to the absolute solitude of Man' conveys an idea that Barker connects with tragedy when discussing another epic religious play *Rome* (1993), written at a similar time:

This solitude [...] doesn't seem to me to be loss but a triumph – the ability to exist alone. That these people suffer to the extent they do, gives an audience a sense of human potential beyond the norm. And I do think that's why tragedy is a necessary art form. It doesn't make you feel good - or anything like that [...] it is purely the fact that its extremity, however painful, lends the audience power.¹⁷

(Barker in Lamb 2005, p. 205-6)

The theological connotations of this state of solitude seem to closely relate to Meister Eckhart's notion of detachment, a concept that will be considered in detail in the next chapter.

¹⁷ Barker made a similar observation about his work in 1984 when responding to criticisms about the bleak nature of his plays, 'My world is passionate after all. People live, suffer, but they affirm something, even if it's only a will to get through' (Barker 1984, p. 42).

A Religion of Sexuality

A key feature of Barker's theatre is that conventional morality is unravelled by tragedy, and sexual ecstasy becomes a new and dominant component. Barker defines the sacred as 'the unconscious and the instinctual,' 'the uneducated aspect of human nature,' and when reflecting on where it has 'migrated to' in contemporary society, he suggests, 'Is it in private life, in what is effectively a religion of sexuality?' (Barker 2011b, p. 192.) The religious, the sexual, and tragic theatre all seem to be connected in Barker's work and therefore a consideration of the influence of sexuality and its interrelationship with religious concepts may help to clarify the spiritual aspect of his drama.

Sexual desire is clearly a very significant element in Barker's theatre from his very first plays. The opening scene of *Cheek* (1971), his first professional stage play, makes it clear that the working class protagonist is motivated by powerful sexual drives: 'LAURIE: You know, I could have a lasting, deep, meaningful affair with one of them little whores [...] BILL: I like to see a man with an aim in life ...' (Barker 1972, p. 7). The wry response by Bill about sexual desire being a primary motivator in life is increasingly true for Barkerian protagonists in later plays, which favour such a focus over ideological aims. In an interview in *Gambit* in 1984 Barker explains his interest in sexual desire:

It has always been one element in everything I've written. It has existed, as a refuge of despair, never tenderly or profoundly. It has

seemed spoiled to me by the violence of the world we live in. But that is wrong. Sexual love is regenerative. Absolutely so.

(Barker in Dunn 1984, p. 36)

With Barker's ideology in crisis in 1984 it is interesting to note how sexual desire is embraced with such conviction. In a similar manner, characters in Barker's tragic drama often experience sexual ecstasy when catastrophe has shattered their previously held ideals. Despite the significant role played by sexual desire in Barker's drama since its inception, in 2003 he felt the need to focus to an even greater degree on this experience, stating in an interview that, 'I'm afraid I'm going to have to write increasingly about sex ...' (Barker in Lamb 2005, p. 197). In another interview a few years later, Rabey specifically asked Barker about the relationship between religion and sexual desire in his drama, to which he responded in the following terms:

Why do I sometimes speak of the religious aspect of sexuality? I think because religion shares its ecstatic potential, but more, because religion is the study of secrets, and the secret retreats always before knowledge and takes up residence somewhere else ... so does sexuality, it is self-inventing, it has its great books, its great testaments, perhaps I have written one or two myself, and it is also irreducible to anything else ... look how pitiful the sex manual is ... the scientific is abolished here ... and it entails the prayer ... what lover has not looked on the nakedness of his/her desired one without uttering a prayer of

devotion? What is the demand in that prayer? The hope that this is the doorway to some other truth ...

(Barker in Gritzner and Rabey 2006, p. 35)

The fact that Barker separates out sexuality from religion betrays his own cultural bias in that the implication is they are mutually exclusive: it is Barker's interpretation of religion as Christianity that allows for such a division. If a broader consideration of religion and sexuality is made then Christianity could be viewed as an exception as a religion in its attitude towards sex rather than as representative. This is the position adopted by Georges Bataille in *Eroticism* who explains this divergence:

It goes without saying that the development of eroticism is in no respect foreign to the domain of religion, but in fact Christianity sets its face against eroticism and thereby condemns most religions. In one sense, the Christian religion is possibly the least religious of them all.

(Bataille 2006, p. 32)

Michel Foucault argues that Christianity, in contrast to pagan attitudes, associated the sexual act with 'evil, sin, the Fall and death' and in terms of permitted sexual relationships 'drew the line at monogamous marriage' and 'strictly excluded' same sex relationships (Foucault 1992, p. 14). The preoccupation with moral transgression in Barker's work could be seen as the

result of Christian culture closing off the darker aspects of religious expression, which then subsequently have limited expression in a post-Christian secular ideology (e.g. humanism). This perhaps helps to explain why immorality becomes the new space of investigation in Barker's theatre: it is denied religious or spiritual expression elsewhere. Similarly sexuality, having been categorised as sin, is repressed within Christianity and then subsequently rationalised and objectified in post-Christian culture. Barker's tragic theatre attempts to level this Christian informed morality and therefore creates space for spiritual and aesthetic expression of immoral thoughts and behaviour (e.g. violent acts), which in the case of Christianity includes sexual ecstasy. Barker's *Gertrude – The Cry* (2000) is a particularly clear example of this relationship, where the cry is one of pure sexual expression intensified by (other) immoral acts, in this case betrayal. The cry is an ecstatic expression of spiritual elements foreclosed by Christian morality.

Religion and sexual desire in *The Castle*

Barker's 1985 play *The Castle* is a useful text to examine in this introductory chapter because it explores a number of key ideas relevant to this study at a time when Barker is close to proclaiming the need for a tragic theatre. The play explores the clash between religious faith and the harsh nature of existence, with sexual desire at the centre of this crisis. It opens with the protagonist Stucley, a knight returning from the crusades, horrified to discover that his estate has been taken over by women, and his wife, Ann, has entered into a relationship with the new religious and spiritual authority, a witch called

Skinner. Deeply affected by this challenge to his faith, we are presented with another Barker character concluding that God must delight in causing human suffering, 'Oh, Lord and Master of Cruelty, who has no shred of mercy for thy servants, I worship Thee' (Barker 2006a, p. 21). During the crusades, Stucley's love for Ann gave his life meaning among the chaos of war and his commitment to her was absolute, 'I who jumped in pond of murder kept this one thing pure in my head' (Barker 2006a, p. 20). As Charles Lamb observes, Stucley's 'exaggerated veneration of woman, within the predominantly medieval context of the play, strongly accords with the chivalric 'courtly love' phenomenon, the secular counterpart of the cult of the Virgin Mary' (Lamb 2005, p. 96-7). Ann, therefore, in the mind of Stucley is a fusion of religious faith and sexual desire, so her infidelity with the female pagan usurper of his land understandably derails his core beliefs. It is unsurprising then that when his trauma finally leads to the formation of a new and heretical version of Christianity, it is one that engages deeply with the suffering and ecstasy of sexual experience. Having examined the gospels, Stucley highlights an omission that for him is conspicuous by its absence, 'Christ's cock' and he is convinced that a deity who has experienced 'neither pain nor ecstasy' in sexual encounters is of no use to mortal man (Barker 2006a, p. 40). The medieval setting of the play, a period when Christianity influenced most aspects of society, adds to the heretical charge of this exclamation. Stucley recounts a spiritual crisis while in Asia and his expression of what seem to be sexual feelings towards Christ strikes at and troubles the core of Christianity's repression of sexuality, 'longing to know Him, to have some sense of Him, to put my finger into Christ and feel His heat, and what pained me, what

agonized me I assure you, was not the absence of a face but His castration' (Barker 2006a, p. 41). Stucley's engagement with sexual ecstasy could have led to a freer spirituality, as expressed by the pagan women, but in its insular male bias leads to something even more oppressive than medieval patriarchal Christianity, with obvious phallogocentric associations, 'Gospel of the Christ Erect.' Lamb notes how the metaphysical construction is mirrored by the physical development of the castle, 'Both erections – physical and theological – go together to form a system of total psychological and physical domination' (Lamb 2005, p. 125). However, for Barkerian characters in later plays, spiritual crisis, with orthodox religion destabilized by sexual desire, will lead to new, mystical and ecstatic spiritualities that transcend conventional morality and ideology rather than intensify it.

As well as the Christianity of Stucley and the paganism of Skinner, a third religious position is suggested in the captured Islamic engineer Krak. He is the most considered and prominent Islamic character in Barker's theatre and although his intention is to destroy his captors through the building of a castle that invites attack, he is not completely unsympathetic because of the terrible atrocities the Christian crusaders enacted on his family (Barker 2006a, p. 55). Barker invokes in Krak a particular aspect of Islamic spirituality: the importance of mathematics. Seyyed Hossein Nasr observes that in Islam, 'algebra, geometry, and arithmetic were to possess a contemplative, spiritual, and intellectual aspect, as well as that practical and purely rational aspect, (...) developed by the later Western science' (Nasr 2001, p. 148). In an interview carried out during the writing of this play, Barker explains that he is

approaching 'the issue of mayhem in science by showing the alienation of the spirit of inquiry from the needs of community' (Barker in Dunn 1984, p. 33). Krak, therefore, represents a negative, excessively rational, and alienated mathematical worldview: presenting a critique of European science rather than Islamic mathematics; and this rationalism is challenged and eventually disordered by female sexuality, 'Where's cunt's geometry? The thing has got no angles! And no measure, neither width nor depth, how can you trust what has no measurements?' (Barker 2006a, p. 67.) It is Ann's seduction of Krak that is finally able to unsettle his rigid belief system, while she remains beyond all ideologies: 'Ann steadfastly refuses to sacrifice any of her instinctive desires in the interests of ideology or even of sparing others pain' (Lamb 2005, p. 96). Ann's focus on sexual desire and the related rejection of ideology encapsulate the approach that Barker's tragic theatre will take in later plays. The emergence of this focus on unfettered sexual desire within a complex interplay of religious positions provides a religious setting that starts to frame sexual desire itself as a form of religious experience, and one that is an alternative to patriarchal Christianity (and scientific objectivity).

Apocalypse and Rebirth in *The Europeans*

One has heard talk of many theatres existing, and of many forms, as if theatres tolerated one another. The fact is that theatres annihilate one another as all religions annihilate one another. Is this because theatre is a religion?

(Barker 2005a, p. 2)

This quotation offers an intriguing insight into how Barker views both religions and theatres and how, for him, there is a clear relationship between the two human phenomena: they are both founded on difference and opposition. This mutually exclusive notion of religion is very much within the tradition of Abrahamic monotheism founded on the principal that only one God should be worshipped to the exclusion of all others, as set out clearly in the first of the ten commandments, 'You must have no other god besides me' (*Exodus 20: 3 The Revised English Bible*). The historically exclusive and oppositional nature of monotheistic religions defines the backdrop of Barker's play *The Europeans* (1990), in which he imaginatively explores the aftermath of the 1683 Battle of Vienna, where Christendom was severely tested by the threatened incursion of the Islamic Ottoman Empire. The protagonist is General Starhemberg, whose ruthless perseverance in the face of overwhelming odds saved Vienna from the siege. *The Europeans* was the first theatre of Catastrophe play (Barker 2007, p. 33), and in both form and content it expresses the ideas and approach of this new form of tragic drama. In his 1989 manifesto *Arguments for a Theatre*, Barker asserts that in the reception of his plays, difference and division should be encouraged over unity, 'The audience is divided and goes home disturbed or amazed,' offering a challenge to what Barker defines as the humanist theatre's preference for consensus and cohesion in the dramatic experience, 'We all really agree / When we laugh we are together' (Barker 1989, p. 91). When considering his plays from this period, Barker suggests that there are perhaps connections with the subject matter of these plays and the religious tensions of the twenty-first century, 'the rise of fundamentalism in

east and west [and] the religious war that's upon us. [...] I wrote several plays about Islam's conflict with Europe long before all this started' (Barker in Irvine 2006).

Unlike Krak, who is one of the main characters in *The Castle*, the Islamic characters in *The Europeans* remain largely offstage and are for the most part reported and interpreted by the Europeans, rather than presented directly to the audience. In one particularly telling example, the play's central characters reflect on the expression seen on the dying severed head of an executed Islamic soldier, trying to imagine what he is experiencing. The Turkish soldier is considered by the Europeans but is unable to respond, highlighting the play's avoidance of dialogue with the cultural otherness of the Ottomans. The only Islamic character to speak in the drama is a Turkish official Jemal, who in an exchange with Starhemberg in the final scene seems to be questioning the play's somewhat dubious and stereotypical portrayal of the Turkish army, 'You persist in identifying me with all atrocity which is -' before being cut off by Starhemberg, whose response is perhaps reassuring the audience that references to Turkish cruelty are mainly employed in order to question the ethical principles of the Europeans, 'No, no, I was merely being philosophical...' (Barker 1990c, p. 44.) The play therefore adopts an insular and subjective focus on the Christian experience in its quest to excavate a European spiritual identity.

In *The Europeans* there is sustained engagement with two particularly powerful and related tropes of Christianity, whose interrelationship give the

Theatre of Catastrophe its distinct form. The first of these is Christian eschatology, the belief that history is moving towards an apocalypse and that from this chaos a new divine order will emerge.¹⁸ Philosopher John Gray argues that this idea is so ingrained in the European mind that, 'Secular myths reproduce the narrative form of Christian apocalyptic', constructing a model where they believe conflict will ultimately lead to harmony, as in the Marxist belief that revolution will give birth to a utopian communist society (Gray 2007, p.207). Although the emergence of the Theatre of Catastrophe is informed by Barker's rejection of socialist ideology, the influence of Christianity and/or Marxism is still apparent in his positing of a theatre that sees a benefit in catastrophic events cleansing society of traditional beliefs. However, instead of a transformation of society, Barker focuses on a spiritual transformation of the individual. This leads to the second Christian trope, which the philosopher Slavoj Žižek's finds particularly valuable to culture, 'What Christianity did, in a religiously mystified version, is give us the idea of rebirth. Against the pagan notion of destiny, Christianity offered the possibility of a radical opening, that we can find a zero point and clear the table' (Žižek in Henwood and Bertsch 2002).

Barker's *The Europeans* is preoccupied with the idea of rebirth and it is the rise of a new self from cultural dislocation that the play proposes. The primary visionary of this new individualism is Starhemberg, whose conception of a new art reflects this belief in the possibility of rebirth: 'I need an art that will

¹⁸ The Christian apocalypse is initially a place dominated by images of death and chaos, 'There as I looked, was another horse, sickly pale; its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed close behind. (...) There was a violent earthquake; the sun turned black as a funeral pale and the moon all red as blood' (*Revelation* 6: 8, 12 *The Revised English Bible*).

plummet through the floor of consciousness and free the unborn self (...) I want to make a new man and a new woman but only from the pieces of the old' (Barker 1990c, p. 31). The Christian context of the play highlights the religious origins of these tropes and this is particularly exemplified in Starhemberg's collaborator, the Priest Orphuls. The threat posed by death and Islamic culture has left Orphuls open to the possibility of complete alteration, 'Every morning when we awoke, we felt the possibility of **utter transformation**, rising with the sun' (Barker 1990c, p. 15). Orphuls' spirituality shifts from orthodoxy towards what could be described as a religion of sexuality, where ecstasy fills the void created by God's absence. This is succinctly expressed in an exchange with Susannah, who will soon become Orphuls' lover. Susannah has undressed, on separate occasions, for both Starhemberg and Orphuls:

ORPHULS: This is not Hell.

SUSANNAH: Not Hell. What's Hell, then?

ORPHULS: Absence.

SUSANNAH: I assure you this is absence.

ORPHULS: Of God. (*Pause*)

SUSANNAH: (*to Starhemberg*) Take me to the café. You said you would, for showing you God's absence...

(Barker 1990c, p. 15)

David Barnett's study of *The Europeans* (2001) considers the influence of Nietzsche's philosophy on this play and Starhemberg is singled out as the purest example in the drama of a Nietzschean Übermensch, godlike in his self-invention and transcendence of normative morality. Barnett also makes the interesting observation that this philosophy may well be the reserve of the European mind, 'the final episode takes place at an Eastern frontier of the Hapsburg Empire, on the edge of European experience, which emphasises the reach and limitations of the Übermensch' (Barnett 2001, p. 465) Not only does this reinforce the suggestion that the play avoids a dialogical approach to culture but the cultural and geographical limitation of Nietzsche's morally reborn self-inventor betrays his Christian eschatological origins. Interestingly, Gray includes Nietzsche's Übermensch as an example of the unconscious influence of Christian eschatology (Gray 2003, p. 48).

Although Nietzsche's influence on Barker's drama as a whole has been considered by a number of scholars, it is in this first Catastrophic play that the influence is most visible.¹⁹ Following the conscious murder of his mother, the Priest Orphuls delivers a sermon on a new religious position, strikingly similar to Nietzsche in its insistence on moving beyond good and evil: 'Even the death of love is food to the soul and therefore what is evil? Is there evil except not to do?' (Barker 1990, p. 38.) The influence of Christianity and Nietzsche on Barker's drama helps to explain its essential difference from the original Greek model of tragedy. Whereas Attic tragedy marks the limits of human order by asserting divine destiny over the hubristic subject, Barker's new form

¹⁹ Other examples include: Rabey (2009), Reynolds (2006) and Tomlin (2006).

of tragedy refuses closure in favour of the continual rebirth of the individual beyond good and evil as a response to the apocalypse. Therefore it is again the influence of Christianity that makes Barker's Theatre of Catastrophe a distinct sub-genre of tragedy. Nietzsche's relationship to Barker's theatre will be considered in greater detail in Chapter 3.

Atheism and Truth in the Theatre of Catastrophe

Barker's use of the apparatus of religion but without a faith system to support them reflects the deep (apparent) paradox in his theatre: a return to religious instincts and ritual but addressed not to God. Žižek argues that Christianity is a religion that at its core and from its inception is in fact an expression of human abandonment and thus its eventual historical conclusion of atheism. Žižek reflects on the fact that in Christianity God is fully humanised in Christ, who is then abandoned by God: "Father, why did you forsake me?"

When I, a human being, experience myself as cut off from God, at that very moment of the utmost abjection, I am absolutely close to God, since I find myself in the position of the abandoned Christ.

(Žižek 2001, p. 146, emphasis his)

Orphuls in *The Europeans* also finds a connection with Christ through direct identification: 'I think of Him, but – (Pause) No, I hardly think of Christ, rather, I think – I am Him (Barker 1990c, p. 15). And when discussing prayer in relation

to his theatre, Barker shows a similar idea to that expressed by Žižek in his consideration of Christ's exclamation to his father on the cross:

BARKER I think of these plays as types of prayer, they demand something of a world which won't give it, but one does not cease praying ... Isn't one anxious when one prays? Tragedy originates from these same sources.

RABEY: As Brendan Kennelly puts it in his version of *Medea*, 'Prayer ... is anger at what is, and a longing for what should be' ...?

BARKER: No, I think that would be to reduce prayer to a practical statement of aims and desires. It is without anger, it is uttered without hope, to a wall of silence ... the cosmological oblivion to which it is addressed does not, however, detract from its passionate need, its value as *expression* ...

(Barker in Gritzner and Rabey 2006, p. 34, emphasis in the original)

Although Barker's theatre is atheistic in its spirituality it is hostile to one of the most common expressions of secular philosophy in the west, humanism. Gray shares Barker's hostility to this movement and offers the following definition: 'Humanism can mean many things, but for us it means belief in progress' (Gray 2003, p. 4). In *Straw Dogs*, Gray argues that the central tenets of humanism are delusional:

Today liberal humanism has the pervasive power that was once possessed by revealed religion. Humanists like to think they have a rational view of the world; but their core belief in progress is superstition, further than the truth about the human animal than any of the world's religions.

(Gray 2003, p. xi)

Gray develops this argument to suggest that atheism itself, although apparently at polar opposites of Christianity, is in fact its logical conclusion.

Unbelief is a move in a game whose rules are set by believers. To deny the existence of God is to accept the categories of monotheism. As these categories fall into disuse, unbelief becomes uninteresting, and soon it is meaningless. Atheists say they want a secular world, but a world defined by the absence of the Christian god is still a Christian world. Secularism is like chastity, a condition defined by what it denies. If atheism has a future, it can only be in a Christian revival; but in fact Christianity and atheism are declining together.

Atheism is a late bloom of a Christian passion for truth. No pagan is ready to sacrifice the pleasure of life for the sake of mere truth. It is artful illusion, not unadorned reality, that they prize. Among the Greeks,

the goal of philosophy was happiness or salvation, not truth. The worship of truth is a Christian cult.

(Gray 2003, p. 126-7)

This is of particular interest with regard to Barker who has returned to history and historical settings in his drama in order to create a Christian context within which his atheism can respond. In our current environment the greatly diminished Christian movement effectively pales in relation to the atheist denouncement of God's existence. A parallel can be drawn with the emergence of the threat of radical Islam and how this has created a new context for the atheist evangelists to respond; and Richard Dawkins's widely read text *The God Delusion* (2006) would have probably been a less significant book before 9/11.²⁰ Therefore Barker, in his drama, has somewhat paradoxically returned to historical settings dominated by Christian faith and ideals in order to challenge and subvert these beliefs. The intensity of Barker's atheism and denouncement of both religious and secular faith systems (ideologies) may partially stem from the destructive impact of his initial loss of faith once he embarked on a relentless search for truth.

Gray emphasises how Christianity may have historically led the West to nihilism via the Christian preoccupation with truth that has unravelled both Christian and secular (political) belief systems: 'The long-delayed

²⁰ Notable proponents of a recent form of atheism that is actively critical of religion are Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel C. Dennett and Michel Onfray. John Gray attacks this group in an article that argues their own secular philosophy is a misplaced faith in progress. The article is entitled 'The atheist delusion' (Gray 2008, p. 4-6).

consequence of Christian faith was an idolatry of truth that found its most complete expression in atheism. If we live in a world without gods, we have Christianity to thank for it' (Gray 2003, p. 127). The truth drive, which could perhaps explain the impressive developments of science in the West, is ultimately destructive to the ideological fabric of human society, and according to Louis Althusser, man is, by definition, an 'ideological animal' and therefore a collapsing ideology requires some new system to replace it.²¹ In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Theodor Adorno reflects on this ultimately destructive force of reason (truth focused thought) explaining that, 'Ruthlessly, in spite of itself, the Enlightenment has extinguished any trace of its own self-consciousness. The only kind of thinking that is sufficiently hard to shatter myths is ultimately self-destructive' (Adorno 1997, p. 4). The mythic view of the world, respectful in its subordination to the overwhelming forces of nature, has been replaced by humanity's attempted mastery of the world through reason. As the collapse in the concept of 'progress' has shown, the metaphysics of language cannot contain the always-exceeding chaos of the extra-human world. Reason's limited power is revealed by its own process. As Adorno expresses it, 'The word knows that it is weaker than the nature it has deceived' (1997, p. 69).

The Wrestling School actor and director Gerrard McArthur emphasises the negative legacy of the Enlightenment as well as the significance of his own

²¹ Althusser describes 'man is an ideological animal by nature' and quotes St Paul to support his observation about the omnipresence of embedded ideological apparatuses: '...it is in the 'Logos' [the word], meaning in ideology, that we 'live, move and have our being' (Althusser 2001, p. 116).

religious background when reflecting on the religious element in Barker's drama and its relationship to rehearsal and performance:

Howard has more than once said to me that he senses in my performing of his work, which he regards as important to it, is the religious sensibility; what he will straightforwardly describe as an understanding of pain, most especially within the context of my being brought up within the Catholic construct. A childhood bathing in the religious and, I think, the rituals and devices of guilt, submission and service, do provide a preparation for an understanding of a mental landscape that is predicated on its absence, and its rejection. How do you play an absence, or celebrate it, if you haven't known its presence?

Naturally, theatre is an organisation of symbols, that systemizes, embodies and is a conduit for, in its most serious disposition, the most personal and deepest of human experiences; in that, it is not a simulacrum of the religious ceremony, it is a 'secular' experience of the same thing. In the absence of God, or with a knowledge of its roots and an acceptance of the absence of God, it has the brute spirit of a travesty, in which the travesty is the purer experience, and closer to man. That is the only, very, very careful way, in which I would employ travesty as a description, but within this context alone, its use is helpful, I think, in moving us to appreciate how the persona's rage for being is expressed in Howard's writing with the force of a great deal of

humour and wit; humour is context, and context is what his characters are continually experiencing - and the actors playing the characters are experiencing - the godless context, as we all do, and the fallout from (or, religiously, the fall) of the enlightenment, which is the world we now live in. This, it seems to me, explains how it is an essential component of the religious sense, and the sense and sensation of his whole body of work, that the masks of tragedy and comedy are crushed together in his work. The context is the presence of the spirit, and the absence of God. It is angry, curious, intelligent and liberated laughter.

Because this is a given, we tend not to have discussions of this kind in the rehearsal room. Occasionally, outside of it, more, in conversations I have had with him. Howard may speak splinters of it as brief clues to an actor, to light up a track, but even then quite rarely. People are often very disappointed to hear that, but then, I doubt that The Wooster Group talk about post-modernism very much when they're working.

(McArthur 2013 Appendix, p. 361-2)

As with humanism and the Enlightenment, Barker's theatre is a response to the absence of God in post-Christian Europe, with this context still informing the atheistic spirituality that emerges in its wake. However, the secular Christian idea of progress, a product of the Enlightenment, and the fallout from this ideal, is also rejected in Barker's theatre. According to McArthur, it is modern man's fall from the ideals of both these belief systems – the Christian

God and the Enlightenment – that Barker’s characters and the actors playing the roles express: ‘a mental landscape that is predicated on its absence’. McArthur’s own assessment of his particular relevance as an actor of Barker’s work is that within his own experience is this movement from religious instruction and faith to atheism – but one that also rejects the secular faith in the Enlightenment.²² Although Barker rejects Christian ideals and secular ideas of social progress, the legacy of Christianity can still be observed in his work through his embrace of rebirth from the apocalypse, and such a model encourages emotions and responses that strive to dismantle and transcend their context: ‘It is angry, curious, intelligent and liberated laughter’, rather than seeking reconciliation with tradition. The desire for a new self, driven by anger, curiosity and intelligence, needs to escape the confines of the old self, a self that is structured by normative ideology. This helps to explain the oppositional element to his aesthetic and the need to reject the truths that support the current system. Barker’s spirituality attempts to locate itself in the wake of metaphysical truths and the absence of God, but retains the Christian spiritual belief in rebirth (following the apocalypse) as a means of transcendence from these truths.

In Barker’s comparison between theatre and religion in *Death, The One and the Art of Theatre*, he reveals his Christian bias in his conception of religion in that he presumes religion, by definition, is posited on truth: ‘Let us confess, the art of theatre has many of the characteristics of religion. [...] What distinguishes it from all religion is this, however: that it recoils from truth. It

²² Barker has commented elsewhere on the strong spiritual element in McArthur’s work: ‘an actor of translucent religiosity’ (Barker 2007, p. 72).

repudiates truth as vulgarity' (Barker 2005a, p. 2). This is in contrast to Gray's argument that it is primarily within the Christian tradition of the West, with its inheritance of the Greek logos and post-Christian shifts into reason, humanism and science, that the idea of 'truth' is predominant.

In the final moments of *The Bite of the Night* (1988), a play in which the protagonist, Doctor Savage, goes on a relentless search for truth, the archaeologist Schliemann is conducting a tour of the play's setting, the ruins of a University. The play expresses an awareness that in the West 'Truth' has become God, or perhaps more precisely, and in line with Gray's argument, the preoccupation with Truth at the core of Christianity has continued in the West even after God himself has been dismantled by this process (a God originally supported by this focus on truth):

SCHLIEMANN (*as guide*): The University! What a terrible place this was! The

little rooms suggestive of a gaol, the –

YORAKIM: Erm –

SCHLIEMANN: The corridors of inordinate length where tortured
thinkers thrashed each other in pursuit of a deity
they called Truth

YORAKIM: Erm –

SCHLIEMANN: A deity without shape or form, of course, these were not
primitives – (*He looks at SAVAGE.*) Are you on the tour?
(Barker 1998, p. 117)

Structure and Methodology

This study is, broadly speaking, divided into two sections. Chapters 1 and 2 focus on Barker's work in relation to monotheism and Chapters 3 to 5 primarily engages with Barker's drama and Greek tragedy.

In Chapter 1, the introduction to the study, there is an examination of monotheistic ideas and narratives in Barker's drama and theory, which are for the most part Christian. There is also some consideration of how tragedy interacts, alters and is altered by these ideas in the development of his drama into the Theatre of Catastrophe. In Chapter 2, the consideration of Christian monotheism is further concentrated into the specific influence of Barker's 'theologian' Meister Eckhart and how his *apophatic* mysticism clearly relates to ideas within Barker's theatre, theory and poetry.

In Chapter 3, the notion of the sacred in performance is considered drawing upon definitions from Ralph Yarrow's (ed.) *Sacred Theatre*. With these ideas as a basic model, there is then a consideration of relevant spiritual and religious elements in Greek tragedy that are then related to Barker's own use and engagement with tragic drama. In Chapter 4, there is a concentrated focus on Greek ideas of the afterlife and imagery of the dead, and how they can be seen to correspond with Barker's own preoccupations with this imaginative territory. In Chapter 5, Greek mythic conceptions of the female and the female protagonist in Greek drama are explored in a comparison with the prominent female characters in Barker's drama.

The most obvious danger for this study is that the subject matter of spirituality and anti-rationality could easily lead to an esoteric style of writing. In order to avoid this as much as possible, there is an endeavour to be clear in the definition of terms and concepts and precise in how they are appropriated and/or are visible in Barker's drama.

The key relationships considered here are between tragedy and religion and this becomes dominant in Barker's drama from the mid-1980s when he developed his new form of tragedy the Theatre of Catastrophe. It is therefore mainly from this period onwards that the play-texts analysed are selected, although there is some very brief references to earlier plays from his socialist political phase. Barker's theoretical texts and interviews offer valuable insights into the intentions of his theatre and there is examination and reference to this material, particularly *Death, The One and the Art of Theatre* (2005). Barker's radio drama offers some strong examples of his spiritual tragic approach and so these are also considered; as are examples from his poetry that show clear evidence of his spiritual position, notably the poem 'Sheer Detachment' (2009). The study focuses on Barker's play-texts and characters. There is some engagement with the wider performance text, both in stage and radio productions, but this is secondary to the analysis of text and character.

There has been a conscious decision in this study to engage with ideas of spirituality and religion that predate the modern era and the European Enlightenment rather than more contemporary examples of spirituality or

spiritual theatre, for example the work of Jerzy Grotowski or Antonin Artaud. This has been done to try and unlock some of the traditional Christian and pre-Christian spiritual ideas that find expression in Barker's work, or at least to see if a relationship can be established between the two. Barker himself is clearly interested in pre-Enlightenment myths, narratives and spiritual ideas as a challenge to modern attitudes and so in a sense I am following his lead in looking back to these earlier ideas and concepts. He is critical of a number of dominant strands in contemporary Western thought, for example humanism, socialism, and rationalism, and his drama sets out to attack and unravel through the tragic form the core moral and ideological tenets of Western democracy. Therefore the question that drives this study is that in the wake of these belief systems in Barker's drama, what pre-modern spiritual and religious positions emerge? Reference is made to contemporary debates about religion, for example in the philosophy of Gray and Žižek, but the focus is predominately on pre-modern ideas. The main focus is on Barker's relationship to the religious aspects of monotheism, mysticism, Greek tragedy and the associated myths and rituals. Therefore the study draws upon primary sources on Eckhart and Greek tragedy, supported by secondary sources engaging with theological ideas and, in the case of Greek tragedy, anthropology and ritual. The focus, therefore, is on readings of the primary sources that emphasise religion and spirituality rather than focusing on, say, social and political elements. The intention is to maintain a sharp focus on the spiritual both in the analysis of Barker's work but also in the consideration of the pre-modern sources.

Barker Studies and Sacred Tragedy

The most dominant strand of academic engagement with Barker is a consideration of how his work is postmodern and reflects postmodern philosophy, often with an interest in the political impact of Barker's work. As Elisabeth Angel-Perez observes in a recent chapter on Barker: 'Howard Barker's art of theatre has been rightly described as resolutely postmodern' (Angel-Perez 2013, p. 38). Prominent early examples include Gunther Klotz's article 'Howard Barker: Paradigm of Postmodernism' (1991) and Charles Lamb's detailed book-length engagement with postmodern ideas, specifically the application of Jean Baudrillard's principal of 'seduction' to the Theatre of Catastrophe (Lamb 1997; revised version 2005). This postmodern perspective, including the use of Baudrillard's 'seduction', has been taken up by leading Barker academic David Ian Rabey who has written extensively on his work (notably two book-length studies 1989 and 2009).²³ Because this theoretical territory has been so extensively covered, this thesis focuses on different and largely unexplored approaches to Barker's work: the analysis of his work in relation to aspects of pre-modern theology, spirituality and myth; specifically looking at Christian mystical theology and Attic tragedy as a religious form. Rather than view the spiritual and religious ideas of the past as part of the ideological framework Barker is dismantling, I am instead looking to see what has been appropriated from this spirituality, or at least, in some instances, establish a parallel with pre-modern spirituality.

²³ Rabey expands upon Lamb's analysis of Barker in relation to this postmodern theory of seduction in 2006.

Although this study does not focus on postmodern philosophy and culture in relation to Barker's work, there is particular and somewhat unavoidable engagement with two fields that relate to postmodern thought. The first of these is the anthropological exploration of ritual and performance (for example Victor Turner) that has influenced Performance Studies, and which provides a very useful starting point to approach spirituality in classical Greece and in theatre today. This ritual spiritual approach has been effectively developed and used in the study of modern theatre in Ralph Yarrow's (ed.) *Sacred Theatre*, which is considered in Chapter 3 of this thesis. However, as Rabey observes:

Sacred Theatre [...] promisingly initiates consideration of theatre which may specifically 'generate or open up something which isn't definable through conventional categories' [...] Whilst Lavery's writings on the destabilising presence of death [...] suggest a potential contact point with Barker's *DTOAT*, it is disappointing that the volume goes on to focus on Stoppard and Pinter rather than consider the more pertinent example of Barker, David Rudkin, Peter Barnes or Ed Thomas.²⁴

(Rabey 2009, p. 267)

This study applies these ideas to the analysis of spirituality in Barker, looking at ritual elements in his drama and the concept of the sacred and its connection with the destabilising presence of death.

²⁴ *DTOAT: Death, The One and the Art of Theatre*.

The other point of contact with postmodernism and the focus of this thesis is an area that a number of Barker scholars have engaged with: the influence of the philosophy of Nietzsche on Barker's work. Nietzsche's ideas have had a clear influence on Barker and the relationship is reflected on in Barnett (2001), Rabey (2009), Tomlin (2000; 2006) and Zimmermann (1999). In Rabey's chapter 'Wrestling with God' (2009) he considers the idea of God in a number of Barker plays as a representation of established morality that the characters 'kill', describing these actions as those of a (female) Nietzschean Übermensch, moving beyond good and evil (Rabey 2009, p. 171-172). This idea is drawn upon in Chapter 5 of this thesis. My main interest in Nietzsche is not so much his relationship to philosophy and postmodernism but in his attempts early in his writings to express the spirituality of Greek tragedy. Zimmermann specifically focuses on Attic tragedy and Nietzsche (and Aristotle) and Barker and there is detailed engagement with this study in Chapter 3.

As well as looking at Zimmermann's observations on Barker, there is also consideration of Rosalind Reedman's M. Phil thesis (1991) entitled 'Classical Tragic Vision in the work of Howard Barker'. Reedman's study of the relationship between Greek tragic drama and Barker's theatre in the 1980s effectively examines key texts from this significant period of change for Barker and how his shift towards the Theatre of Catastrophe generated clear parallels in form and content with ancient tragedy. Of particular interest for this study are Reedman's observations on the spiritual and religious connections

between the two types of tragedy, which she examines in relation to Euripides' *Bacchae* and Barker's *The Last Supper*. These ideas are also considered in Chapter 3.

Chapter 2

Making Faith from God's Absence

Mysticism, Meister Eckhart and the Art of Theatre

Barker's philosophical master was Adorno, a Marxist and materialist until he came to speak of art... and his theologian was Meister Eckhart, who knew God was not there and made faith from His absence... Barker learned from them to speak of the unspeakable and to look where nothing seemed to be...

(Barker 2007, p. 116)

In *A Style and Its Origins*, Howard Barker mentions two important influences on his thinking. The influence of the twentieth century German Marxist, Theodor Adorno, on Barker, is well known and has already been the subject of academic study (Gritzner 2005). However, the influence of the German mystical theologian, Meister Eckhart, is more surprising for two reasons. Firstly, Eckhart's sermons and treatises were written in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and, therefore, one would assume, would have been in many ways outmoded by more recent theology. Secondly, it is initially somewhat surprising that a man who is clearly an atheist himself (as this quotation very strongly suggests) would possess a theologian at all. What is also interesting to observe in this quotation is that both these thinkers appear to be driven by and grounded in an ideological framework. Even if both

thinkers present ideas that can be transposed to a variant belief system or worldview, they still acknowledge a level of grounding in both Marxism/Christianity. It is significant that Barker chooses to be influenced by two thinkers who are functioning, to an extent, within an ideological system when his work so determinedly examines territory beyond any ideological matrix (or at least continually gestures towards this territory).

Barker's definition of these two thinkers reflects his own now familiar rejection of ideology. In 1988, a year in which Barker's Theatre of Catastrophe was still emerging as a new genre of tragedy, Barker rejected his previous ideological affiliation with the left, writing:

I have come to realise, no doubt belatedly, that socialism, too, has the power to stunt life. I no longer look at the world in terms of class conflict. I would now identify ideology as the enemy.

(Barker in Marks 1988)

This identification of 'ideology as the enemy' allows us to consider the meaning of the 2007 quotation in a little more detail. It seems to mean that what is of value to Barker in Adorno is his *accurate* reflections on art despite his mistaken Marxism; whilst Eckhart is valuable because of his ability to generate faith for Christianity, paradoxically, on what Barker assumes is an inner atheism.

Having noted this parallel, this chapter will focus exclusively on illuminating Eckhart's influence on Barker and how his theology functions effectively, at times, despite the (apparent) actual absence of God. It is important to note the limitations of transposing Eckhartian theology to a secular or at least post-Christian culture, but it is instructive to tease out the parallels between Eckhart's Christian philosophy and Barker's theatrical practice.

Atheism, Mysticism and Barker

The attraction of Eckhart's theology to the non-theistic worldview seems to lie in the very strong mystical element in his thought and the specific type of theology he adopts. Meister Eckhart was a prominent and respected theologian who was born around 1260 and died in 1328. In the later stages of his career his mystical and radical approach to theology and preaching eventually led to accusations of heresy. Although he challenged and defended himself from such claims, in the year following his death, 1329, Eckhart was charged and condemned for seventeen articles that were judged to 'contain the error or stain of heresy' (Eckhart 1981, p. 80).²⁵ One such article made the assertion that man and God are, or could become, 'one':

²⁵ In 1326 Eckhart was asked to respond to forty-nine articles 'taken from books, remarks and sermons ascribed to Meister Eckhart that seem to some erroneous, or what is worse, to smack of heresy' (Colledge and McGinn 1981, p 71). Perhaps Barker's article 'Forty-nine Asides for a Tragic Theatre' (1986) is a numerical reference to this document; Barker very subtly relating his challenge to contemporary theatre to the perceived challenge to medieval theology of these articles from Eckhart.

We shall all be transformed totally into God and changed into him. [...] I am so changed into him that he makes me his one existence, and not just similar. By the living God it is true that there is no distinction there.

(Eckhart 1981, p. 78)

This journey towards oneness with God can be seen as a defining feature of Eckhart's *apophatic* or negative theology, a theology that argues that God is so far beyond all human conceptual systems that he will always be unknowable to humanity, at least in any actual *form*. Such an approach is one of the possible strands of Christian mystical theology and its intention is to achieve direct mystical union with God. Oliver Davies in his study of medieval German mysticism, *God Within*, defines the term:²⁶

[It] aims specifically to transcend images and to enter the 'darkness' and the 'nothingness' of the Godhead itself in a journey which leads the soul to the shedding of all that is superfluous, contrary or unequal to God as he is in his most essential Being. The technical word for this is 'apophatic' [...] It is also known in Latin as the *via negativa* or the 'negative way'.

(Davies 1988, p. 4)

²⁶ Davies (1988) identifies three strands of Christian mysticism: 1) Mysticism of the sacraments and of the liturgy 2) Christocentric spirituality, which is based on imagery and revelation and 3) *apophatic* mysticism.

Eckhart uses this term 'Godhead' for the true nature of the divine that lies beyond all human form. Even the persons of the trinity are superseded by the Godhead in that the Father, Son and Spirit still maintain aspects of a human perspective on the true Oneness of God beyond form: 'The divine nature is One, and each Person is both One and the same One as God's nature' (Eckhart trans. Davies 1994, p. 104). Having identified Eckhart as an *apophatic* theologian it begins to explain Barker's interest in his particular mode of thought. A mysticism that aims to move beyond images and forms into a realm of nothingness has clear connections with an art form that strives to move beyond the stunting effects of the subjectivisation of any ideological apparatus. Both are attempting to shed themselves of the (apparent) constraints of the forms and concepts of the normative.

Eckhart's *apophatic* theology also suggests the key reason for his influence on various thinkers of the increasingly post-Christian and secular world of the nineteenth and twentieth century, where the concept of a personal God was becoming ever more problematic. Eckhart scholar Reiner Schurmann highlights his considerable nineteenth century impact:

German philosophy of the nineteenth century adopted Eckhart as an ancestor and called him the "father of speculation" (Joseph Bach, 1864). Hegel regarded Eckhart as the reconciler of faith and science; Schopenhauer saw him as the founder of transcendental idealism.

(Schurmann 2001, p. xi)

Theologian Stephen Bullivant examines the impact of Eckhart on significant and surprisingly diverse figures in the modern era, including Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch, musician John Cage and the Nazi politician Alfred Rosenberg (Bullivant 2009). Bullivant notes Eckhart's puzzling ability to inspire such divergent and non-Christian thinkers and artists in the following terms:

[T]here is very little that connects Hegel, Rosenberg, Bloch and Cage – except of course, their enthusiasm for Meister Eckhart. [...] It is the *sheer diversity* of Eckhart's modern reception that I have tried to convey in this paper. In fact, it is quite difficult to think of many comparable figures who have been invoked and embraced across such a wide spectrum.

(Bullivant 2009, p. 18-19, emphasis his)

The most well known influence of Eckhart on twentieth century thought arrives via the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, whose debt to Eckhart has been explored in detail by John D. Caputo (1978). More recently, and shifting our focus towards theatre, Jerzy Grotowski's 1990 essay 'The Performer' contains an extract from Eckhart entitled 'The Inner Man'. In this essay Grotowski is exploring the possibility of the performer breaking through to an essential state of being, 'something which is no longer linked to beginnings but – if I

dare say – *to the beginning?*' (Grotowski in Wolford 1997, p. 379.)²⁷ He ends the short essay with an extract from Eckhart that communicates this similar desire for transcendent breakthrough: 'In the breakthrough – there, I am above all creatures, neither God, nor creature; but I am what I was, what I should remain now and forever (Eckhart in Wolford 1997, p. 379). In this short quotation it is possible to see aspects of Eckhart's thought that attract a post-Christian culture. Within his thought there is the strong suggestion of a transcendence and unity with the Godhead that seems to place man at one with God and nature to such an extent, and with such an eradication of any knowable God persona, that Eckhart's perspective can be interpreted as pantheistic or even atheistic, hence Barker's suggestion that Eckhart knew God did not exist.²⁸

The suggestion that Eckhart was in fact an atheist/pantheist is not unique to Barker and studies have been written that connect Eckhart's thought with atheistic systems of Eastern thought (notably Zen Buddhism).²⁹ To examine the possible relationship between mysticism and atheism it is useful to consider Schopenhauer's atheistic perspective on this aspect of religious experience:

²⁷ Grotowski is of course well known for his *via negativa* or 'negative way' as an approach to performance. The actor strips away the social self in order to reveal a state of pure impulse in rehearsal, 'Ours then is a *via negativa* – not a collection of skills but an eradication of blocks.' (Grotowski 1997, p. 31)

²⁸ Eckhart is considered by some to be a pantheist. For example Paul Harrison (Harrison 1996).

²⁹ For example Brian J. Pierce's *We Walk The Path Together: Learning from Thich Nhat Hanh and Meister Eckhart* (2005).

We see all religions at their highest point end in mysticism and mysteries, that is to say, in darkness and veiled obscurity. These really indicate merely a blank spot for knowledge, the point where all knowledge necessarily ceases. Hence for thought this can be expressed only by negations, but for sense-perception it is indicated by symbolic signs, in temples by dim light and silence

(Schopenhauer 1958, p. 610)

Schopenhauer regarded Eckhart as a powerful expression of this journey, even describing him as 'the father of German Mysticism' (p. 612). It is also useful to consider Schopenhauer's challenge to pantheism in relation to Barker's appropriation of religious and theological language. Schopenhauer highlights the proximity of pantheism to atheism:

My chief objection to pantheism is that it signifies nothing. To call the world God is not to explain it but merely to enrich the language with a superfluous synonym for the word world. [...] It would never occur to anyone taking an unprejudiced view of the world to regard it as God.

(Schopenhauer 1970, p. 217)

Barker's regular use of the word 'God' in his plays, despite God's apparent non-existence, can be seen to function in a similar way. Having stripped away the normative moral presuppositions (associated with humanism and

democracy) on which many Western people are dependant, Barker can avoid the expression of simply a blank, mechanistic world through the 'enrichment' of the word 'God' and other associated language (e.g. 'soul'). Barker can thus embrace a level of irrationalism and avoid a complete reduction to a mechanistic world, or indeed simply nothingness. Richard Dawkins, citing Carl Sagan, comments on the enrichment religious language offers to the pantheist conception of the universe when he writes: 'Carl Sagan put it well: '... if by "God" one means the set of physical laws that govern the universe, then clearly there is such a God. This God is emotionally unsatisfying ... it does not make much sense to pray to the law of gravity' (Dawkins 2007, p. 40).

By drawing upon Schopenhauer's description of mysticism we can begin to tease out similarities in Barker's writing and theatre with the mystical religious response to reality. For example, a relentless engagement with knowledge and truth that ends in the oblivion of all meaning can be traced in Barker's theoretical writings from 1986, when he began his new direction of tragic theatre. At this early stage he recognised the difficulty of such an endeavour writing that: 'Some people want to know pain. There is no truth on the cheap' (Barker 1989, p. 17). From this time, there are many examples in Barker's writing (including his mention and description of Eckhart) that reflect Barker's *apophatic* tendencies and desire to dismantle normative ideas. This example is from the second prologue in his 1985 play *The Bite of the Night*:

It is not true that that everyone wants to be

Entertained

Some want the pain of unknowing

Shh

Shh

Shh

The ecstasy of not knowing for once

The sheer suspension of not knowing

[...]

Should we not

I know it's impossible but you still try

Not reach down beyond the known for once

(Barker 1998, p. 6-7, emphasis his)

In *A Style and Its Origins* Barker expresses aspects of himself that, from an early time in his life, are striving for something higher than normative reality and therefore, like the mystic, motivate a search for higher truths:

He thought his time sordid and suffered an emotional and physical distaste for it, preserving his ecstasies for the spiritual and sexual life he created for himself. He craved solitude. He was thin-skinned. Neither quality befits a man of the theatre, where bruising is routine. So

he invented a method, as an alternative to flight or suicide. This book might show how that method came to be.

(Barker 2007, p. 9)

The text of *Death, The One* is a series of thoughts expressed in short poetic sections and aphorisms. The sections explore one of two themes: either reflecting on death and theatre or, and in more narrative form, examining the writer's (fictional) engagement with 'the one', a female who clearly obsesses him. This narrative element of the text presents a somewhat dream-like, episodic meditation on death and desire for 'the one', the subject of death connecting both strands. The style of the text shows how Barker's poetic response to existence has more fully penetrated his theoretical writing, pushing his expression ever further from the dominant secular rationalism of Western culture.

At the risk of reducing and diminishing a complex text, the central argument can be partially summed up by this extract:

Very great plays yield no meanings. They move like the mouths of the dead on the banks of the Styx. "Meaningful" plays are soiled/spoiled by their meanings. What is the *meaning* of death?

(Barker 2005a, p. 20, emphasis his)

This refusal to accept any 'meaning' from the dominant values in British theatrical texts continues Barker's now long standing confrontation with democratic and rational humanism. We can safely assume it is British humanist theatre and a democratic focus on accessibility that are the soiled/spoiled meaningful plays under attack here.³⁰ Barker's continual attack on, and dismantling of, the apparently 'meaningful' forms and ideas of rational humanism has a strong similarity of method and outcome with the *apophatic* mystic's journey, a journey that moves away from the more orthodox structures of Christianity to 'the point where all knowledge necessarily ceases' (Schopenhauer 1958, p. 610). We can already see that from this brief overview of Barker's theoretical writing it now seems less surprising that he chooses to adopt as his theologian the *apophatic* mystic Meister Eckhart.

Eckhart's Theology

Let us now consider Eckhart's mystical theology in more detail, in an attempt to uncover further, subtler and more specific similarities with the plays and theories of Howard Barker. Eckhart's theology centres on the concepts of the Godhead or the One, and the spark of the soul. Related ideas of interest are the eternal 'now', living 'without why', and 'detachment' as the highest virtue.

For Eckhart, the Godhead or One is the true state of the divine that lies beyond the spatio-temporal world of humanity and creation. The Godhead is differentiated from simply 'God' due to its greater distance from human

³⁰ *Arguments for a Theatre* often refers to humanist theatre as a dominant and restrictive form and argues that the influential view that 'Art must be understood' (Barker 1997, p. 71) now needs to be challenged.

conception: it is beyond any form. Therefore, the position critiqued in Eckhart's writings is the perspective of the creature, man, trying and failing to fully comprehend and formalise the Godhead:³¹

So all creatures speak of 'God'. And why do they not speak of the Godhead? All that is in the Godhead is one, and we cannot speak of it. God is active and does things, while the Godhead does nothing, for there is no activity in it, nor has it ever sought any activity.

(Eckhart in Davies 1988, p. 46)

In this oneness all multiplicity ends, and it seems to be the goal of Eckhartian mysticism to move spiritually beyond multiplicity and into this oneness. The Godhead is described as the only actual 'being' and, therefore, Eckhart concludes that the created world is in fact 'pure nothing' (and this was another article that was scrutinised for heresy): 'All creatures are one pure nothing. I do not say that they are a little something or anything, but they are pure nothing' (Eckhart 1981, p. 80).

However, within the human soul is a 'spark' of the Godhead that, like the Godhead itself, is beyond the spatio-temporal universe of creation. It is this 'spark' that the Eckhartian mystic uncovers by discarding the outward illusions of the forms of self (products and distractions of the created world) and thus enters into the part of the soul that is 'uncreated' and *is* the Godhead. Eckhart

³¹ Eckhart's ability to think through and dismantle the limitations of the human perspective and therefore open up the dizzying terrain and possibility of a God perspective, may well explain the epithet he was ascribed in his own time: 'the man from whom God hid nothing'.

uses the same *apophatic* theological language that he uses to describe the Godhead, i.e. defining something by what it is not, to describe this aspect of the soul:

I have sometimes said that there is a power in the mind, the only one that is free. [...] It is free of all names and devoid of all forms, entirely bare and free, as void and free as God is in himself. It is perfect unity and simplicity as God is unity and simplicity, so that in no way can one peer into it.

(Eckhart in Schurmann 2001, p. 7)

We have, therefore, in Eckhart's theology two voids: the created world is pure nothing because it is not God, who is the only actuality; and the One or Godhead (and also the spark within the soul of man) is void of form but is in fact the source of all things.

By achieving this state of oneness beyond multiplicity, the mystic enters the eternal now, the eternal realm of the Godhead, and thus exists in an infinite present:

And the now in which I am speaking are all equal in God and are nothing but one sole and same now [...] He dwells in a single now which is in all time and unceasingly new.³²

(Eckhart in Schurmann 2001, p. 6)

Within this 'now' the mystic is able to 'live without why' in that once union with the Godhead is achieved then questions of purpose become irrelevant, as the pressure of the past and future dissolve in the eternal nothingness of the Godhead. Eckhart is keen to emphasise that any suggestion of self-directed purpose, even when it is supposedly 'for God', is to some extent self-conscious and not truly living 'without why' and therefore not a true union with the Godhead in/as the now:³³

God's ground is my ground and my ground is God's ground. [...] You should work all your works out of this innermost ground without why. Indeed I say, so long as you work for the kingdom of heaven, or for God, or for your internal happiness and thus something outward, all is not well with you.

(Eckhart in Caputo 1978, p. 100)

³² A bestselling contemporary mystical text *The Power of NOW* (1999) has an obvious and acknowledged connection to Meister Eckhart's ideas. In fact the author, Eckhart Tolle, may well have changed his original name Ulrich Tolle due to Eckhart's influence. In *The Power of NOW* Tolle writes of his mystical transformation, describing a realm similar to the Godhead/spark of the soul: 'I learned to go into that inner timeless and deathless realm that I had originally perceived as a void and remain fully conscious' (Tolle, 1999, p. 3).

³³ Here Eckhart is employing another familiar metaphor for the spark of the soul: 'ground' (*grunt*)

The pathway towards this state of oneness involves one of Eckhart's most famous and influential concepts, detachment as described below:

And so God has in His first eternal look regarded all things; and God does nothing new, since everything is worked out beforehand

[...]

Consequently, should a man wish to become like to god, insofar as a creature can have any likeness with God, then this can only come about through detachment.

(Eckhart in Caputo 1978, p. 12-13)

In a sermon devoted to this concept, 'On Detachment', Meister Eckhart examines in detail this influential and important theological idea, which is no less than his approach to life and the solution to the challenge of human existence. Eckhart argues that 'detachment' is the highest of all virtues: 'If I regard all virtues, I find not one so much without shortcomings and so leading us to God as detachment' (Eckhart 1981, p. 286). For Eckhart it is superior even to the conventional Christian focus on love: 'And yet I praise detachment above all love'. His argument in favour of detachment over the other virtues is that the other virtues restrict the relationship to God because of their relationship to earthly things:

I praise detachment above love because love compels me to suffer all things for God's love, yet detachment leads me to where I am receptive to nothing except God.

[...]

I praise detachment above all humility, and that is because, although there may be humility without detachment, there cannot be perfect detachment without perfect humility, because perfect humility proceeds from the annihilation of self. Now detachment approaches so closely to nothingness that there can be nothing between perfect detachment and nothingness.

(Eckhart 1981, p. 286)

This argument for detachment's superiority is therefore informed by Eckhart's theological mystical objective of immersion in the eternal now of the Godhead. All other virtues, to varying extents, tie the human being to the spatio-temporality of creation. To enter the pure nothingness of the Godhead you must unravel all attachments so that you are also effectively nothing. This nothingness, according to Eckhart, is in fact the only true *being* and any focus elsewhere (and not completely informed by this unity) is a focus on the illusion of substance that *is* the created world. Eckhart uses the metaphor of the mirror, as Eckhart scholar Burkhard Hasebrink observes, to explain his theory of being and the relationship between God and his creation: 'The image in the mirror receives its being only from the mirrored object. When the latter is moved away, the image disappears' (Hasebrink 2004, p. 3). Though it cannot

be formalised in any way, for Eckhart the Godhead is the only being, and to encounter it, all else must be dismantled.

Eckhart's The One

Eckhart's other term for the Godhead, 'the One', is of particular interest with regard to Barker in that he uses the same phrase in the title of *Death, The One and the Art of Theatre*. The term arrives with Eckhart after a long and evolving tradition in which Judaeo-Christian and Greek philosophical thought merge in their definition of the absolute. The term the One or Monad initially derives from Greek philosophy and the term goes back to thinkers that predate Socrates. The idea of Oneness can be compared to two other common ontological perspectives on reality: dualism and pluralism. Rather than seeing the world as a dualistic division of mind (spirit) and body (material), or the division of reality into a plurality of distinct forms/things, monism argues that essentially all is one.³⁴

With regard to Eckhart's use of the term, it is useful to briefly consider the evolution of the concept from Plato to Plotinus, which also includes an evolution of the *apophatic* strand of monism. Andrew Louth offers a concise overview of the concept of the One and its development from Platonism

³⁴ According to the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* the term 'Monism' can apply to 1) 'any theory denying the duality of matter and mind' or more specifically 2) 'the doctrine that only one ultimate principal or being exists' (1996). The existence of the divine is therefore not itself necessary to a monist worldview, but when it is it is by definition everything. This is why Eckhart will come to talk of everything that is not divine as 'nothingness'. Richard Dawkins provides a useful example of a secular or material monist: 'A dualist acknowledges a fundamental distinction between matter and mind. A monist, by contrast, believes that mind is a manifestation of matter – material in a brain or perhaps a computer – and cannot exist apart from matter' (Dawkins 1996, p. 209).

through to Neoplatonism and early Christian metaphysics in his study *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition* (2006):

In Plato himself there is no clear and unequivocal concept of God at all. The summit of the soul's quest, the Idea of the Good and the Beautiful, is certainly the highest and most ultimate being and gives form and meaning to everything else. But whether one can call this God is uncertain. For, to call it God is to suggest that it is some sort of personal, even if supra-personal, being; and it is not clear if Plato's Good is this. With Plotinus we can more obviously regard the One as God – though he does not characteristically use *theos* of the One. Even so, we have to recognise that for Plotinus the One transcends any personal categories; it is unconscious even of itself, let alone of anything outside of itself. It is the object of the soul's quest; but it is not actively involved in that quest.

(Louth 2006, p. 190)

According to Louth, the philosopher Plotinus (c. 204/205 AD – 270 AD) is the first key advocate of Neoplatonism and a 'supreme exponent of ... mystical philosophy' (Louth, 2006: 35) and Plotinus had a clear influence on Meister Eckhart's thought (Louth 2006, p. 35). However, what separates Plotinus from Eckhart is that in Eckhart's experience of the One you remain *in* the world whereas for Plotinus it is an ecstatic ascent from which you must eventually descend:

Many times it has happened: lifted out of the body into myself; becoming external to all other things and self-centered; beholding a marvellous beauty; then, more-than ever, assured of community with the loftiest order; enacting the noblest life, acquiring identity with the divine [...] I ask myself how it happens that I can now be descending, and how did the Soul ever enter into my body, the soul which, even within the body, is the high thing it has shown itself to be

(Plotinus 1991, p. 334)

This state of ecstasy in Plotinus' encounter with the One also separates it from the Eckhartian experience, which seems to have reduced or even removed this particular mystical element in its theology. According to Hasebrink, 'Eckhart never talks of ecstatic experience or divine visions' (Hasebrink 2004, p. 7). This is also a clear difference between Eckhart and Barker, for as we will see, for Barker, the encounter with the One is defined by an overwhelming sexual ecstasy.³⁵

Louth's study argues that the Christian mysticism of the early Church Fathers is distinct from Neoplatonism due to its engagement with a God that is personal: 'for the Father's God is a Person' (2006, p. 190), and, therefore, we can assume this means a relationship between two separate subjectivities. In

³⁵ According to E.R. Dodds, it is Plotinus who instigated the relationship between ecstasy and the One, 'Nowhere is the individuality of his genius more manifest than in the doctrine of ecstasy, which for him is the psychological correlate of the doctrine of the One' (Dodds 1928, p. 140); so in a sense Barker is re-establishing this connection but with 'sexual' ecstasy.

Eckhart's theology, therefore, we see the possible re-emergence of the Neoplatonic emphasis on God's transcendence of personal categories to a more impersonal notion of the One. In Eckhart, the experience of the true Godhead seems to be a reconnection to the One in/as the spark of the soul rather than an encounter between two 'persons' (at least in its purest state). As mentioned earlier, the Godhead/One transcends the Persons of the trinity, as it does the illusion of all distinct objects:

The divine nature is One, and each Person is both One and the same One as God's nature. The distinction between essence and existence is apprehended as One and is One. Distinction is born, exists and is possessed only where this Oneness no longer obtains. Therefore it is in the Oneness that God is found, and they who would find God must themselves become One. [...] In distinction we shall find neither Oneness, essence, God, rest, blessedness or contentment. Be One then, so that you shall find God! And truly, if you are properly One, then you shall remain One in the midst of distinction, and the multifold will be One for you and will not be able to impede you in any way. The One remains equally One in a thousand times a thousand stones as it does in four stones, and a thousand is just as certainly a simple number as four is a number.

(Eckhart 1994, p. 104)

This quotation is a very clear example of Eckhart's monist position. Robert K. C. Forman discusses this position when examining the use of language used by Eckhart in his interpretation of St Paul's encounter with God:³⁶

As we have said, Paul was locked in the embrace of the Godhead. While this term grammatically sounds like an object, what kind of an object might it be? The Godhead, you will recall, was God beyond God, utterly without numeration or distinguishing marks. If one were to encounter something without distinctions, then there would be nothing by means of which one might distinguish the subject from the object.

(Forman 1991, p. 109)

Eckhart's radical *apophaticism*, although *within* the Christian tradition, is in some ways a movement back towards an earlier and more Neoplatonic conception of God(head). The concept was initially introduced to Christianity by the anonymous theologian Pseudo-Dionysus the Areopagite in the fifth or sixth century. Dionysus is an early example of the convergence of Platonic and Christian thought and both Plato and Dionysus are philosophical influences that Eckhart himself acknowledges and makes reference to at various points in his texts.³⁷ The language Dionysus employs regarding the

³⁶ Forman notes that in the section he is analysing, Eckhart is probably referring to 2 *Corinthians* 12: 2.

³⁷ Bernard McGinn (2001) has counted four named references to Plato (p. 169) and sixteen named references to Pseudo-Dionysus (p. 167). Žižek considers Eckhart's relationship to Plato: "When Eckhart writes that anyone who wants to receive Jesus must become as free of all representations "as he was when he was not yet," before his birth on earth, he is, of course, referring to Plato, to the Platonic notion of the soul prior to its bodily dwelling; however, in contrast to Plato, this pre-existence does not involve a soul which, uncontaminated by the images of sensory things, beholds eternal ideas, but one which

conception (or impossibility of conceiving) the One shows definitive connections with Eckhart's example cited above. This quotation from Dionysus' *The Divine Names* also offers a useful definition of the Neoplatonic-Christian usage of the term:

The name "One" means that God is uniquely all things through the transcendence of one unity and that he is the cause of all without ever departing from that oneness. [...] The One cause of all things is not one of the many things in the world but actually precedes oneness and multiplicity and indeed defines oneness and multiplicity [...] Without the One there is no multiplicity, just as one precedes all multiplied number. And, then, if one thinks of all things as united in all things, the totality of things must be presumed to be one.

(Pseudo-Dionysus 1987, p. 128)

The mathematical model for understanding the One, in which, for Eckhart, the One remains One in four or a thousand times a thousand stones, appears to be a less abstract example of Dionysus' argument that the One, like the number one, precedes all multiplied numbers. Dionysus, like Eckhart, goes to great lengths to emphasise the infinite gulf between the One and man's language and conception of God. He even highlights the inadequacy of the favoured term 'One' itself:

purifies itself of all "things," ideas included' (and including God himself as a Thing)' (Žižek 2009, p. 36).

It cannot be spoken of and it cannot be grasped by understanding. [...] It cannot be grasped by understanding since it is neither knowledge nor truth. [...] It is neither one nor oneness, divinity nor goodness [...] It falls neither within the predicate of nonbeing nor of being. Existing beings do not know it as it actually is and it does not know them as they are.

(Pseudo-Dionysus 1987, p. 141)

This extreme negation again highlights the striking similarity between mystical *apophatic* theology and worldviews that have no God persona: e.g. atheism and pantheism. Returning to contemporary philosophical ideas, the process of total negation has a parallel and influence on post-structuralism's continuous negation and ultimate acknowledgement and embrace of undecidability; a dominant movement (at least in academic circles) within the cultural context that Barker's theatre emerged. Of particular interest is Derrida's philosophical process of deconstruction.³⁸

Derrida's philosophy owes much to the Platonic-Christian movement of *apophatic* theology, including indirect reference to Eckhart via Derrida's use of Eckhart's *apophatic* phrase 'neither this, nor that'. This makes Derrida an interesting point of focus when considering Barker's theology. As Toby Foshay points out in his essay on Derrida and *apophaticism*, Derrida's deconstruction is often seen as a contemporary form of the negative theology

³⁸ Charles Lamb (1997 and 2005) has connected Barker's ideas to the postmodern and post-structural movement, including reference to the ideas of Derrida (Lamb 1997, p. 35-38).

tradition, a label Derrida himself rejects. Foshay notes how Derrida was wary of this problem even early in deconstruction's conception:

The detours, locutions, and syntax in which I will often have to take recourse will resemble those of negative theology, occasionally even to the point of being indistinguishable from negative theology ... And yet those aspects of *différance* ... are not theological, not even in the order of the most negative of negative theologies, which are always concerned with disengaging a superessentiality beyond the finite categories of essence and existence.

(Derrida in Foshay 1992, p. 82)

This arguable difference between Derrida and negative theology is useful in highlighting the difference between Barker and Eckhart. For both Derrida and Barker there is no, or at least not necessarily, 'superessentiality' beyond the dismantled forms; the deconstructed language does not, or probably does not, reveal what was previously known as God. This examination of Eckhart's concepts has shown how his radical *apophatic* mystical theology of the One is the product of the merging of Neoplatonic and Christian ideas. It has also been noted how the tradition and methods of post-structuralism, and specifically Derrida, have clear connections with this movement, although the absence of belief in a superessentiality 'beyond' marks a crucial separation with its previous use in the pre-modern world.

Barker's 'the one'

Although Barker makes only a brief direct reference to Eckhart, it is possible to find evidence of his influence elsewhere on Barker's writings. The *apophatic* strand of Eckhart's thinking has been the most straightforward to identify. The more specific Eckhartian concepts are not always so immediately apparent in Barker's work, requiring a degree of extrapolation; this is probably due to their necessary transformation into Barker's atheistic mode of thought. There are two terms of Eckhart's theology that also appear and are highlighted by Barker in his writings: 'the one' and 'detachment'. The first of these, of course, is in the title and subject matter of Barker's semi-theoretical text: *Death, The One and the Art of Theatre*.

On picking up Barker's text *Death, The One* you might initially assume that 'the one' refers not to a theological, but to the more obvious and familiar idea of the singularity of the ideal partner in popular expression; who by definition is the only human being uniquely suited to you. However, Barker is very quick to make it clear that this is not his usage:

If, conversely, the loved one need not have been the *only one* (a nauseating exclusivity according to democratic ideology, where absolute interchangeability is the rule) but rather the world is profuse with possibility, the arbitrary becomes the excellent, a condition of luxury.

(Barker 2005a, p. 10, emphasis his)

If for Barker, 'the one' of the title is not the *only one* then in what other sense can this person be 'the one' or have 'one-ness'?³⁹ With the normative contemporary usage ruled out it makes sense instead to search for parallels in Eckhart's (Barker's theologian) definition and use of the term 'the One'.

For Barker, 'the one' seems to be a female that generates an all-consuming desire and, therefore, like the divine becomes the object of the soul's quest. The quest begins when the writer becomes aware that normative notions of compatibility of 'the loved one' are inadequate and deceptive:

The loved one shared all his emotions and all his attitudes. [...] If anyone was *the one*, it was she. Yet for all the accord that the loved one represented, he was aware she was not *the one* at all. He sensed, with a terrible foreboding, that mutuality was not a sign of *the one*, that any amount of agreement was *beside the point*, as a marching and chanting crowd is also a symbol of frailty and deception...

(Barker 2005a, p. 20, emphasis his)

We can note in this extract Barker's familiar desire to search beyond the apparent truths of democratic society, frail truths that are represented by the

³⁹ Barker uses both the terms 'the one' and 'one-ness' in the text: 'The evidence of *one-ness* lay precisely in the vehemence with which she tried to demonstrate she was not *the one* at all ...' (Barker, emphasis his, 2005a, p. 47)

'marching and chanting crowd'.⁴⁰ This journey to search beyond the obvious reflects a journey not dissimilar to the search for the Godhead beyond orthodoxy. Like the journey to the abyss of the Godhead, the author finally reaches the oblivion of meaning and therefore form, 'the end of the world':

The one came to exemplify all that could no longer be evaded, she was therefore a *recognition* that what had seemed escapable was not, and as such, was relief from an enervating and pointless struggle. *The one* was a joyous yielding to the determinant facts, in other words, *the end of the world*. In this she possessed an awesome familiarity ...

(Barker 2005a, p. 66, emphasis his)

This continual meditation on the collapse of all meaning in *Death, The One* helps to generate a world view that encourages an end to the search for meaning, and therefore living in the 'without why' of Eckhart (but admittedly one which is not expressed in the decidedly more tranquil language Eckhart employs):

Tragedy is *hope-less*. Death is *hope-less*. Neither is bereft of hope, rather they have *dispensed* with hope. They exist in a vortex, not of *hopelessness* ('the situation is hopeless' always contains the plea for a miracle) but a vortex without categories either of optimism or pessimism. Who would say tragedy is pessimistic? Only a fool, for the

⁴⁰ Often presented in his plays by a chorus who threaten to overwhelm the individuality of the protagonist, e.g. **The Masses** in Barker's *The Last Supper* (1988).

tragic gesture demands the abolition of pessimism at the outset, it identifies it as a *redundancy*, along with its opposite.

Hope-lessness is the point of departure, not a closure but a new condition ...

(Barker 2005a, p. 32, emphasis his)

For Barker, therefore, the configuration of this female or females as 'the one' seems to be due to their own awareness or at least apparent awareness of *hope-lessness*, which then acts as a window into and then doorway to the abyss: the oblivion of meaning for the author/desirer, re-orientating them to the 'now' 'without why'. Barker also describes his movement towards the idea of *hope-lessness* in *A Style and Its Origins* and how it enabled him to traverse normal moral and ideological perspectives: 'DISCARDING HOPE from his ethical system enabled Barker to discover tragedy ... he became *hope-less* [...] to be *hope-less* enabled him to excavate where others might have hung back' (Barker 2007, p. 99). This also shows the clear relationship between *hope-lessness* and the *apophatic approach*.

If Barker is correct about Eckhart knowing God is 'not there' then we can see how both thinkers have expressed their encounter with the abyss of meaning, and the emergence of the present without why/purpose, in their own cultural ideological matrix. For Eckhart, living in a time where Christianity unquestionably predominated, the journey beyond form to the now is

expressed through the Godhead and Christian metaphysics. For Barker, in the twentieth and twenty-first century, where secular scepticism and scientific mechanistic models dominate our reading of reality, such overtly theological language would be greatly diminished in its impact. Instead he expresses his ideas through the fictional world of his plays, where their historical setting makes such terminology acceptable.

Even in the semi-theoretical *Death, The One*, Barker continually draws attention to the fact that everything he writes is not truth: 'All I describe is theatre even where theatre is not the subject' (Barker 2005a, p. 2, 6, 11, 16, etc). This continual negation of any concrete truth-value in the text, via this meta-textual phrase, has the effect of threatening to unravel or deconstruct each idea soon after it has become established in the reader's mind. The *apophatic* process is therefore constantly invoked about the stability of the text itself and therefore (in Eckhartian/Dionysian fashion) about the inadequacy of all human attempts at conceiving and defining the nature of reality and truth.

Sheer Detachment

We have seen how the Eckhartian term 'the One' emerged in Barker's *Death, The One*, though the concept is radically adapted for a more secular age, in its fusion with the tragic and erotic. In 2009 another Eckhartian term appeared on the cover of a Barker text, this time in his latest collection of poetry: *Sheer Detachment*. With the influence of Eckhart in mind, the penultimate poem in

this collection, also entitled 'Sheer Detachment', can be read as an expression of Barker's fascination with this theological concept. The poem talks of a hermit figure that seems to have attained full Eckhartian separation from the pull of material existence. The poem also contains possible allusions to Barker's own journey to detachment.

Where the rebels marched with their three words
I followed
And then swerved to where a man sat naked in tall
Weeds childless and godless
And he boiled milk for me under a raging sun:

(Barker 2009b, p. 71)

The opening line begins with the author as part of a rebellious group, reminiscent of Barker's own initial following of, and affiliation with, socialism and left wing radicals. The 'three words' could reflect the limiting simplification such political movements necessarily reduce to in order to attract a mass following, a reduction of language that was a problem for Barker when struggling with his declining faith in socialism.⁴¹ The author is then distracted from the march by an individual whose detachment is initially expressed by the absence of two dominant, life-affirming forces: children and God. The raging sun conjures up the desert of religious ascetic transformation, and the

⁴¹ In the first edition of *Arguments for a Theatre* he refers to this problem: 'The word was deliberately maimed, pulped into headline or spewed into naturalistic loops. Speech as art was spattered with a double contempt, by the left who required workers to grunt and the right, who were coming to the masses at last' (Barker 1989, p. 15).

boiling milk offers the possibility of nurturing, life and renewal in this bleak space.

He stank of things before my time
Attics of spinsters and soaped wounds
And both his eyes were overgrown and both
His legs ceased at the knees:
He caused nothing anymore and what he had
Caused did not trouble him:
Rats came near him with their young
And dogs who shook with dog's disease
He drove nothing away nor did he say kind things:
He had sheer detachment:

(Barker 2009b, p. 71)

The hermit's evocation of an older time helps to place the author's own transient beliefs in perspective and his overgrown eyes create an image of one whose inner sight has evolved to replace the need for normal ways of seeing. The absent feet suggest someone who no longer journeys in life because they are now fully at rest due to their detachment from all things; including the moral implications and significance of all past actions. This stillness is the result of one who is in union with all elements of nature, even in its decay; and who accepts the whole of existence without affectations of pity for others:

The sun drowned in a crowd whose breath
Reached us over cooling roads:
I knew my habits would reveal me and my few
Truths fall in on me as palaces crush
Their proprietors smothering them in stones:
I said my name and he repeated it as if he
Might clean it with his spit and sell it on as new:
His sheer detachment

(Barker 2009b, p. 71)

In the concluding section, the author fears the self-destroying power of the remaining monoliths of attachment: those few truths that give him his own identity and meaning. In Eckhartian terms, this core of the self is the hardest thing to dismantle on the journey to detachment and oneness: 'There never was a struggle or a battle which required greater valor than that in which a man forgets or denies himself' (Eckhart 1996, p. 5). To highlight the similarities of Barker's poem 'Sheer Detachment' with Eckhart's definition, here is a section from Eckhart's famous sermon on the subject:

Perfect detachment is not in the least inclined to bow down beneath any creature or above any creature. It wishes to be neither below nor above; it wishes to stand by itself, giving neither joy nor sorrow to anyone, and wishing to have neither equality nor inequality with any

creature, desiring neither this nor that. It does not wish for anything but to exist. To be either this or that is not its wish. For if anyone wishes to be this or that, he wants to be something, but detachment wishes to be nothing. For this reason it is not a burden to anything.

(Eckhart 1996, p. 109)

This section also highlights the profound *apophatic* nature of detachment: to encounter the Godhead beyond form your own self must also move beyond anything to nothing. Having identified Barker's exploration of Eckhartian concepts in his poetry and theoretical writing in the twenty-first century, I would now like to look back to his earlier plays and identify what can now be seen as the initial dramatisation of these ideas.

Eckhart and the plays of Howard Barker

Unlike the more direct forms of authorial expression found in theory and poetry, Eckhart's influence on Barker is also clearly perceivable in the more indirect form of expression that is playwriting and theatre (or at least potentially indirect due to the authorial voice being fragmented into the multiple voices and perspectives of the characters). The value of looking at Eckhart's theology in relation to Howard Barker's plays is that it begins to cast light on aspects of his drama which were previously unclear and obscure, particularly the precise significance and relationship between his characters and 'God', or at least the idea of God. It also allows an understanding to form

about the somewhat paradoxical question of Barker's apparent atheism and his plays' preoccupation with religion.

One of his most overtly theologically focused plays: *Rome: On Being Divine* (1993) is a clear example of a text that is difficult to decipher. The various characters go in search of divinity and the somewhat puzzling conclusion reached by the most central female character, Beatrice, is that her divinity is due to her ceasing to apologise. Without knowledge of Eckhart, such a discovery could be read as simply the imaginative and spiritual conclusion of a writer who (at the time) was continuing a relentless journey beyond ideology and uncovering unique, or at least unique to him, spiritual states, and concluding in this particular expression of spiritual enlightenment. However, when placed alongside Eckhartian theology, we come to realise that the final state of mind that Beatrice attains, can be explained as an expression of the ultimate detachment preached by this medieval mystical theologian.

Although an example of the deified 'female' as 'the one' (or at least its prototype) can be seen in many of Barker's plays, one of the clearest examples is this character of Beatrice in *Rome*. The play is set during the barbarian incursions of the holy city at an unspecified time. Beatrice is the object of desire for many of the other characters. This includes Benz, who represents God himself, though a male God diminished in power and significance. The various encounters between Benz and Beatrice are dominated by Benz's simultaneous sexual desire for her and frustration at her lack of beliefs. In these encounters we are offered a complex expression of

mysticism and sexuality that Barker will later reflect on in *Death, The One*. In one such encounter, Benz pleads with Beatrice to adopt some form of faith:

You are quite without belief. Political. Moral. Social. Theological. Teleological. Philosophical. Anything! And it is unforgivable! [...]

Please have a belief. Let it be wrong, let it be foolish, reprehensible, misguided or malicious, but **do have one please**.

(Barker 1993c, p. 237, emphasis his)

Beatrice recognises that both her power and attraction lie in this refusal to submit to belief and that it is Benz/God who is in fact so desperate to submit. The encounter ends with Benz kneeling at her feet and clinging to her shouting out enraged '**Emp-ty! Em-pty!**' (Barker 1993c, p. 237, emphasis his.) Benz's desire for, and desire to submit to, Beatrice can be seen as a clear expression of this shift from the male Christian God, who is historically affirmed by morality, philosophy, teleology and theology, towards Barker's deification of the female as oneness/nothingness in the absence of any other ideology. For Benz, the emptiness of belief in Beatrice seems to initiate a similar crisis or abyss in him, resulting in an explosion of emotion: a mixture of rage and ecstasy.

At a later stage in the play there is an attempt to examine more closely what makes Beatrice the object of such desire, and even an attempt at a definition of the nature of her divinity, and therefore divinity itself. As the new barbarian

(secular) ideas seem to be taking hold of the populace, Benz appears on stage with a baby. This is shortly followed by the appearance of Beatrice, who is 'revealed naked' and 'resolute'. Beatrice makes an announcement that shows a detachment that even exceeds her previous rejection of ideologies and beliefs. She confesses to herself and others that she is 'incapable of love' and is therefore 'impervious' (Barker 1993c, p. 268). After inviting all to worship her, she turns to Benz and announces that his desire for her means that he has ceased to be God.

Beatrice's confession that she is incapable of love seems to be a final freeing moment that leaves her fully detached from the world, as she simultaneously recognises how the desire of others for her is what restricts them: when God desires he ceases to be God. The fact that the performer playing Beatrice is naked during this revelation allows the female body, separated from any cultural codes of costume, to act as a signifier for this higher state. In an interview in 2006, Barker referred to the unclothed body in performance as a mobile surface that can adopt new modes of signification and 'which, no matter how overwritten, still has the power to be discovered *differently* ...' (Barker in Gritzner and Rabey 2006, p. 34). It is the 'mobile surface' of the naked female body, representing a person in a state of complete detachment, that the other characters and the audience are invited to worship.

After covering herself again, Beatrice reflects on her new state of complete detachment, which she defines as divinity: 'I have ceased to apologise even to myself. Can you imagine the freedom of that? [...] I am divine, therefore.'

Divine!' (Barker 1993c, p. 269.) The connection with Eckhart's argument that it is in the nothingness of detachment you become closest to the Godhead is apparent here. Barker seems to be expressing a similar idea by having Benz, the emotional and anthropomorphic male God of history, greatly diminished in importance when he is placed alongside Beatrice: a human in a state of perfect detachment. Beatrice's detachment makes her the new divinity, or a higher divinity, in the same way that for Eckhart the Godhead exceeds God. Even when Benz/God returns with their child, that he has now killed in a final challenge to her authority, her response to this harrowing event is one of detachment. Beatrice '*controls every emotion in her stillness, under Benz's gaze [and] 'takes out a cigarette, and lights it.'* Benz is left speechless as Beatrice observes: 'I am greater than you/ Lonelier and greater than you.' In this moment the shift from the male God of history into the deified female, a symbol of mysticism and ecstasy, is complete, as '*BENZ falls at her feet, rocking to and fro on his knees*' (Barker 1993c, p. 269).

The submission of the male God, previously supported by the belief systems of western theology and philosophy, to a female who stands for radical detachment and absence of belief, is an effective concentration of ideas that are more fully explored and expressed twelve years later in Barker's *Death, The One*. The dramatic shift from Eckhart's Godhead as a symbol of absence and detachment, to the defied female as such a symbol, allows Barker to combine both *apophatic* and mystical theology with sexual ecstasy. The paradox then is that the mystical elements in Barker's texts, which may have helped to generate his position and reputation as an original and relentless

post enlightenment investigator of the unknowable, become less obscure and original in their meaning and personal 'ideology' when perceived in relation to the theology of Eckhart. It may also explain why Barker left it until after he entered his sixtieth year to inform people that behind his work were in fact the concepts of a specific theologian. Once this was revealed, the theology that underpins his plays begins to cast light on otherwise obscure areas.

The Bite of the Night: An Education

It already seems clear how Eckhart's concentration on detachment seems to inform the outlook of Barker's characters, as they struggle to manage their (often) catastrophic environment. However, it is also a path that they actively seek and initiate in order to attain a higher state of truth (which of course is ultimately truth's absence). In *The Bite of the Night: An Education* written in 1985, the protagonist, a disillusioned lecturer called Dr Savage, embarks on a relentless journey for knowledge, which offers another striking example of Barker's *apophatic* mysticism and embrace of detachment.

The Troy of classical antiquity has fallen and the play charts the attempts of various characters to construct new Troys (cultural-political systems) on the remains of the old. Savage's journey for knowledge coincides and interacts with these various systems. At the centre is the deified female, Helen, whose refusal to conform ignites perpetual desire for her, confounding attempts at the rationalising control and assimilation of each new Troy. Helen challenges

the foundational concepts of post-Christian Western democracy: the importance of pity, logic and the democratic right to life:

HELEN: [...] can it be true that every life is precious, can it? Mums' Troy is babies, all the kerbs are padded and the rivers hung with nets, breasts out in the market and the endless music of their gurgles, **the preposterous claim of life** –
[...]

SAVAGE: Kiss me –

HELEN: **The snail's insistence on its rights!** [...] If I saw a baby drift by on a raft of rushes I would not lift a finger for it [...] pity, the great unending ribbon of pity, it has no end except exhaustion [...] All this logic! All this pity! Kiss me, now. Kiss me ...! (*He kisses her.*) Your mouth would draw me in and make me vanish, a sweet in your jaw, sucked to oblivion ... (*They kiss.*)

(Barker 1998, p. 65)

Here we see in the character of Helen the female who is 'the one' (or at least the prototype).⁴² Helen deconstructs some of the most fundamental systems that generate meaning in Western society and thus opens up the abyss for both herself and Savage. The act of the kiss and her request to be 'sucked to oblivion' show her desire to immerse totally in a now without form.

⁴² In Barker's plays there are numerous proto-types for 'the one' and they are usually (unsurprisingly) the central focus of the narrative. Gertrude in *Gertrude – The Cry*, performed by Victoria Wicks (2002), is one of the most memorable.

The title of the play itself, *The Bite of the Night*, expresses this shock encounter with the abyss at the end of the journey for true knowledge. Savage shows his awareness of the need to carefully negotiate this journey towards oblivion when he states '**Dance on the rim of knowledge** but don't fall through, you'll drop forever' (Barker 1998, p. 64, emphasis his).

Early in the play, Savage observes that the authentic journey to knowledge (as with the mystic) is an inner journey into the self:

SAVAGE: To go beyond. That's our hunger, that's our thirst. To go beyond, you must stand still. **First paradox of all great journeys.**

(Barker, 1998, p. 25)

In a mode similar to Eckhartian 'detachment', Savage systematically discards all conventional attachments in order to obtain a higher level of truth. The domestic world is the first to be discarded: after giving his son away Savage starts to question and alienate himself from his own father (who eventually kills himself with the shard of a plate):

SAVAGE: Kind thought? I hated you. Your mundane opinions. Your repetition of half-truths. Straddling my back. You burden. You dead weight. He's gone so why don't you. (THE OLD MAN *turns.*) No one is here for long. Who knows, some death might be already on me. [...] We can have knowledge, but not in

passivity. Knowledge exists, but the path is strewn with obstacles. (THE OLD MAN *breaks the plate.*) These obstacles we ourselves erect. (*He takes a shard.*) The conspiracy of the ignorant against the visionary can be broken only by the ruthless intellect [...] Pity is also a regime. (*He [THE OLD MAN] attempts to cut his throat.*) And consideration a manacle.

[...]

Manners -

[...]

Loyalty -

[...]

Responsibility, **iron bands on the brain.**

[...]

Knowledge is beyond kindness you know -

(Barker 1998, p. 18)

As Savage's journey progresses, he formulates a model for the inner journey into the self that shows a close parallel to Eckhart's process of detachment. Both Barker's and Eckhart's descriptions of the process suggest the self is many layered and these need to be discarded in order to encounter the true self. Barker even borrows the skin and animal skin (pelts) metaphor:

A man has many skins in himself, covering the depths of his own heart. Man knows so many things. He does not know himself.

Why, thirty or forty skins or hides, just like an ox's or a bear's, so thick and hard, cover the soul. Go into your own ground and learn to know yourself there.

(Eckhart in Meserve 1963, p. 184)

SAVAGE: Knowledge is a suit of rooms. Dirty rooms, unswept as museums in the provinces. And to enter each room you must leave with the woman at the door some priceless thing, which feels part of yourself and your identity, so that it feels like ripping skin. And the keepers sit in piles of discarded treasures, like the pelts of love or children's pity, and at each successive door the piles are less because few stagger such long distances, until there comes a door at which there lies a small, white rag stained as a dishcloth, which may be sanity. **And if you think that is the end you are mistaken, it is the beginning.** (Pause.) And people say, 'I know myself.' Have you heard that? Never! They know the contents of one room.

(Barker 1998, p. 28)

At the end of Savage's journey, however, we become aware of the difference between the Eckhartian and Barkerian approach. Where the Eckhartian mystic experiences or at least believes they are/will experience a harmonious immersion in the eternal now of the Godhead: living without why; Barker's

protagonists dwell in an abyss where meaning is replaced only by oblivion. At the close of the play, after Savage fails to complete the act of cutting his own throat, another of the central characters comments on his final condition:

MACLUBY: You murdered everything, and long for nothing. Aren't you already dead? [...]

SAVAGE: That's knowledge, then ...

(Barker 1998, p. 116)

The Bite of the Night was one of the foundational texts of the Theatre of Catastrophe and helped to set out Barker's new aesthetic as he moved from socialist political theatre to tragedy.⁴³ Let us now look at one of his more recent plays, to consider how the Eckhartian influence is still observable in his dramatic works.

Let Me

Although Barker's characters often observe their situation from a state of complete detachment, they will also, often, return from detachment to an intense re-encounter with the emotional now. Emotional expression is central to Barker's theatre as he underlines, 'These texts were texts of ideas perhaps, but, more crucially, texts of emotions' (Barker 1997, p. 133), and it is in the

⁴³ Another foundational text, *The Last Supper* (1988), also contains lines that are clearly setting out Barker's new aesthetic vision, including through direct address to the audience: 'When the poem became easy it also became poor. When art became mechanised it became an addiction. I lecture! Oh I lecture you!' (Barker 1988c, p. 2.)

constant swing from violent mental repression (that allows intellectual detachment), back to an overwhelming and complex emotional expression, that makes his plays so compelling. A clear example of this repression/detachment and then explosion of emotions takes place in Barker's radio play *Let Me*, broadcast on BBC 3 on the 1 October 2006.

In *Let Me* 'set in the 5th century at the time of barbarian invasions' (BBC Radio 3 2006), the Roman protagonist Copolla (played by Edward Petherbridge) is surrounded by barbarians who are trying to make him flee his home. In his increasing loneliness and isolation Copolla begins to detach himself from his previous emotional connections and thus he enters an ever-greater stage of spiritual freedom (again reminiscent of the journey of the mystic). This is initially observable in the comments he makes after his slave leaves him isolated in the house. Aphrodite has been his loyal slave for many years and although she says she will return, the danger is now so great that he is convinced he will never see her again. This realisation, combined with the probability of his own imminent death at the hands of the barbarians, threatens to overwhelm his sanity with fear and grief. As a means of mental survival, Copolla adopts an Eckhartian like strategy of detachment, and rapidly sheds and distances himself from these potentially incapacitating feelings:

COPOLLA: YOU BITCH OF FORTY YEARS DURATION YOU HAVE
ABANDONED ME

(Pause. The silence sings around him...)

So what

So I am abandoned

So there is me and only me me old me solitary absolute and
utter me I prefer it yes I do the extinction the eradication of every
wretched and melancholy illusion friendship allegiance piety the
whole basket of discredited solidarities AS FOR THE POLICE

(He half-laughs in the silence...)

(Barker 2010b, p. 201, emphasis his)

Copolla is determined to remain in his house and has managed to capture a barbarian child who wandered in, holding her hostage as a deterrent to his assailants. His slave, Aphrodite, surprisingly decides to visit him again, despite the high level of danger. As she leaves for the second time, Copolla makes it clear to her that he is fully embracing a journey into the recesses of the self that his proximity to death has initiated:

COPOLLA: I'm not leaving here

To stay can also be a journey

APHRODITE: A journey to where Mr Copolla?

COPOLLA: To why I am

To what we were

To all that was pity Thalia [his deceased wife] her

travelling was pure cowardice trapped in some feverish
swamp she convinced herself she was ennobled by her

curiosity. What she had no curiosity about was Thalia herself. It is an abyss the self you must equip yourself with long ropes very long

(Barker 2010b, p. 228-9)

Immediately following her exit, Aphrodite is murdered. Copolla forces both himself and the barbarian girl to look at the corpse, in a detached manner, before he allows himself any emotional reaction. Detachment here is again the determination to reflect objectively on experience uncontaminated by feelings. Copolla strives to analyse the corpse with a rigorously objective consideration of human ontology, but his detached analysis is punctuated by cries of terrible emotion. This speech offers an excellent example of the employment of detachment when faced with the most terrible horror:

COPOLLA: Oh God they are hacking off her head

Look

Look what your people do and I must look I must she was my loyal and

She was my loyal and

(He falters.)

I WILL LOOK

(He is swept by nausea.)

I WILL LOOK AND SO WILL YOU LOOK I SAID

(He forces the child to watch.)

Yes

Yes

She was

She was and is no longer what she was she no longer is she if you can call it she the thing there on the grass the thing once known to me and others as Aphrodite.

(He screams.)

[...]

What does it matter she isn't in her head it's not her head the head's empty we must get use to the sordidity of human actions to say it's self-indulgence surely such and such a thing offends that such-and-such a thing nauseates me

(Barker 2010b, p. 233-4, emphasis his)

13 Objects: Studies in Servitude

In 2003 Barker staged a series of thirteen short plays that explore the hypnotic and talismanic power that everyday objects can possess for people in extreme and overwhelming circumstances. As other structures of meaning dissolve, the object, like the female 'one', takes on the meaning of meaning's transience. The thirteen objects therefore adopt a religious significance for the protagonists:

Everyone thinks his life should be better than it is. Everyone thinks life itself should be better than it is. This ancient torment produced by the mismatch of hope and reality is the theme of these short plays, where the sense of disappointment is stimulated by mundane objects. On the surface of these ordinary things a spiritual quarrel is enacted.

(Barker in *The Wrestling School* 2003)

It was written at a time when Barker had a keen interest in Eckhart, reflected by the publication of *Death, The One*, two years later. Many of these ideas are examined and played out in *13 Objects*. Of particular interest, in terms of Eckhartian theology, is first play 'The Lonely Spade'.⁴⁴

In 'A Lonely Spade' an Officer tests the dignity and spirituality of two prisoners in what appears to be a death camp. The Prisoners are instructed to dig a grave, which one of them will occupy, although the Officer continually shifts the rules of the exercise so that is unclear who will eventually be buried alive. The scene opens with the repetition of two words, which, in addition to their literal meaning, can be seen metaphorically to initiate an Eckhartian focus on burrowing deep into the self in the 'now', as a means of freeing oneself from the created world and even the illusions of self:

⁴⁴ This scene, along with five others from *13 Objects*, were staged as part of the Wrestling School's international theatre festival '21 FOR 21' at the Melton Theatre on 15 October 2009. It was performed by De Montfort University BA Performing Arts students and I directed the production. This section of the study draws upon this staging of the play.

OFFICER: Dig now

Dig

Dig

(The PRISONERS exchange looks)

Dig now

(Barker 2006b, p. 255)

The Officer is relentless, determined and at imaginative extremes to confront and overcome their fear of death. One particular section of text seems to be expressing such an extreme dissolved sense of the human self that Barker may well be reaching here for an Eckhartian God like perspective on human life. This is achieved, or at least attempted, by the Officer by trying to imaginatively move beyond human perception, and back towards a state *before* perception, which in a philosophical way could be equated with Eckhart's spark of the soul before/beyond the perspective of creation:

OFFICER: [...] The world is nothing but the sum of your perceptions

Always I have been convinced of this

Since childhood

Yes

The greatest moments of awareness are granted us prior to
thought

Later

Absurd it is not

We are obliged to retrieve them by the exertions of the intellect.

(Barker 2006b, p. 258)

This seemingly absurd process in which the intellect necessarily has to dismantle itself and *the* self in order to attain a pure (divine) state, is central to Eckhart's theology: 'There is something that transcends the created being of the soul [...]. It is akin to the nature of deity, it is one in itself, and has naught in common with anything. [...] If you could naught yourself in an instant, indeed I say less than an instant, you would possess all that this is in itself' (Eckhart 2009, p. 131). Having unravelled the self the Officer attempts an esoteric, mystical and God like perspective on being and death (a God like position that is also suggested by the ruthless and total power he holds over the lives of the Prisoners):

In view of this

This fact about the world that I have just described

It cannot be said that death

Insofar as you are experiencing it

In any way diminishes us

The contrary

The contrary must be the case

The world is in death also

[...]

This death

Far from being the extinction of perception

It is itself perception

(Barker 2006b, p. 259)

At this point the Officer (and perhaps the playwright) falters in the attempt to see outside the self. The Officer reflects on the inadequacy of language in such circumstances and after a modernist like call for a new form of expression eventually retreats back to the limitations of human conception and understanding in language:

Oh

It is so hard to say

It is so hard to enter the territory of this

It calls for a new language

It calls for poetry

But poetry is sometimes obfuscation let us admit it

[...]

We must struggle with the language we possess

We must employ the inadequate knowing full well its inadequacy

(Barker 2006b, p. 259)

Here we see how Barker's atheism lacks the sense of transcendence and tranquillity of Eckhart's invocation and fusion with the super-essential

Godhead. The Eckhartian method of detachment is impoverished in Barker, where language and the world remain a limitation. The scene concludes with the God like Officer rewarding the Prisoner who renounces fear of death and desire for life (and therefore complete detachment) with freedom. Read symbolically and theologically this freedom is an Eckhartian freedom in the now which has been achieved through the Prisoner's detachment from all things. After checking the Prisoner is sincere, 'Assure me with a single motion of your head that you have abandoned every futile hope of further life' (Barker 2006b, p. 262), the Officer tells the Prisoner to 'Run', who, after a moment's disbelief, does so.

Other scenes in *13 Objects* reflect this clear influence of Eckhartian theology. For example in Scene 6 'Cracked Lens' a Youth who is an idealist, finally overcomes the need to commit suicide following the gift of a camera, by removing the film from the camera. The camera greatly disturbed the Youth due to its recording (and therefore giving form) to an imperfect and disappointing world, 'This could drive me to suicide / This / This / FOCUS ON THE WORLD' (Barker 2006b, p. 284). However, in the final moments of the scene he removes the film from the camera (again, read symbolically, he is removing the human desire to formalise reality). Once the form making apparatus is dispensed with the Youth is free to exist in the now, a freedom now symbolised by the altered camera:

YOUTH: How perfect is the camera without film

(He lifts the camera to his eye. He presses the shutter.)

How entirely me

(Barker 2006b, p. 290)

Negative Capability and *The Ecstatic Bible*

The *via negativa* of Eckhart's theology, with its desire for spiritual experience without recourse to established concepts, has some relationship with John Keats's concept of negative capability. However, where Eckhart's approach sought immersion in the Godhead beyond form, Keats's intention is to instead capture the complexity of the world through artistic form but without the need to rationalise and explain the world through conventional ideas. It is helpful to consider this divergent 'negative' approach that relates specifically to art, as a way of further understanding Barker's theatre. The significance of negative capability in relation to Barker's theatre was suggested and explored by The Wrestling School actor and director Gerrard McArthur in response to an interview question about divinity in Barker's *The Ecstatic Bible* (2000) (McArthur 2013 Appendix, p. 368).

Keats's only mentioned this now famous concept once in a letter to his brothers George and Thomas Keats (December 1817):

[I]t struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously – I mean *Negative Capability*, that is, when a man is

capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries and doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason. [...] This pursued through volumes would perhaps take us no further than this, that with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration.

(Keats 1925, p. 48)

An earlier part of the same letter shows the need to frame the chaos of the world in a suitably poetic mode; an important consideration in tragic dramatic art:

The excellence of every art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate from their being in close relationship with Beauty and Truth – Examine King Lear, and you will find this exemplified throughout; but in this picture [*Death on the Pale horse* by Benjamin West] we have unpleasantness without any momentous depth of speculation excited, in which to bury its repulsiveness.

(Keats 1925, p. 47)

The romantic idea of 'Beauty' overcoming and obliterating other considerations has a clear connection with Barker's championing of art over and against rational, ideological and naturalistic conceptions of the world. The pre-eminence of beauty via an association with truth is also expressed in the

famous final lines of Keat's *Ode on a Grecian Urn*: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," – that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know' (Keats 1909, p. 70). In Barker's *The Bite of the Night*, Helen of Troy, a symbol and personification of this artistic sense of beauty seems to be supporting Keats's statement but in a qualified and less idealistic form: 'Beauty is a lie! Of course it is a lie! [...] It is simply the best available lie on the subject of truth ...' (Barker 1998, p. 103).

Li Ou further defines the term in her book length study of negative capability (2009), noting the challenge it enacts on a sense of stable subjectivity:

To be negatively capable is to be open to the actual vastness and complexity of experience, and one cannot possess this openness unless one can abandon the comfortable enclosure of doctrinaire knowledge, safely guarding the self's identity, for a more truthful view of the world which is necessarily more disturbing or even agonizing for the self.

(Ou 2009, p.2)

This challenge to the sense of self as a result of the abandoning of established knowledge also relates to both Eckhart's *apophatic* theology and Barker's Theatre of Catastrophe.

The Ecstatic Bible is an epic seven and a half hour long play that follows the encounters and experiences of two characters, the Priest and Gollancz, as they journey for many years through a war ravaged and violent world. The scope of the play, as the title suggests, approaches the biblical in terms of its range and exploration of human emotions and desires and in the moral and spiritual dilemmas that the characters continually face in the chaotic landscapes they find themselves in. Where it differs from the Judaeo-Christian Bible, is in the significant role that sexual ecstasy plays within the text, which Gollancz is often the cause of. She is defined in the *dramatis persona* as 'a woman unencumbered by will' (Barker, 2004, p. 9) and with one exception is the focus of ecstatic desire rather than driven to pursue others.⁴⁵ This absence of will allows for a supreme Eckhartian detachment from the many emotionally and ethically challenging experiences she encounters in the play.

At the start of the play Gollancz is wrongly accused of the murder of her husband, who was seriously incapacitated in the war. He was murdered as a favour from a vagrant called Shaw who has just met and had sex with her, 'You served me, so I served you' (Barker 2004b, p. 16). Gollancz responds to both these unexpected events with detachment.

The Priest, who believes her to be guilty but is influenced by his love for her, insists that she flees with him, rejecting his religious faith and his ethical responsibilities in the process. As with other Barker protagonists, the intense focus of faith in God retains its force but shifts into desire for a female. The

⁴⁵ The only exception to her initial definition of being without will is her obsessive pursuit of the young prostitute and criminal Richardson in Scene 9 'The Wall' (Barker 2004b, p. 85-91).

formulation is similar to the dynamic between Benz and Beatrice in *Rome*, but with a man of God rather than God himself. The Priest's desire for Gollancz is agonizingly unrequited throughout the whole play, with the pain further increased by the fact she passively accepts the seduction attempts from many other characters. These frequent sexual liaisons and the biblical length of her and the Priest's life leads to many narratives that are encounters with her offspring: 'Gollancz – a miraculous trope on the Old Testament – is a mother into her hundreds and peoples the play with her progeny' (Barker 2004b, p. 7). In the penultimate scene of the play, the Priest reflects on her mysterious, troubling and Godlike dominance of both his own life and the world in general, finally attaining some level of detachment from the chaos of these experiences:

PRIEST: This is all Mrs Gollancz ...

Not only this ...

But everything is Mrs Gollancz ...

I am neither more nor less the inert or sometimes volcanic substance of Mrs Gollancz, her flora, her fauna, her detritus, now I say all that came from her, all consequences of the fact of Mrs Gollancz her creation and participation in the world, has been to my detriment and to the detriment of others, and I announce this without a trace of bitterness, I announce it as one might announce the dawn to a windowless cell of the condemned ...

(Barker 2004, p. 297)

Gerrard McArthur played the Priest in The Wrestling School's full production of the play in Adelaide (2000), as well as directing the abridged student production of *Scenes from an Ecstatic Bible* in 2013.⁴⁶ He therefore has a particularly thorough knowledge of this epic Barker text. In response to my question: 'I was fascinated by Barker's comment about Gollancz that 'she could be God'. What is your opinion about this statement and do you feel that there are other similar (godlike) characters in Barker's work?' McArthur explores how negative capability can be used as a way to understand the divine qualities of Gollancz.⁴⁷

The Priest's difficulties rest in his belief in pattern and reason; Gollancz's equilibrium and strength rest in her embrace of the arbitrary. If there is a God, our experiential knowledge of him in so far as we can have knowledge of Him, is that he is defined by the arbitrary, and it is faith only that constructs a different conclusion. Gollancz's approach puts her at the nexus of 'God's' lack of overt method.

Your raising of what Howard's said about Gollancz made me think of the discussion of Keat's famous reference to his idea of what he termed 'negative capability'. [...] I think so much of the discussion around this seems so directly resonant to what she embodies, and of

⁴⁶ The Adelaide production was a collaboration with the Australian theatre company Brink Productions (The Wrestling School 2000).

⁴⁷ Barker made this observation when introducing the play to the students at the start of the project on 6 October 2012. For MacArthur's full response to this question see Appendix, p.365-371.

Howard's comment. [...] The Priest, of course, represents a stubborn adherence to 'theories of knowledge', while it is the very definition of Gollancz as someone with 'the ability to experience phenomenon free from epistemological bounds.

[...]

Gollancz is the cause of so much creation in the narrative. Indeed, she is the creator of the entire narrative, and almost of the world itself, it could be said, as she peoples the world with most of its significant protagonists. She is the Artist, as God has been said to be.

(McArthur 2013 Appendix, p.368-369)

MacArthur is therefore able to provide a concise formula for this relationship to Keatsian aesthetics: 'Knowledge/Priest, Gollancz/Beauty', with knowledge referring to the 'irritable reaching after fact and reason' in Keats's letter. MacArthur then expands the consideration of Gollancz to reflect on Barker's wider theatrical project:

[C]apable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason' [...] is not only a description of Gollancz, it is description of how Howard is inviting the audience to experience his work. The dismal history of the Priest, is the history of the audience. It criticizes accepted ways of viewing. Their identification with his travails and his methodology has a startling double-edge.

As for Gollancz, she could be described by a later phrase in the letter, approvingly written of the artist's search, as a 'thoroughfare for all thoughts'. Well, in that she gives no sense of great thinking and absolutely refutes choice, it is a Barkerian irony that she provokes so much thought and choice in the world around her. This effect connects to a further matter, raised by the following:

'Negative capability has been seen as feeding into the displaced subject of modernism - as contributing to what Baudelaire described as 'an ego athirst for the non-ego.' (Wikipedia 2014)

This not only describes Priest and Gollancz, but describes the entire practise of Gollancz's effect in 'The Bible', and thrusts her forward as a modernist figure, and force. Moreover, it places her, perhaps, at the centre of Barker's aesthetic manoeuvres of the last 30 years. Which is 'Godlike' enough.

(McArthur 2013 Appendix, p. 370-371)

This chapter has attempted to show how Barker's plays and theoretical writings show some strong connections with mystical *apophatic* theology and specifically the ideas of Meister Eckhart. It also shows that the influence is apparent both at the emergence of Barker's tragic theatre in *The Bite of the Night* (1985) and much more recently in *Death, The One and the Art of Theatre* (2005), *Let Me* (2006) *13 Objects* (2003) and the poem *Sheer*

Detachment. The main distinction, however, between Barker and Eckhart is the assumption about the final nature of the abyss. Both agree that the abyss is unknowable, but where Eckhart assumes an essentially benevolent Godhead, Barker sees only amoral oblivion. Caputo, in his comparison of Eckhart's theological ideas with their twentieth century re-configuration in the atheistic philosophy of Heidegger, offers a conclusion that can also be usefully considered in relation to Barker and Eckhart:

The possibility of a new world is "dark" and its coming "uncertain" (SD, 66/60). In this darkness and uncertainty lies one of the largest difficulties with Heidegger's work. For what becomes of *Gelassenheit* [detachment] once it is detached from its religious matrix? Huhnerfeld puts the difficulty this presents sharply when he writes: 'Meister Eckhart would never have taken the mystical step if he had believed that he was leaping into Nothingness instead of into the arms of God.' (Huhn., 125)

(Caputo 1978, p. 254)

For Barker, in *Death, The One and the Art of Theatre*, this encounter with the amoral abyss is a struggle for meaning that ultimately results in a frustration at life and, therefore, an embrace of death:

Beyond the Christian era we can no longer be satisfied with the apology as the precondition for entering death. We can only go into

death with a contempt of life, with a sense of life's poverty. Without God we may dare to say life is not worthy of *us*.

(Barker 2005, p. 22)

However, the final line of *Death, The One*, even in the absence of faith in a benevolent Godhead, gestures not towards death's closure but instead towards Barker's own transcendence of pain through its Keatsian aesthetic transformation in theatrical art:

It 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 doing so, make *beautiful* ...

(Barker, 2005a, p. 105)

Chapter 3

Sacred Theatre and Greek Tragedy

Tragedy is a sacred art. If you do not understand the sacred, do not enter the theatre.

(Barker in Shuttleworth 2010)

[R]eligion is the moving force behind the breaking of taboos. Now religion is founded on feelings of terror and awe, indeed it can hardly be thought of without them, and their existence causes some confusion. The recoil that inevitably follows the forward movement is constantly being presented as the essence of religion. [...] More than any other state of mind consciousness of the void about us throws us into exaltation. This does not mean that we feel an emptiness in ourselves, far from it; but we pass beyond that into an awareness of the act of transgression.

(Bataille 2006, p. 68)

This quotation from Bataille is a reminder of the irrational and spiritual dimension of religion, a dimension that arguably exists *before* the moral, philosophical and theological structures form within the human mind and

(subsequently) the wider society or community. This idea of a void *before* theology is a very useful concept when considering the relationship between religion and tragedy, both when tragedy emerges for the first time in ancient Greece in the sixth century and also in its re-emergence in the late twentieth century in the mystical and spiritual theatre of Howard Barker.⁴⁸ This chapter initially examines some recent contemporary ideas of the sacred in theatre and how they relate to Howard Barker's tragic drama. Having established this model, the chapter then explores the spiritual and religious aspects of tragic drama in the pagan context of classical Greece in order to examine similar spiritual elements in Barker's Theatre of Catastrophe.

We have seen in the previous chapter how the spiritual and (pseudo-) religious dimension to his poetry, dramatic theory and theatrical writing owes much to the medieval mystical theologian Eckhart. However, two core areas of Barker's work that are not covered by this theology are the privileging of sexual ecstasy as a subject within his writing and also the use of tragic drama as the genre and art form of primary expression in his spiritual theatre.⁴⁹ Both of these elements were firmly connected to religion in Greek and Roman culture before they were both marginalised or excluded in Christian Europe. Sexual desire had become increasingly alienated from religion in Christian Europe because of its growing association with sin, a surprising shift from the Greek and Roman pagan tradition, and such a significant change of focus that Batialle even suggests that 'the Christian religion is possibly the least religious

⁴⁸ I am aware that Barker's modernist and, more specifically, Brechtian roots make it difficult for his theatre to fully disconnect from a rationalising sensibility.

⁴⁹ Barker of course also writes poetry and radio drama. However it is clear from the relative output of plays to poems that drama is his primary medium, and the vast majority of these plays are written specifically for the theatre.

of them all' (Bataille 2006, p. 32).⁵⁰ Tragic drama, and drama in general, also suffered in Christian Europe in that there was no '*officially sanctioned* theatre' (Kubiak 1993, p. 49, emphasis his) during the Middle Ages following severe and hostile restrictions placed on theatre at the end of the fourth century by the relatively new Christian administration of the Roman Empire.⁵¹

[I]n 398 A.D. the Council of Carthage voted to excommunicate anyone attending the theatre instead of church on holy days. Also, actors were denied the sacraments unless they denounced their profession.

(Bruch 2004, p. 4)

It is interesting to note that the two potential aspects of spirituality that Christianity felt the need to so sharply repress, drama and sexual desire, were both previously celebrated and embraced in ancient Greece through the worship of Dionysus, the popular god of theatrical performance and sexual ecstasy. It therefore makes sense to explore the possible relationship of Dionysus to Greek culture in search of a pre-Christian and pre-enlightenment spirituality and religious expression. This Dionysiac *spirituality* seems to have made a significant contribution to the cultural matrix in which tragic drama emerged as an art form. Once this influence has been outlined, spiritual (or

⁵⁰ 'It goes without saying that the development of eroticism is in no respect foreign to the domain of religion, but in fact Christianity sets its face against eroticism and thereby condemns most religions. In one sense, the Christian religion is possibly the least religious of them all.' (Bataille 2006, p. 32)

⁵¹ 'Dramatic performance reappeared in Christian Europe over 500 years later in the 'tenth-century Latin trope for Easter, which was the beginning of liturgical drama' (Cawley 1993, p. xiii).

ideological) parallels will then be established with Barker's post-Christian and post-enlightenment return to tragedy.

Sacred Tragedy

Tragedy is not a demonstration, it is a terrible ignorance that admits itself ... a disarming naïveté clings to all its protagonists ...

(Barker 2005, p.45)

Let us return to Bataille's observation at the start of this chapter, and its location of the religious experience *before* theology. This definition is particularly useful when examining any religious experience or even experiences not formally defined as religious, but rather spiritual. For this reason Bataille's atheistic spirituality is one of the key influences on a recent examination of spirituality in performance, *Sacred Theatre* (2007). In this multi-authored book edited by Ralph Yarrow, five theatre academics reflect on the idea of the sacred in relation to theatre and its significance for contemporary theatre practice. The universality of this conception of the sacred usefully serves as an initial way into considering the spiritual dimension to tragic dramas across 2,500 years. Barker, himself, employed the term sacred in the programme notes to his 2002 production of *Gertrude – The Cry* writing that 'Tragedy is a sacred art. If you do not understand the sacred, do not enter the theatre' (Barker in Shuttleworth 2002). In *Sacred Theatre* the authors also assert the sacred nature of certain forms of contemporary theatre

(although no mention is made of Barker) and they offer a very positive and pluralistic assessment of this term/experience.⁵² The positive and universal approach to the sacred is clear from the fact that they argue for an inclusive conception of this mode of experience, one that is not restricted to a particular religious tradition, in fact they view such a focus as restrictive and unhelpfully limiting of the sacred:

We want to be clear about this – the notion of the sacred discussed in this book has nothing in common with theological or religious notions of the sacred, which, with the exception of marginalized mystic traditions within them, generally try to ‘positivise’ the sacred by making it knowable, that is to say, reducible to a set of precepts or commandments.

(Yarrow 2007, p. 10)

One of the principal stated aims of the book is to ‘rescue’ the sacred from ‘monotheological and prescriptive use’ (2007, p. 10). This anti-monotheological position chimes with post-structural and postmodern suspicions towards anything orthodox and opposed to inclusive notions of pluralism, for example Derrida’s critique of what he defines as phallogocentrism and Lyotard’s incredulity towards meta-narratives and his

⁵² The positive assessment in this book is in contrast to either a more neutral anthropological reading of the sacred in relation to theatre or one that argues against such ‘spiritual’ modes of theatre in favour of more political and rational objectives (and therefore views sacred theatre as a deception that manipulates the audience).

subsequent suggestion that we are now experiencing a new paganism.⁵³ Subsequently, their notion of the sacred causes a similar radical reassessment of what was thought to be known about the world: '[We] argue that the sacred, as experience, mode of being and perception, is central to theatre practice, which thereby locates a radical refiguring of engagement with the world' (Yarrow 2007, p. 10). So, if the experience of the sacred is not related to a religious tradition then what can it consist of which causes such a transformation and new engagement with the world? Yarrow *et al* argue for the absence of fixed thought and ideas as the very nature of the sacred suggesting that '[It] entails a voiding of thought, and by implication a shift of consciousness that effects a blurring of boundaries between subject and object, self and other' (Haney in Yarrow 2007, p. 16).

The collapse of individual identity and the dissolution of binary opposites are, as we will see, aspects of experience commonly attributed to Dionysus. As well as Bataille's philosophy, Victor Turner's anthropology, and particularly his term liminality, is drawn upon in *Sacred Theatre* to define the sacred in theatre. '[V]oiding of thought' (going beyond pairs of opposites) and a condition of liminality; and claims that the optimal subjective experience of liminality is performance' (Yarrow 2007, p. 15). Liminal means a state of change and fluidity where nothing is fixed and all definition and identity is uncertain but not necessarily a concern. According to Richard Schechner, 'Turner's liminality is like death, being in the womb or darkness; it is a state of being 'not-this-nor-that', 'open to change' (Schechner 2002, p. 66). The

⁵³ Caputo defines Lyotard's paganism as: 'the affirmation of radical and irreducible pluralism' (Caputo 2007, p.268).

sacred space is further defined by Carl Lavery as: ‘*an empty fullness, a full emptiness*’ (Lavery in Yarrow 2007, p. 16, emphasis his) suggesting the surprisingly positive experience of liminality which could be connected to the sense of freedom in the Eckhartian ‘now’ and Barker’s ‘hope-lessness’ (see Chapter 2).

The dominance of the anthropological term ‘liminality’ in *Sacred Theatre* as a definition of the spiritual experience in modern theatres, reflects a wider interest in this concept in Performance Studies, a discipline where dance, drama and theatre studies merge with anthropology and other social sciences, to expand the focus beyond the theatrical space so it can consider performances in the wider human community and culture. Turner’s influential concept ‘liminality’ stems initially from Arnold van Gennep in his study *Rites of Passage* (1908), in which he ‘distinguishes three phases in a rite of passage: *separation, transition, and incorporation*’ (Turner 1985, p. 24). The intervening phase of transition is also known by Van Gennep as “margin” or “limen” (meaning “threshold” in Latin)’ (Turner 1985, p. 24). The first stage involves rituals that separate those undertaking the process, the ‘initiands’, from an awareness of secular society and their current role and relationship to this society. This is achieved in the performance of rituals that generate a sense of sacred time and space through a process of symbolic detachment (Turner 1985, p. 24). Immediately we can see similarities with Eckhart and Barker, where detachment allows an escape from the individual’s dependence on everyday life and the beliefs and ideals that inform this existence. In the transition or liminal stage ‘the ritual subjects pass through a period and area

of ambiguity, a sort of social limbo' (Turner 1985, p. 24). This is the space of sacred theatre where identity is unraveled. The final stage of incorporation, also described by Van Gennep as 'reaggregation', is where the subjects are returned to society with a sense of closure with their 'new, relatively stable, well defined position in the total society' (Turner 1985, p. 24).

The spiritual and *apophatic* focus of Barker's theatre makes the transitional and liminal space of particular interest and Turner's definition of this state shows how thoroughly ideological structures are temporarily suspended:

Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. Thus, liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon. Liminal entities, such as neophytes in initiation or puberty rites, may be represented as possessing nothing.

(Turner in Schechner 2002, p. 58)

The connections with both Greek tragedy and Barker's Theatre of Catastrophe are clear, with the tragic protagonist, like the initiand in the ritual process, being distanced from social structures through the invocation of

extra-human forces: death, the wilderness, and unfettered and (previously) illicit sexual desire, so that their identity becomes highly unstable. The ritual process and tragedy will be explored in greater detail in the next chapter.

Turner's collaborator Schechner draws upon the concept of ritual as a significant influence on his notion of Performance Studies.⁵⁴ In *The Performance Studies Reader* (2004) Jon McKenzie's chapter 'The Liminal Norm' examines the surprising level of twentieth century theoretical interest in the middle stage of ritual and lack of interest or wariness towards the end point and purpose of ritual where order is re-established. McKenzie warns against this preoccupation with the liminal state, resulting in it becoming too dominant an idea in Performance Studies. Clearly, the subversive potential of the liminal makes it of interest to radical political agendas despite the fact that anthropologists conclude that the majority of the time the ritual ends with the 'reinforcement of existing social structure' rather than 'schism' (McKenzie 2004, p. 28). *Sacred Theatre's* injunction to 'rescue' the sacred from 'monotheological and prescriptive use' is clearly part of this cultural-political movement. The sacred space of theatre is the liminal space and although primarily used historically as a process towards entry into a new and stable religious identity, this closure is viewed as oppressive by twentieth and twenty-first century notions of freedom and individualism. Arguably, Barker's political and radical past attracts him to a strikingly similar notion of the sacred without closure for the same reason.

⁵⁴ Performance Studies emerged as a new model for performing arts delivery in the 1990s. It had become established enough by the turn of the century to warrant an introductory textbook: *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, first published in 2002 and the most recent version, the third edition, was published in 2013.

Sacred Theatre's central argument, that theatre/performance is the 'optimal subjective experience' of the sacred, may begin to explain the relationship between the tragedy and the sacred. Barker argues for a connection between the sacred and tragedy in *Death, The One and the Art of Theatre*:

By making death the sacred object of our meditations *the art of theatre* [tragedy] at once dispenses with the pitiful paraphernalia of representation that so disfigures the stage of *the theatre* [commercial / humanist theatre].

(Barker 2005, p. 53)

Rationalism and Tragedy

For Barker the return to tragedy allows for the creation of a cultural space in which reason is no longer privileged, allowing ecstasy to emerge in the vacuum: '*The ecstasy of not knowing for once / The sheer suspension of not knowing*' (Barker 1997, p. 41, emphasis his). This perception of tragedy has a clear connection to the 'voiding of thought' in sacred theatre, although, for Barker, anxiety dominates this emotional state.⁵⁵ Barker therefore establishes

⁵⁵ Barker's focus on anxiety as a primary emotional experience for the audience may not clearly correspond with a more meditative experience of the sacred. This is also a separation between Eckhartian and Barkerian (apparent) models of mystical experience (see Chapter 1). Barker describes the role of anxiety in his theatre in an interview with David Ian Rabey: 'But I think of anxiety in my theatre as a state quite different to fear ... rather it is a troubling of the fixed strata of moral conventions ... a sort of low quaking that threatens the foundations of the stable personality ... the public doesn't quite know where to place its feet, there is an insecurity, but one which is simultaneously exhilarating' (Barker in Gritzner and Rabey 2006, p.34)

an antithesis between tragedy and reason that offers the audience member an atheistic and yet irrational world-view. Because this tragedy/reason antithesis is so central to Barker's vision of (theatrical) art I would like to explore this idea in relation to Greek rationalism, atheism and tragedy in order to interrogate the relationship between these two positions.

Two of the most influential theorists on contemporary conceptions of Greek tragedy are the philosophers Aristotle and Nietzsche. The level of this influence can be seen in Heiner Zimmermann's article entitled 'Howard Barker's Appropriation of Classical Tragedy' (1999). Zimmermann's engagement with what constitutes Greek tragedy is almost exclusively based on the theoretical frameworks set out by these two philosophers. Zimmermann does not engage directly with Greek tragic plays in his comparison, which means that the model he compares Barker to is mostly dependant on these two constructions. Zimmermann also utilises Barker's own theoretical model for how his tragedy functions, therefore accepting that the plays/productions achieve what Barker perceives them to achieve.⁵⁶ The result of this is that the article primarily compares theoretical models of tragedy rather than two sets of tragic plays. However, this focus on 'models' of tragedy suits the particular focus of Zimmermann's study, which is considering how Barker is *appropriating* tragedy by redefining the form through challenging dominant ideas of classical tragedy, notably, for Barker, Aristotle's

⁵⁶ This study has the advantage over Zimmermann of being undertaken after Barker has written a greater number of Theatre of Catastrophe tragedies and has also expanded his own theoretical explorations of (his) tragedy. Zimmermann's article was published in 1999 so before Barker's *Death, The One and the Art of Theatre* (2005). His reference to the second rather than the third edition of *Arguments for a Theatre* (1993 and 1997, respectively) would also suggest the final version of this text was not engaged with. *Hated Nightfall* is the most recent play referred to in this study (1994).

model of tragedy. In contrast to Zimmerman's study this thesis will attempt to examine beyond these models, looking at religious and spiritual aspects of Greek tragedy and consider their relationship to Barker's Theatre of Catastrophe.

Barker explicitly rejects Aristotle's model in *Arguments for a Theatre*: '[Tragedy] asserts nothing in its own defence – not its therapeutic essences, its cathartic effects on social behaviour, nothing Aristotelian at all' (Barker 1993, p. 113).⁵⁷ In *Death, The One and the Art of Theatre* (2005) Barker suggests that Aristotle's definition of Attic tragedy was unhelpfully informed by his rationalising and moralising philosophy:

Aristotle and tragedy – nothing too great that it cannot be annexed in the interests of social order ...

Aristotle – forcing politics onto the supremely apolitical ...

(Barker 2005, p. 68)

⁵⁷ Although Barker rejects Aristotle's view of social catharsis he previously describes the effects of tragedy as reducing instincts for social change: 'theatre of the Enlightenment requires its teachers, those who will promote the false ideal that Theatre Changes the World. It never changed the world, of course, but at its best it complicated it, making action even less likely than before' (1993, p. 112). Although the reasons are different, both theorists present an argument explaining why tragedy is not socially destabilizing. Aristotle's defence of tragedy as a positive and stabilizing social force (considered to be a response to Plato's concerns) is therefore not the obvious person to challenge when attacking political theatre; the Aristotelian model is often criticised by political theatre practitioners, for example Brecht and Boal (Brecht 1974, p. 87; Boal 1979, p. 1-50). Barker's post-Marxist theatre wants to challenge both the classical tradition and twentieth century radical theatre, reducing them to the single tendency of progressivism.

This quotation suggests that the tragedy Aristotle was forcing politics onto *already existed* in apolitical form. Therefore the actual Greek tragedy, or at least its apolitical elements, that existed before or during Aristotle's time is something Barker feels that he is rediscovering in his Theatre of Catastrophe.

Barker's model of tragedy as primarily an irrational experience most probably stems, in part, from Nietzsche's highly influential study of Greek tragedy, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). Nietzsche's argument is that it was emerging Greek rationalism that destroyed the powerful spirit of 'cheerfulness' and initiated a decline that would eventually result in nihilism in the west. Nietzsche conceptualizes this rational based approach as a new aesthetics in the Greek world (i.e. not Apolline or Dionysiac):

[W]e may approach the phenomenon of *aesthetic Socratism*, the chief law of which is, more or less: 'to be beautiful everything must first be intelligible' a parallel to the Socratic dictum 'only the one who knows is virtuous'

(Nietzsche 1993, p. 62, emphasis his)

For Nietzsche this decline was expressed within tragedy itself, in the plays of Euripides. Nietzsche defines this movement towards Greek rationalism as being most clearly understood through the philosopher Socrates and the playwright Euripides, and in *The Birth of Tragedy* they become the embodiment of this paradigm shift in aesthetics:

Euripides too was, in a particular sense, merely a mask: the deity that spoke through him was not Dionysus, nor yet Apollo, but a new-born daemon bearing the name of *Socrates*. That was the new opposition: the Dionysiac and the Socratic, and that conflict was to be the downfall of Greek tragedy.⁵⁸

(Nietzsche 1993, p. 60)⁵⁹

Greek rationalism when combined with tragedy allowed for an unraveling of religious ideas within the drama. Jan N. Bremmer, in his search for clear statements of atheism in antiquity, locates some of the strongest expressions in theatre. One of these is by Euripides in *Bellerophon*, spoken by Bellerophon himself:

Does someone say there are indeed gods in heaven? There are not, there are not, if a man is willing not to rely foolishly on the antiquated reasoning. Consider for yourselves, do not base your opinion on words of mine. I say myself that tyranny kills very many men and deprives them of their possessions, and that tyrants break their oaths to ransack cities, and in doing this they are more prosperous under heaven than

⁵⁸ In Nietzsche's final statement in his final work *Ecce Homo* (1888) the opposition was famously expressed in a new paradigm: 'Have I been understood? – *Dionysos against the Crucified...*' (Nietzsche 1979, p.134.)

⁵⁹ Adorno and Horkheimer trace the enlightenment instinct to Homer's Odysseus and its opposition to myth: 'In myth each moment of the cycle discharges the previous one, and thereby helps to install the context of guilt as law. Odysseus opposes this situation. The self represents rational universality against the inevitability of fate' (Adorno and Horkheimer 1997, p.58).

men who live quietly in reverence from day to day.

(Euripides in Bremmer, 2006, p. 16)

This is an early expression of the 'problem of evil' argument in theology and its function in a tragedy would almost inevitably result, if only temporally, in an unraveling of the established belief systems, systems that produce meaning and direction for the polis. Returning to the present, it is possible to see how the problem of evil functions in Barker's tragedy, where it is employed in a predominately secular society against progressivist humanist doctrines. In Barker's *The Last Supper* (1988), the disciple Sloman, who expresses the post-Christian humanist ideology that Barker continually assaults and whose connection to both Jesus and the ordinary working man is suggested through his character sub-title: 'A Carpenter', responds intensely to those who question his faith in the essential goodness of man, a humanist doctrine which faces similar problems to the theological 'problem of evil'. After the amoral female character, Judith, suggests his nature is flawed, Sloman expresses frustration at the gap between his drive for progress and the resistance of reality:⁶⁰

SLOMAN: And what if I do ram my head against trees? What if I do?
Perhaps I hate the universe. Perhaps I wish water would run uphill. And if democracy is as hard as scooping the stars out of the sky, so what, the effort is good, the effort is admirable –

⁶⁰ The character of Judith seems to be a female take on the biblical traitor Judas and is an early example of Barker's construction of a female in the direction of 'the one': someone who seems to exist outside normative morality and ideology.

(Barker 1988c, p. 14)

So, we have in both modes of tragedy the opening of a space in which normative ideology can be strongly questioned and this oppositional quality may also be the reason why both Euripides and Barker were/are not fully embraced in their time - the attack they make is too ideologically disorientating for the audience.

Although, of course, the atheistic position could be expressed elsewhere, for example in philosophical texts, it is in the mimesis of performance that any perspective or way of behaving can be presented in a context that is distanced via character, fiction and multiple perspectives, not to mention the historical or mythological location, from the playwright and performer. It is this distance but also disturbing closeness to real life that makes Plato so critical and wary of theatrical performance:

If you consider that the poet gratifies and indulges the instinctive desires of a part of us, which we forcibly restrain in our private misfortunes, with its hunger for tears and for an uninhibited indulgence in grief. Our better nature, being without adequate intellectual or moral training, relaxes its control over these feelings, on the grounds that it is someone else's sufferings it is watching and that there's nothing to be ashamed of in praising and pitying another man with some claim to goodness who shows excessive grief.

(Plato 1974, p. 374)

Plato is concerned here with what he expresses as primarily an emotional and behavioral deterioration in the audience viewing performance, rather than an intellectual one, and this is due to his faith in reason as the ultimate aspiration:

But you will know that the only poetry that should be allowed in a state is hymns to the gods and paeans in praise of good men; once you go beyond that and admit the sweet lyric or epic muse, pleasure and pain become your rulers instead of law and the rational principles commonly accepted as best.

(Plato 1974, p. 375)

However, this emphasis on praising the 'gods' and 'good men' as 'the only poetry that should be allowed' suggests an awareness of the vulnerability of both faith and morality in the face of tragic theatrical speculation. These observations combined together all point towards the territory of tragedy that Barker relentlessly drives towards in his tragic theatre: a collapse of ideology due to the focus on death and pain and the subsequent emergence of intense emotions which Plato fears will begin to dissolve the socially ordering and stabilizing forces of morality and faith. Barker himself comments on Plato's assault on tragedy and its relationship to the twentieth century in the following terms:

Plato's violent repudiation of poetry and drama in the fifth century B.C. is merely the first ideological statement of this unending war that rages between order and imagination, and the contemporary world, with its entire moral will invested in the threadbare notions of universal human happiness, finds itself equally uncomfortable with an art form that leaps over the fences so carefully erected by therapists, media mechanics, and social workers.

(Barker 1997, p. 172)

If Plato expresses the rationalist stance against tragic theatre then in Euripides we have the application of rational thought processes *within* the matrix of tragedy that result, even, in a degree of purely atheistic expression. It is in Euripidean drama therefore that we begin to see a mode of tragedy that Barker will embrace and develop in the 1980s. This complex mixture of rationalism (the aspect which Nietzsche sees as so destructive) and tragic emotion or irrationalism (which Plato sees as so destructive), are brilliantly expressed in one of Euripides's final plays *Bacchae*:

[W]hat chiefly preoccupied Euripides in his later work was not so much the impotence of reason in man as the wider doubt whether any rational purpose could be seen in the ordering of human life and the governance of the world. That trend culminates in *Bacchae*.

(Dodds 1951, p. 187)

This description of Euripides contains parallels with Barker's conception of tragedy. Dodds sees Euripides as both a product of, and a backlash against, the emerging Socratic rationalism, creating, or expressing, a secular irrationalism in tragic theatrical form. This is similar to the emergence of Barker's tragic drama in the late twentieth century, expressing the irrational and religious human as European enlightenment and the associated secular political philosophies start to decline. Approached from this perspective, *Bacchae* can be viewed as a powerful expression of the extra-human world and the emotional and unconscious realm of the human, exploding the rational subject of Pentheus.

In Barker's recent play entitled *Dogdeath in Macedonia* (2014), there is a very strong suggestion that Howard Barker feels an affinity with the ancient tragedian. Euripides himself is the protagonist in this drama, which imagines the final days of Euripides' life in voluntary exile writing his last play. The play's setting in Macedonia is based on the limited information we have about the end of Euripides' life: 'Presumably [...] *Bacchae* was one of the very last plays written by Euripides, perhaps after his departure from Athens to the court of King Archelaos in Macedonia, where according to ancient tradition, he died (in 407-6 BC)' (Seaford 1996, p. 25).⁶¹ The central debate of the play revolves around the clash of opinions on poetry between the aged Euripides

⁶¹ Barker's Euripides says that he is yet to give this final and partially written play a title (Barker 2014a, p. 70). Like the *Bacchae*, the queen in this play murders her son. However, unlike the *Bacchae*, the murder occurs in a scene where there is an exchange between the two characters (Barker 2014a, p. 46), which does not occur in Euripides' text, where these two characters are not onstage at the same time.

and the young Plato (aged 22), who has been sent by Socrates to persuade Euripides to return to Athens. The play therefore allows Barker to explore and express in dramatic form his opposition to Plato's criticism of poetry and drama. In contrast to Nietzsche, who argues that Euripidean drama is essentially Socratic, Barker's *Dogdeath in Macedonia* places Euripides' poetry at polar opposites to the rational philosophy of Socrates and Plato. On the arrival of Plato to Macedonia, Barker relates the place of exile to Euripides' character. It is a location where Plato, significantly, is uncomfortable:

PLATO: I don't like Macedonia /

[...]

EURIPIDES: It's a vastly better place than Athens for a hope-less /
dream-less / and wife-less man / like me

PLATO: I've come to fetch you /

EURIPIDES: (*Ignoring this*) And please don't misunderstand me /
hope-less-ness is the condition I aspired to / and have
acquired / with utmost difficulty /

(Barker 2014a, p. 29)

Barker's own identification with Euripides in this play is shown by this expression of desire for and achievement of the condition of hope-less-ness, a state of mind Barker describes in *Death, The One and the Art of Theatre* and one which I have already established relationships with to Eckhartian mysticism. A further and related association with Barker's point of view is

perhaps implied through the word 'dream-less', suggesting an absence of any visionary ideology behind the work of the great Greek playwright. In the climatic moments of the play, Plato's calm and rational exterior finally breaks as he '*collapses in a flood of tears*' (Barker 2014a, p. 72). His challenge to Euripides expresses the basis of logical thought in non-contradiction that his philosophy depends on; a base that he fears the irrationalism of Euripidean poetry will undermine:

PLATO: All contradiction is appearance / and the consequence of
 misunderstanding /
 (*He stares*)
 If you disagree with this /

EURIPIDES: I do / I do disagree /

PLATO: You are the enemy not only of logic / but also / of
 democracy /

(Barker 2013, p. 73)

Soon after this exchange, Euripides is set upon and killed by a pack of dogs that have been present from the start of the play. Like Pentheus in the *Bacchae*, Euripides is savagely torn to pieces. However, whereas the god of ecstasy and theatre initiates and oversees the death of the oppressive rationalist Pentheus in Euripides' play, it is Plato, the rationalist, in Barker's drama, who goads the pack of dogs in their murder of the tragic playwright:

(EURIPIDES *loses his balance, and his euphoria simultaneously. He falls into the pack, but it is PLATO who stimulates the animals to savagery, clicking his fingers and wading among them.*)

PLATO: EAT / EAT / EAT HIS POETRY /
(*He laughs, he exults. [...]*)

(Barker 2014a, p. 75-76)

The symbolism of this sequence can be seen as an expression of the historical and cultural shift into Socratism that Nietzsche argues led to the demise of the golden age of Attic tragedy.

Dionysus and Tragedy

Further consideration of Dionysus, the god of theatre and ecstasy, offers some useful insights into the religious and spiritual aspects of tragedy. Richard Seaford's essay 'Tragedy and Dionysus' observes that 'A strong association of Greek drama with Dionysus persisted throughout antiquity, and it is virtually certain that drama also *originated* in Dionysiac cult' (2005, p. 25). In an attempt to define the nature of Dionysus, Seaford draws upon the four references to the god that occur in Homer as a means of highlighting the early essential characteristics of the god: death (mentioned twice), wine and

autocratic resistance.⁶² Dionysus' association with death of course immediately resonates with Barker's placing of death as the essential focus of tragedy in *Death, The One* and Barker's resistance to normative ideology finds an ancient parallel in resistance to autocratic rule. Dionysus as a wine god is the aspect that seems alien to Barker's tragedy where drunkenness is rare, despite the constant catastrophes and the intense emotional experiences and ecstasies of his characters, this is always combined with a lucid philosophical perception which seems far removed from alcoholic inebriation. There is some support for this in Barker's *Judith* (1990) when the Assyrian general Holofernes rejects Judith's offer of wine, altering the narrative from the original apocryphal biblical text where he is murdered by her after drinking 'more than he had drunk on any single day in his whole life (*Judith* 12: 20 *The Revised English Bible*). Instead, Barker's Holofernes explains, 'I do not drink, which if you were not a stranger, you would know. Obviously you believe in rumours, for example, the rumour that cruel men are degenerate. The opposite is the case, I promise you' (Barker 1990, p.49). Rabey argues that drunkenness is alien to the experience in Barker's tragic drama: 'The sense of having witnessed too much is crucial. It leads not to a drunkenness or a reeling exhaustion but a roaring sense of possibility and a rinsing out of accumulated expectations. Barker's own title for this form of theatre is Catastrophism' (Rabey 1989, p. 245). Such a lucidity of thought is attempted continually by Barker's characters even when they are experiencing the most terrible suffering or mental and emotional chaos. This determination to express as precisely as possible the inexpressible seems

⁶² Homer being both a very early reference to the god in literature and the author of two foundational texts of Greek culture.

crucial to maintaining to Barker's theatre. In *The Bite of the Night* (1988) the character Gay (daughter of Helen of Troy) expresses an attitude to horror that could also be seen as an expression of the thought process that supports all of Barker's tragic theatre:

GAY: The amount of killing I have seen! My father, for example, on the floor and skinned. Paris! Yes, it's true! They skinned him. And my grandfather was inside out. I have seen the lot I can assure you, and I thought to myself, Gay, they want you to go **insane**. So I decided there and then I would not. **I declined to be insane.**

(Barker 1998, p. 28, emphasis his)

This continual declining to go insane in the face of horror is the reason why Barker's characters, I would argue, cannot enter a full irrationality or madness (in the way that, for example, Shakespeare's *Lear* is able to), as all experience is always circumvented by this determination for articulation and for precision of thought in chaos. Dionysus as the god of wine is therefore an aspect of the god that is alien to Barker's tragedy.

Seaford uses the Homeric references as the basis for a fuller reflection on the character of Dionysus, noting that the god unites aspects of life normally seen as opposites: 'life and death', 'human-animal, man-god, and male-female, each of which was associated with Dionysus (notably in *Bacchae*) and

occurred in the ritual of mystic initiation' (Seaford 2005, p. 32). Dionysus' connection with the mystery cults offers an interesting alternative performative engagement with death, other than the very social event of tragedy. Charles Segal, in his study *Dionysiac Poetics and Euripides' Bacchae* (1997), discusses how Euripides utilises the aspect of Dionysus that collapses culturally established oppositions: 'Euripides' "feeling for the tragic antinomies of life," perhaps more pronounced in the *Bacchae* than in his earlier plays, finds its clearest expression in doubling, the pairing of opposites, and the sliding of opposites into one another' (Segal 1997, p. 27).

Seaford argues that the first tragedies were about Dionysus himself, which allows the extant *Bacchae* by Euripides (despite its late date 404 BC) to serve as a model to examine the early features of Greek tragedy. By drawing upon this play, he argues that the relationship of the protagonist to the chorus expresses tragedy's drive towards communitarianism: 'In Euripides *Bacchae* this also takes the subjective form of opposition between the almost impenetrable individualism of the autocrat Pentheus on the one hand and the chorus that aspires to "merging the soul in the thiasos" on the other' (Seaford 2005, p. 33). This 'communitarian' approach to Dionysus, challenges the famous Nietzschean conception, which he views as a distortion in its rejection of a more democratic impulse: 'Nietzsche's distaste for the politics of his own time made him imagine Dionysus as a metaphysical principle with nothing to do with "the state and society". In this he was profoundly mistaken' (Seaford 2005, p. 32). Even when looking at the *Birth of Tragedy* itself, there are certain definitions of the Dionysiac that Nietzsche employs that seem to

favour a communitarian levelling, or at least could easily be interpreted in this direction:

Now the slave is a free man, now all the rigid and hostile boundaries that distress, despotism or 'impudent fashion' have erected between man and man break down. Now, with the gospel of world harmony, each man feels himself not only united, reconciled, and at one with his neighbour, but *one* with him, as if the veil of Maya had been rent and now hung in rags before the mysterious primal Oneness.

(Nietzsche 1993, p. 17)

This early romantic definition by Nietzsche suggests an aspect of tragedy that is concerned with the disintegration of ordering structures towards freedom and therefore offers support for Seaford's analysis. Barker's relationship to this aspect of Dionysus is complex in that it can be seen to agree with his conception of tragedy as a means of dismantling the controlling and restrictive aspect of ideology, but it functions in contradiction to Barker's emphasis on tragedy as an experience that essentially divides the audience and promotes individualism rather than unity: 'In tragedy, the audience is disunited. It sits alone. It suffers alone' (Barker 1997, p. 19). Nietzsche's description is also enlightening in its reference to oneness, a term Barker employs as an expression of the mystical state of ecstasy that both tragedy and the female as *the one* can invoke (see Chapter 2). However, Barker's focusing of oneness through a female individual allows him to avoid the potential for

social reconciliation and immersion that such an experience could lead to. Therefore, Barker can be seen to be directing a more fluid experience, the liminal *before* of sacred theatre, towards his own mystical agenda.

The religious matrix of Athenian tragedy

Classical scholar Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood's in *Tragedy and Athenian Religion* (2003) argues that Aristotle's influential definition of tragedy has come to form the core definition of what we perceive 'drama' to be, and which dominates contemporary readings of fifth century tragedy over and at the severe marginalisation of the non-rational, religious and ritualistic elements of the performances:

The perception of tragedy underlying the *Poetics* was shaped by rigidly rationalizing perceptual filters [...] It is methodologically dubious to use the perceptions of a rationalizing thinker, who was not even a participant in the culture, since he did not live in the fifth century and he was not an Athenian [...] However, the Aristotelian mind cast and the marginalisation of religion in tragedy have not disappeared, and they can take many forms.

(Sourvinou-Inwood 2003, p. 2)

This challenge to the Aristotelian rational reading of Attic tragedy, finds an interesting connection in Hans-Thies Lehmann's suggestion in *Postdramatic*

Theatre, that 'transformation' is the core of performance/theatre *before* the Aristotelian primacy of plot and unity of action:

Theatre is transformation at all levels, *metamorphosis*, and it is worth taking to heart the insight of theatre anthropology that under the conventional scheme of *action* there is the more general structure of *transformation*. This explains why abandoning the model of 'mimesis of action' by no means leads to the end of theatre.

(Lehmann 2006, p. 77)

Sourvinou-Inwood's argument is that the idea of drama as a coherent plot and a closed world of the play is a retrospective definition of tragic drama, which was in fact crystallized and rationalised in the century following its inception. When analysing Greek tragedy, Sourvinou-Inwood, in place of this rationalizing model of 'drama', argues for an audience experience in which ritual aspects of the performance are not fully separated from the present reality via various zooming devices, and this argument is supported by her reconstruction of proto-tragedy. Her main argument to challenge the rational modern view is to show how the ritual context of Greek tragedy, combined with the distance created by the play's heroic setting, would have created a constantly fluid experience for the audience:

The double perspective of the heroic setting, and the shifting of the distances through the use of zooming and distancing devices, allowed

the explorations of problems to take place at a distance, so that the explorations were not symbolically threatening to an audience, but at the same time it allowed them to be relevant to the audience's realities.

(Sourvinou-Inwood 2003, p. 46)

David Wiles draws a related conclusion in *Greek Theatre Performance* (2000) when he states, 'Mythic subject matter was not a residue of old tradition, but was introduced into tragedy as a means of generating critical distance, so issues of the moment could be turned into issues of principle' (Wiles 2000, p. 11). This 'double perspective' of tragedy has an obvious parallel for Barker's drama. Barker's initial engagement with tragedy followed a common approach to twentieth century realistic drama, where tragedy was set in contemporary society and for or about the 'common man', exemplified by Arthur Miller's plays and his short essay on the topic *Tragedy and the Common Man* (Miller 1994). However, Barker's increasing interest in the tragic genre corresponded with a turning away from the contemporary world and setting his plays at a distance to the audience's immediate reality. This initially started with historical settings in the first half of the 1980s exemplified by *Victory* (1983) and *The Castle* (1985), and then to myth in *The Bite of the Night* (1985) and *The Last Supper* (1988) and then to reinterpretations of canonical literature in *Seven Lears* (1989) and *(Uncle) Vanya* (1996). Sourvinou-Inwood's observation about the need for zooming devices to allow the audience a safe distance from the painful problems explored in ancient tragedy is particularly revealing when considered in relation to Barker's move into tragedy. As his

plays increasingly challenged normative ideology and morality through the tragic form, the sense of distance created through the use of historical and mythic and literary settings allows for more disturbing subject matter to be explored, keeping the horror at a more tolerable distance.

In a similar way that ancient Greek tragedy explores the events that eventually end with the formation of religious cults, Barker's drama often imaginatively tackles the chaos that takes place before the foundation of cultural and historical events, movements or characters. As Angel-Perez observes:

[I]n this rethinking of foundation myths, Barker's artistic ambition exceeds the mere will to debunk. His re-visioning is more than a dismissal of something antiquated. Those myths (Homeric, Biblical, Shakespearian, fairy tales) that are instrumental in the constitution of the grand narratives may still have things to tell us. Yet, what they have to tell, in Barker's hands, may differ considerably from what their hypotexts originally proposed

(Angel-Perez 2013, p. 38)

As with Greek tragedy, these foundation myths are re-examined to engage with contemporary concerns. Examples include the emergence of Western culture from the ashes of Troy in *The Bite of the Night*, the emergence of secular rationalism, replacing Judaeo-Christian monotheism in *Rome*, the

formation of the character of Shakespeare's *King Lear* in *Seven Lears* and the emergence of a united Europe following the defeat of Islam in *The Europeans*. In addition, as with the mention of heroes and gods for the Greek audience, Barker's use of recognisable characters from myth, history or canonical literature (e.g. Hamlet in *Gertrude – The Cry* (2002), Homer in *The Bite of the Night*, Abraham in *Rome* or Hitler in *Found in the Ground* (2001) immediately ignites cultural presuppositions in the audience.

Even if the narrative is not directly about the mythical characters and their story, for example the myth of Adam and Eve in *I Saw Myself* (2009), the regular invocation by the central character of this myth helps to create a sub or parallel narrative that takes place alongside the main narrative and serves as a comment on the current situation of the characters, which the audience can then draw upon to critique their own life. In *I Saw Myself* the central character, Sleev, a widow, living in Europe in the thirteenth century, imagines and interrogates the experience of Eve and in the later stages of the play concludes:

SLEEV: When Eve was old and bent and thin with war and pain and digging she wept those dry tears of old women shaking her head and wringing her animal hands with her remorse her hands which had been dove-white and slender on the rising adoration of her husband and God was glad glad of her suffering BUT PARADISE HAD TO BE USURPED beyond shame there is

ecstasy forgive Eve forgive me our knowledge and we will
forgive God accordingly.

(Barker 2008, p. 79)

The use of this myth to enable the character and then the audience to look beyond a utopian or ordered world towards the formlessness of ecstasy, employs the familiar framework of a foundational narrative as a secure structure on which to gesture towards the conceptually dark space of ecstasy. This existential stripping that takes place in Barker's drama, which often culminates in observations on the general nature of being, makes it difficult for the audience not to relate the observations to their own existence as the statements become about any human existence.

Stephen Booth examines tragic theatre's ability to gesture towards aspects of existence beyond the ordering and comprehensible world of reason in his analysis of Shakespearian tragedy, arguing that a defining feature of tragic drama is its expression of a world that cannot be fully understood and controlled:

What *Macbeth* does for us – what successful dramatic tragedy does for us – is like what the word “tragedy” does for real-life tragedies: it gives local habitation and a name to the most terrifying of things, “a deed without a name” (IV.i-49), without denying its namelessness, its incomprehensibility, its indefiniteness.

(Booth 2001, p. 121)

Booth's argument that tragedy expresses indefiniteness helps to explain Barker's interest in tragic theatre and his use of catastrophe as a means of derailing ideological and rational perspectives. David Ian Rabey directly connects Booth's observations on tragedy with Barker's theatre in his analysis of *The Castle* (1985), examining the irruption of the extra-human world into the world-views of the characters of Stucley and Krak:

Stephen Booth has identified the gruelling distance and contrary tensions, challenging and breaking all hopes of definite confinement, yet, nevertheless, confined within *King Lear*: correspondingly Stucley yearns for 'the obliteration of the melancholy crawl from the puddle to the puddle, from the puddle of the maternal belly to the puddle of the old man's involuntary bladder', while becoming increasingly aware of the fragility of reassurance in rational patterning, sensing 'all the madness in the immaculately ordered words ... all the temper in the perfect curve', which permitted Krak to entertain and initially manage such immeasurable forces of destruction before they slipped from his control. Krak's own rationality is overturned by the discovery that the body is itself infinite, 'no measure, neither width nor depth', rather than the definite thing he had thought to have limited, tamed and, to most purposes, dismissed.

(Rabey 1989, p. 171)

Barker's growing interest in tragic theatre as a way of expressing an irrational world (a world of indefiniteness) from the mid 1980s onwards perhaps informed the shift towards a greater level of stylisation in Barker's Theatre of Catastrophe as a counter balance to the sense of disorder created by the challenging subject matter. The ritual and formal quality of Barker's theatrical event, e.g. rhythms of the language, choreographed and carefully blocked performance, performance presented out to the audience, discordant sound, etc., allows Barker's theatre to present thought processes that argue for the absence of meaning or ideology: the carefully structured visual, aural and spatial theatrical elements offer a level of compensation for the absence of ideological and moral structure in the content. Barker himself makes a similar observation about the importance of theatrical form in his theatre:

Style, Barker said, was never the superficial indulgence of taste or sensation it is frequently considered to be, but something arrived at by painful study; a distillation of thought and practice, and essentially a moral decision. In a perverse way, Barker's staging became the moral element in an imaginative world that stressed its own immorality ...

(Barker 2007, p. 32)

A not dissimilar use of ritual was employed in ancient Greek theatre, greatly enhanced by the ritual elements existing as *actual* religious rituals, within the society in which the performance took place. According to Sourvinou-Inwood, these rituals would have grounded the complex and dark philosophical

explorations of the play in a ritual structure that governed their everyday lives (Sourvinou-Inwood 2005, p. 10). For an ancient Greek audience, the formal quality of the singing and chanting chorus and the praying protagonists would have placed the tragedy in the religious context of Greek religion, making it ultimately less disturbing. In a similar manner both the appearance of deities to mortals and the impersonation of deities by performers corresponded to the religious experience and traditions beyond the Dionysian theatre (Sourvinou-Inwood 2005, p. 13).⁶³

Sourvinou-Inwood's assertion that fifth century tragedy was primarily a religious exploration is not only supported by the use of ritual elements and impersonations of epiphanies but also due to the wider Greek religious model with its perspective of ultimate unknowability: that the will of the gods is only glimpsed ever in part and is beyond human knowledge and moral understanding. This differs from the Christian *apophatic* position (see Chapter 2) in that Greek religion included no clear or authorised sacred text (in contrast to the two biblical testaments, revealed by God) or an authoritarian priestly group or single figure (the pope) that could set out moral positions and statements of faith to its people.⁶⁴ Although oracles (notably at Delphi) and epiphanies might suggest clear revelation was possible, this process was not a guarantee of direct truth, again due to the limitations of human knowledge

⁶³ An example of priestly personnel impersonating deities is in the Mysteries of Eleusis, which we will consider in the next chapter as a related mode of Greek religious drama.

⁶⁴ 'Unlike Christianity, Greek religion did not have a canonical body of beliefs, no divine revelation nor scriptural texts – only marginal sects had sacred books. It also did not have a "professional" divinely anointed clergy claiming special knowledge or authority; and there was no church' (Sourvinou-Inwood 2005, p. 8). Dodds also highlights this difference: 'Greece had neither a bible nor a church' (Dodds 1951, p. 75).

(Sourvinou-Inwood 2005, p. 9).⁶⁵ It is this uncertain nature of Greek religion, therefore, that explains both the emergence of such a questioning and exploratory religious event as drama, with its multiple perspectives, and specifically tragedy, in Greek culture. It also begins to explain a growing interest in Greek tragedy in British theatre in the late twentieth century, offering a diversion from the political optimism and progressivism that informed the post-war British theatrical interest in social realism and Brechtian theatre. As Edith Hall observes in a study of the influence of Greek tragedy on Western theatre after 1969, 'More Greek tragedy has been performed in the last thirty years than at any point in history since Greco-Roman antiquity' (Hall 2004, p. 2). Barker's return to tragedy in the 1980s can be seen as part of this wider movement and his particular engagement with tragedy seems to have been an attempt to navigate the (apparently) ideologically neutralised space of post-modern thought. Sourvinou-Inwood summarises her argument for the crucial religious dimension to Greek tragedy, even in the tragedies of Euripides:

The most terrifying thing is a world that has no meaning, no order, and no plan. Euripidean tragedies show that the world does have order and meaning, and works on a plan of Zeus. By our standards, that order and that plan were often cruel, and not the mark of a benevolent divine order. But the world is not always kind and just and fair, and the Greek perception of the cosmos acknowledged this fact. It is this perception

⁶⁵ This ancient Greek religious attitude is helpfully defined by Michael L. Morgan as 'Delphic Theology' (2006, p. 231).

that is articulated in those tragedies which, to the modern eyes, have often appeared to be criticising the gods.

(Sourvinou-Inwood 2003, p. 410)

The earlier reference to Greek atheistic comments by characters can be read in this new framework: the tragic and sometimes irrational expressions and endings in the tragedies arguably expressed the always limited knowledge of man in relation to the ordering force of fate and the will of the gods. Unlike the more agnostic and atheistic doubts expressed both inside and outside the tragedies, the overall structure of the tragedy and its context within the Athenian religious matrix seems to have side stepped the 'problem of evil' that the secular moralist encounters. It is therefore religious tragedy and the ability of a religious perspective in general to defer the problem of evil from man to the divine, and where ultimate understanding is conveniently beyond human knowledge, that avoids descent into nihilism. Barker's drama and philosophy therefore has a problematic proximity to nihilism due to its rejection of both progressive rationalism and secular ideologies and religious or metaphysical belief systems.⁶⁶ If Sourvinou-Inwood's reconstruction is correct, this is the central ideological distinction between Euripidean and Barkerian tragedy. John Gray, employing the example of Christianity, highlights how the problem of evil is arguably more destructive in a secular context:

⁶⁶ In more recent years Barker's anxiety about his own proximity to nihilism can be observed in *The Dying of Today* (2008) and *Hurts Given and Received* (2010) where tragic narrator/poet figures are critiqued (in terms of morality) by characters that are suffering after experiencing their stories and poetry.

Liberal humanism is a secular rendition of a Christian myth, but the truth in the myth has been lost on the way. The biblical story of the Fall teaches that evil cannot be rooted out from human life. Humans are radically flawed – a perception expressed in the doctrine of Original Sin.

(Gray 2004, p. 8)

The problem, therefore, for Barker's tragedy is the absence of divine will behind his tragic narratives. We do, however, in its place, still have a sense of fate and other forces acting beyond the character's control. These more controlling characters fulfil this godly function from the Greek tragic drama and are observable in his later plays. In *He Stumbled* (1998) the protagonist, an anatomist called Doja, is aware from early in the play that his employment to dissect the body of the king has locked him into a potentially terrible fate: 'I think if any of us is to leave this place alive I must fuck with the Queen ...' (Barker 2008, p. 183).

The association of death and sex is a defining feature in many of Barker's later plays and their concentration into the Barkerian archetype of the female 'one' also follows a common pattern. 'The one' as a queen is also notably common in Barker's later plays and helps to lend the character/'the one' a goddess-like aura, with monarchy and divinity closely related and even identical in many human political-religious traditions. In this line of dialogue, therefore, the protagonist Doja emphasises irrational elements that help to

push the play towards a tragic religious conception of fate. This is then further emphasised by the attitudes and comments of the other characters, particularly the chorus of two dead priests.

One of the two assistances of Doja develops this sense that super human forces are at work, as their fear causes them to become suddenly deeply suspicious of the other assistance:

SUEDE: Yes, you. You are the origin.

PIN: Of what...?

SUEDE: THE MORTAL DANGER WE ARE IN. YOU.

(He lifts the scalpel.)

Don't come near me. Not that I fear you. But I would think myself contaminated by your blood.

(Barker 2008, p. 214, emphasis his)

Although this opinion is reduced and qualified by the character's position, a clearly absurd superstitious perspective reinforced by their character's type (naïve sidekick/servant) and subordinate position in the narrative, when married with Doja's own uncanny concerns, it foregrounds irrationalism and mystery while carefully evading the extreme of the supernatural. As the attack continues on Pin, Suede significantly locates his contamination in the lack of respect for the dead:

SUEDE: He's the reason. He has no reverence for flesh. All these years
and we did not suspect –

[...]

PIN: TO WHAT TO WHAT AM I UNFAITHFUL -

SUEDE: OUR COMPACT WITH THE DEAD

(Barker 2008, p. 215, emphasis his)

In the 2000 performance of this play by the Wrestling School, Pin's turning on Suede was expressed through a sudden change into a distinctly non-naturalistic, intense and controlled vocality and physicality from actress Julia Tarnoky, contrasting with the needy and servile style proceeding this change. This greatly heightened the sense of a shift from normality (secular and rational) into a more unnatural realm: a more ritual performance style supporting the shift towards irrationalism. Suede's insistence on the sacred nature of their profession extends to further supernatural assertions 'THE DECEASED ARE CAPABLE OF PAIN' lending the narrative an aura of the otherworldly.

The play's climax involves the king dramatically appearing (Doja had been given the corpse of someone else). The king, Tortmann, requests the heart of Doja: 'I" keep your heart ... a thing no doubt you've long since ceased to revere' (Barker 2008, p. 249), which results in Doja dissecting his own body to remove the organ. This entrance is epiphany like in that a king figure must come close to the nearest character a secular based drama can utilise as an

all powerful god substitute, particularly when the narrative has allowed him to appear suddenly when assumed to be the dissected corpse that the stage action has revolved around. In addition to this, in the Wrestling School production the performer playing the king moved towards the centre of the stage in a strange slow motion movement, adding to this sense of the otherworldly. Tortmann's dialogue enforces this sense of being other than human and god like, 'because I was a king my ecstasy has been ... extraordinary ... an ecstasy akin to God's' (Barker 2008, p.249). Therefore Doja's unnerving sense of his approaching death is given Greek tragic form by this *deus ex machina* like ending.

The subjectivity of the tragic protagonist

In the final sections of this chapter, the focus is on the tragic protagonist in both Greek theatre and Barker's Theatre of Catastrophe. Two previous studies have engaged specifically with Barker's relationship to Greek tragedy and in both these studies the subjectivity of the tragic protagonist is a significant area of discussion. The first of these studies is Rosalind Reedman's MPhil thesis entitled 'Classical Tragic Vision in the work of Howard Barker' (1991). Reedman begins her thesis by emphasising the similarities in form and vision of the two tragic theatres: 'there is in [Barker's] plays a seriousness of intent, a starkness of vision and a stylisation of form that in my view constitutes a modern equivalent for the ancient genre of tragedy' (Reedman 1991, p. 1). She then proceeds to consider chapter by chapter a Greek tragedy by each of the three tragedians, comparing each one

to a single significant Barker play from the 1980s. After establishing a number of convincing connections with Aeschylus' *Orestia* (the trilogy is treated as a single play) in relation to Barker's *The Castle*, designated by her as 'social dramas that involve the whole community' (Reedman 1991), Reedman then moves to Sophocles' *Antigone* and Barker's *Victory*, observing a greater focus in Sophoclean tragedy on human agency:

In moving from the plays of Aeschylus to those of Sophocles, there is a perceptible shift of focus in the drama from grand, sweeping, monumental dimensions to a barer, pared-down theatre in which man in all his complexity seizes the centre stage from the gods.

(Reedman 1991, p. 71)

Reedman sees a comparison with the sense of isolation experienced by the protagonists in both Barker and Sophocles and concludes that the tragic hero is distinguished by their ability to distil the overwhelming complexity of existence into an immediate, imaginative and concentrated action, whilst remaining fully aware of this complexity:

Barker exposes the individual isolation of many of his characters, Galactia, (*Scenes from an Execution*), Bela (*No End of Blame*), and Skinner; like Sophocles' Ajax, Philoctetes and Oedipus, these characters are isolated by their actions from the rest of society.

[...]

The purpose of the hero figure would therefore seem to be his/her existential demonstration, in word and deed, of the paradoxical combination of complexity and terrible simplicity that together comprise the soul of the individual.

(Reedman 1991, p. 103/104)

This focus on the soul of the individual continues into the final comparison of the study in a chapter entitled 'Tragic Wisdom in the Divided Soul', where Reedman engages in decidedly spiritual territory, analysing the Dionysian ideas that inform Euripides' *Bacchae* and then suggesting parallels with Barker's early Theatre of Catastrophe play *The Last Supper* (1988). Reedman begins the discussion by stressing a number of connections between the works of the two playwrights:

By looking at the endings of Euripides' tragedies, particularly *The Bacchae* I find that there is no return to order or harmony, no collective celebration, just a terrible uncompromising isolation. A similar desolation on and off stage signifies the end of a Barker play; by comparing the tragic pleasure of Euripides with the moments of catastrophic beauty of Barker I can not only equate the two writers but suggest too that Barker may be seen as 'the most tragic poet' of his own time.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ A reference to Aristotle's description of Euripides as 'the most tragic of poets' (Aristotle 1996, p. 22).

(Reedman 1991, p. 117)

Although Reedman effectively identifies terrible isolation as a distinguishing feature of the endings of many of Euripides's plays, the assertion that 'there is no return to order or harmony', perhaps requires qualification with regard to the religious context of Greek tragedy and the probable response of the audience to Euripides' use of deities in epiphany and the foundation of cults in his theatre.⁶⁸ Therefore, despite the disturbing events experienced by the protagonist, some level of meaning, purpose and sense of collective harmony for the audience would probably have been generated through the use of these devices in the final stages of the play. This would have also been the case with Euripides' *Bacchae*, which ends with both an epiphany of the god Dionysus and (probably) the foundation of a cult.⁶⁹

The final moments of Barker's *The Last Supper* also features what seems to be the institution of a cult, or perhaps rather the formalisation of a cult through the creation of a ritual act. The cult is that of the prophet Lvov, whose spiritual guidance expresses the artistic vision of Barker's Theatre of Catastrophe: against the backdrop of an ongoing war, Lvov asserts the spiritually purifying nature of a terrible encounter with disorder, 'only catastrophe can keep us clean' (Barker 1988c, p. 23). Although the play draws upon key elements of the Christ story transposed to a modern setting, with twelve disciples

⁶⁸ Sourvinou-Inwood, in response to the modern tendency to view epiphany, aetiologies and epilogues in Euripidean drama as 'simply closure devices', argues that: 'what is important is how these endings would have been perceived by the ancient audience, in whose religious realities the cults referred to were real cults, and for whom the deities were representations of deities whom they worshipped' (Sourvinou-Inwood 2003, p. 415).

⁶⁹ Richard Seaford feels strongly that the lost final sections of the *Bacchae* must have included the establishment of a Dionysian cult in Thebes: 'In the first, general part of his speech [...] D. [Dionysus] surely announced the establishment of his cult at Thebes: (a) that was his aim in coming there [...]; (b) Eur.'s tragedies frequently end with the deity founding a cult' (Seaford 1996, p. 252).

attending a final meal before the death of their spiritual teacher, instead of the Christian Eucharist, Barker's *The Last Supper* concludes with a shockingly literal rather than symbolic consumption of the prophet's body by his disciples, with Lvov dramatically announcing: 'I AM THE SUPPER!' (Barker 1988c, p. 50, emphasis his.) Reedman argues for a Dionysian connection in Barker's disturbing take on the Christ narrative:

Lvov has gathered together with his followers for the ultimate act of worship that will bind them to him in the same way that Dionysus was bound to his true worshippers, and by which they will become the continuing witnesses to his existence. The fear of both Judith and the Bacchantes that they will lose their god is unfounded; they all learn in the most devastating way that they will never be without 'the god unnamed'. Through the act of sparagmos, the sacrifice with knowledge, the eating of the god, the god is always with them. Dodds writes that 'the culminating act of the Dionysiac dance was the tearing to pieces and eating raw of an animal body; it is at once holy and horrible, fulfilment and uncleanness, a sacrament and a pollution – the same violent conflict of emotional attitudes that runs all through *The Bacchae* and lies at the root of all religion of the Dionysiac type'.

(Reedman 1991, p. 124-5)

For Reedman, the tragic or Dionysian experience is one that generates an existential response to the nature of reality, awakening previously repressed aspects of the soul:

Why Dionysus? Because I tend to agree with Heidegger's existential interpretation, explicit in *The Bacchae*, that he represents the 'inside' earth, the second part of the soul described above, in opposition to the 'external' world, the artificially created, purely rational part of the soul. The worship or at the very least the recognition of the Dionysiac is necessary before the world part and the earth part can be united and consequently free the complete soul to live the previously un-lived life.

(Reedman 1991, p. 140)

This notion of the divided soul forms the basis of her reading of *The Last Supper*, viewing two key characters, the protagonist Lvov and Judith, a widow, as aspects of the same soul:

Only Judith continues to demand more and more knowledge, extending beyond the unknowable if necessary. Judith is the other half of Lvov's divided soul, the rational half that will use what the emotional half has created, the Judas to Lvov's Christ

(Reedman 1991, p. 123)

Reedman's case for Judith as a representation of the 'rational half' of a divided soul is based on the character's uncompromising search for knowledge over peace:

JUDITH: I alone of all of them, I truly want to know. I alone, prefer knowledge to peace. You taught me everything. Everything. But one thing you cannot teach me is what it is to live without you. And that I have to know. I want to help you die, so that there is no one left. And after that there won't be. Anyone at all.

(Barker 1988c, p. 45)

Reedman's interpretation of Judith symbolically as the rational aspect of the soul presumably and somewhat problematically connects Judith to Pentheus in the *Bacchae* (although this is not stated directly by Reedman). The critique of rationality expressed through the portrayal of this repressed young king does not easily relate to Judith's clearly more profound understanding of the world, herself and others. Reedman does, however, seem aware that this symbolic model does not fully explain the character of Judith and ascribes other attributes to her in her relationship to Lvov: 'she is his equal, because she worships knowledge beyond sex – she is at once his muse, his alter ego and his mother-goddess figure' (Reedman 1991, p. 126). Rather than view Judith as primarily the rational aspect of Lvov, perhaps a focus on the more mystical sense of a search for knowledge beyond rational meaning is relevant here. In this respect, Judith shows traits of 'the one', female characters who

move beyond (or are already beyond) normative ideas of truth and morality, and who ignite this search in others. A description of Judith by another character in the play suggests that an approach similar to Eckhartian detachment informs her responses to the world, 'you are unloving. Unhating. But unloving too. I think you will live to be hundreds!' (Barker 1988c, p. 14.) Judith's desire to move the protagonist towards death is also a familiar aspect of 'the one' in Barker's plays. This thanatic element is examined in detail in the next chapter.

Although there may be some limitations to her application of a binary model of the soul to the central characters, Reedman's examination of Barker's *The Last Supper* establishes a number of effective connections with Dionysian spirituality and the Theatre of Catastrophe at the early stage of its development.

In contrast to Reedman, Heiner Zimmermann's study, 'Howard Barker's Appropriation of Classical Tragedy' (1999), not only sets out areas of correspondence but also argues for clear differences or developments in Barker's Theatre of Catastrophe from the Greek tragic model. His main focus for this analysis is Barker's relationship to Aristotle's and Nietzsche's definitions of Greek tragedy. Where Barker's rejection of Aristotelian tragedy is clearly expressed in his theoretical writings, his relationship to Nietzsche is where Zimmermann necessarily exercises a greater degree of speculation. This relationship is of particular interest to this chapter (and study) because it engages with religious concepts and their role in the formation and

disintegration of subjectivity in the tragic protagonist. Zimmermann concludes that Barker's theatre only engages with the Dionysian aspect of Nietzsche's Apollo-Dionysus model:

[Barker] disagrees with Nietzsche's claim that the cause of the Greek audience's pleasure lies in the Apollonian transformation of the Dionysiac, in the transfiguration of pain, suffering and death through their representation which creates an illusion of form and order. For the "theatre of catastrophe," unlike Nietzsche's construction of Attic tragedy, does not combine the Apollonian principle (rationality, form, individuation, illusion, beauty) with the opposite Dionysiac artistic impulse (ecstasy, loss of self, erasing of distinction, breaking of barriers, reference to ultimate reality, primordial oneness). The form of Barker's plays denies Apollonian order and rationality as much as his protagonists who exclusively follow a Dionysiac desire to transgress in order to overcome the limiting effect of civilisation and to explore knowledge repressed by rationality. In Barker's plays the representation of pain therefore responds to a "necessity demanded by instinct." The subversive beauty of catastrophe, the beauty of transgression and pain, has no truck with Apollonian qualities such as form, order or symmetry, nor with the moral good. [...] It is the beauty of the sublime which rouses delight and disgust, which refuses to be consoled by the Apollonian order and rather irritates its norms in order to refer to that which cannot be represented.

(Zimmermann 1999, p. 362-3)

At first sight it appears from this analysis that Barker has achieved a strikingly new form of tragedy that is able to dispense with Nietzsche's model. However, on closer inspection it becomes apparent that Zimmermann has emphasised aspects of the Apollonian and this then enables him to reject the whole concept. Zimmermann defines the Apollonian as 'rationality, form, individuation, illusion, beauty' and, in the context of Barker's rejection of Apollonian qualities, 'form, order or symmetry, nor with the moral good' (Zimmermann 1999, p. 363). In order to make a convincing case for this rejection of the Apollonian it is necessary to stress the aspects of rationality and the moral good because these are two areas Barker has often explicitly challenged. However, the extent to which these are not the dominating features of the Nietzschean Apollonian can be seen from the fact that Nietzsche himself felt the need to introduce a third concept to distinguish the Apollonian artistic instinct from an emerging unhealthy embrace of reason and morality in fifth century Attic art and culture. As noted earlier in this study, this emerging force Nietzsche called the Socratic because Socrates is a primary symbol for this change. Zimmermann therefore seems to be confusing Nietzsche's Socratism with the Apollonian and that results in his placing Barker's theatre at an exaggerated distance from Nietzsche's model of (Greek) tragedy.

Nietzsche includes reason and ethics as *aspects* of the Apollonian but the Apollonian is a much larger category that encompasses all (artistic) *form*.⁷⁰ The new term 'socratism' or 'socratic' is a category with the qualified meaning that reason (in its Socratic/Platonic synchronisation with morality and beauty) is taken beyond its acceptable limits into a totalising principal: 'the unshakeable belief that rational thought, guided by causality, can penetrate to the depths of being, and that it is capable not only of knowing but even of *correcting* being' (Nietzsche 1993, p. 73).⁷¹ It is clearly this total and ideological embrace of reason that Barker (like Nietzsche) is attacking, rather than *any* application of reason. In terms of ethics, it is true that there is a clear intention in Barker to question established morality (and therefore state ideology) to a greater degree than the (extant) classical tragedians. However, Barker also acknowledges that the Greek gods are not always moral in their actions: 'Malice was a characteristic of the Greek gods' (Barker 1993b, p. 167).⁷² The immoral aspects of the Greek divinities mean that the religious space of Greek tragedy already offers a more morally unstable space than the secular humanist theatre, Barker's acknowledged point of attack.⁷³

⁷⁰ 'Apollo, as an ethical deity, demands moderation from his followers and, in order to maintain it, self-knowledge' (Nietzsche 1993, p. 26). Although Barker's protagonists often drive themselves towards excess, their continued attempts at trying to capture complex and excessive experience in poetic form throughout this process suggest that self-knowledge captured in language is a necessary and moderating feature of Barker's drama.

⁷¹ We see therefore in Socrates a clear contender for the emergence of the delusion of progress that Gray argues is a dominant feature of western secular culture, as discussed in earlier.

⁷² Classical scholar Sourvinou-Inwood shows how although this ancient Greek view of divinity contrasts with contemporary conceptions of divinity (Christian?), the idea of malicious gods is able to reflect and express the cruel aspects of existence: 'Euripidean tragedies show that the world does have order and meaning, and works on a plan of Zeus. By our standards, that order and that plan were often cruel, and not the mark of a benevolent divine order. But the world is not always kind and just and fair, and the Greek perception of the cosmos acknowledged this fact' (Sourvinou-Inwood 2003, p. 410).

⁷³ It is perhaps more accurate to note that this comparison is based predominantly on Barker's *formulation* of the secular humanist theatre. There is insufficient space to examine to

For Nietzsche the conceptual dyad of Apollonian and Dionysian is necessary to produce tragic theatre. Nietzsche's insistence on the Dionysian is an insistence on its primacy or perhaps even equality in the relationship, rather than a force that excludes the Apollonian; the Apollonian is necessary because it is the ordering, structuring and formalising aspect of art. Unlike the Apollonian, the Socratic is dangerous because it operates by increasingly trying to exclude the Dionysian. The philosopher Lawrence J. Hatab exams Nietzsche's Dionysian in his study of myth and philosophy, and highlights the *necessity* of the Apollonian in tragedy:

Tragedy presents a negative limit, but "without denial of individual existence." Pure Dionysian experience would preclude the awareness and comprehension of cultural production, and so the formative and educative capacity of mythical symbols "would remain totally ineffective and unnoticed." Apollonian art allows us to "delight in individuals," it "satisfies our sense of beauty which longs for great and sublime forms," it "presents images of life to us, and incites us to comprehend in thought the core of life they contain." With the force of sensuous imagery, intelligible ideas, and sympathetic emotions, the Apollonian prevents a collapse into the "orgiastic self-annihilation" of sheer Dionysian abandon. And yet, the power of Dionysus still holds sway because of tragic limits on formed conditions. So both cultural forms and negative limits have equal status in tragedy.

what extent humanist theatre restricts a neutral expression of amoral or immoral perspectives and of course what in fact precisely constitutes humanist theatre and its ideologies.

(Hatab 2001, p. 51)

Although Barker may be challenging metaphysical models of form, order or symmetry, in terms of the poetic language and the staging of this text there is undoubtedly a very precise and deliberate sense of form, order and symmetry. It is arguably this Apollonian dimension that distinguishes Barker from other and earlier Dionysian experiments that seek to evade a fixed form through spontaneity, as was the intention with Schechner's *Dionysus '69* (Zeitlin 1994, p. 49).⁷⁴ Zimmermann has in fact conflated the same aspects that Socrates and Plato connected together: that order, reason and morality are identical.

Having rejected the Apollonian as an aspect of Barker's theatre, Zimmermann goes on to emphasise the importance of the Nietzschean Dionysian in Barker's work, but also how certain aspects of this concept are excluded:

Barker's protagonists share with Nietzsche's classical hero the Dionysiac insight that existence is horrifying, contradictory and painful. But they ignore his Dionysiac belief that individuation is a curse and that the ultimate reality is a primordial oneness. If they aspire to

⁷⁴ Barker's return to the more formal style of classical tragedy can be contrasted with other theatrical experiments that attempt to radically dissolve the traditional structures of theatre including the boundaries between actor and spectator. However, even with these modes of theatre some aspect of structure and form are needed. Artaud's admiration for the formal style of the Balinese dancers shows his recognition that terror needs to be placed in a tightly structured form (Artaud 1993, p. 37). Similarly Grotowski's *via negativa* rehearsal process, which releases and explores the true inner impulse, is only successful if *form* is created (or uncovered), otherwise the performance material will collapse into shapelessness (Grotowski 1991, p.17).

oneness, they mean a oneness with themselves which integrates their irrational self, their unconscious, their passions and desires.

(Zimmermann 1999, p. 363)

To suggest that Barker follows Nietzsche's Dionysian strand, but as an individual, is problematic in that for Nietzsche the defining feature or most significant feature of the Apollonian is '*principium individuationis*', Schopenhauer's term that means the principal of individuation (Nietzsche 1993, p. 16). Zimmermann's rejection of the Apollonian and then his subsequent claim Barker is not completely Dionysian because he favours individuation highlights his misunderstanding of Nietzsche's model: the Apollonian *is* individuation. Therefore, it is only when Apollo is removed from the equation that a Dionysian focused modern tragedy that is also preoccupied with subjectivity seems a divergence. The Dionysian state in contrast to the Apollonian is by definition de-individuating, and the unique power of tragedy, according to Nietzsche, is the fusion or interaction of the two gods. The Apollonian principal, focused on subjectivity, is in fact essential to Barker's sacred theatre.

Hatab argues that Nietzsche gives us a sacred model for tragic theatre based on the presiding principals of Apollonian individuation and Dionysian dissolution. It therefore retains both the heroic focus of epic and the formlessness (oneness) of Dionysus. This meeting point of two divine, and therefore sacred aspects, in Hatab's existential and mythic formulation, for the

most part coheres with both Barker's drama and his theoretical writings. Therefore the sacred aspects of the Apollonian and Dionysian are clearly at play in Barker's theatre. We can see this spiritual perspective in his recent foregrounding of the self as the essentially sacred element of democracy:

The sacred character of the individual in secular democracies obliterates any possibility the sacred might be located in any other sphere, and the consequence is a war of competing egos, thinly concealed beneath sentimental and threadbare platitudes of conscience and pity.⁷⁵

(Barker in *The Wrestling School* 2010)

Zimmermann's observation that individuation is a curse is in fact a *Dionysian position* rather than a *tragic position*, where the individual is also embraced via the Apollonian. Nietzsche himself is at pains to stress the symbiosis of the Apollonian and Dionysian in the final stages of *The Birth of Tragedy*. After a lengthy discussion he concludes with a statement that shows how their inter-relationship is vital not only to tragedy but all (significant) art:

Thus the difficult relationship of the Apolline and Dionysiac in tragedy could really be symbolized by a fraternal bond between the two deities.

Dionysus speaks the language of Apollo, but Apollo finally speaks the

⁷⁵ It is interesting that Barker is acknowledging the role of the current political-cultural system in dictating his preoccupation with individualism in his sacred theatre.

language of Dionysus, and thus is attained the supreme goal of tragedy and art in general.

(Nietzsche 1993, p. 104)

As well as *principium individuationis* and the related need for form and order, the Apollonian is specifically related to poetry. This seems to be a significant part of Nietzsche's model for tragedy (that follows Aristotle): tragedy being influenced by the precursors of the dithyramb and epic poetry, and Homeric epic poetry is referred to as Apollonian.⁷⁶ The Muses belonged to Apollo (Graf 2009, p. 128) and the majority of the Muses are inspirations for different forms of poetry, including Calliope the patron of epic poetry.⁷⁷ In the Hellenistic period Apollo was seen directly as the god of poetry (Graf 2009, p. 128). The reason for emphasizing this aspect of the Apollonian is because it is the use of poetry that is a defining feature of Barker's non-naturalistic style. In fact it is the poetic language that most clearly distances his play-texts from naturalism and connects him with the classical and Jacobean tragedians.⁷⁸

The Dionysian cannot stand for subjectivity but only complete dissolution in nature. Nietzsche describes this Dionysian state as oneness but as I

⁷⁶ 'Homeric *naïveté* can only be understood as the complete triumph of Apolline illusion' (Nietzsche 1993, p. 24).

⁷⁷ Calliope was considered by Hesiod to be 'chief among them all' (Hesiod 2008, p. 5). In Howard Barker's play *The Last Supper*, the poet character is called Apollo (Barker 1988).

⁷⁸ When asked by the broadcaster Mark Lawson: 'How would you describe yourself?' Barker's response shows the importance of poetry in his own self-definition: 'As a dramatist and a poet' (Barker 2012). Poetry is something that is part of his playwriting but also a significant form in itself, with Barker having published seven books of poetry. In two of his most recent dramas, *Hurts Given and Received* (2010) and *Blok/Eko* (2011), there is a concentrated engagement with the significance and power of poetry. Perhaps this introspection is an artistic response to the withdrawal of Arts Council funding from The Wrestling School in 2009.

suggested in Chapter 2 this oneness can in fact be seen as an expression of nothingness or formlessness. If all form is rejected then nature appears without form, therefore without any differentiation. This undifferentiated state can be perceived as either absence or totality (the world/nature). Barker's characters sometimes give this oneness/nothingness the name of God. However, what can also occur in his drama, and is a dominating idea in *Death, The One and the Art of Theatre*, is that the properties of this oneness/nothingness are projected into female form. The penultimate play of Barker's *13 Objects* (2003), entitled 'The Hermit's war with God', can be usefully examined as a concentrated expression of some of the aspects of this process.

In 'The Hermit's war with God', a religious recluse called Loftus renounces all natural human needs as a way of directly challenging God. It is clear that this asceticism has previously included overcoming sexual desire. The extremity of the final challenge is that a bucket of water is set before him, which he refuses to drink even though it means his death, which is the final outcome of the play. This conflict represents a battle between the self and God/nature/the (external) world *in extremis*. When god finally intervenes it is as a female, a messenger sent by God who Satan-like uses a range of seductive ploys to tempt Loftus to drink. When the initial ploys fail she opts for extreme challenges to morality, including drowning her own child in the bucket after Loftus has died. In Loftus's final moments we see that it is rage against existence that allows defiant Apollonian subjectivity to survive until death:

If you have no regard for this infant why should I have you see it is a weakness of God and further evidence of His fathomless vanity that having bestowed life upon His creatures He dares presume our everlasting gratitude will ensure we cling to it value it in others shudder at the spectacle of death and so on drown your child by all means babies are plentiful now I'm thirsty from arguing but that only brings the crisis nearer.

(Barker 2006b, p. 319)

What distinguishes Loftus from other male Barkerian protagonists is that his own resistance to sexual desire is a defining feature of his subjectivity. The more common model can be seen in other Barker plays where active desire for an amoral female defined in some way as godlike, drives the male protagonists. Although the precise model shifts around, what we see in Barker's plays are intense interactions that contain a strong element of sexual intensity in one or more of the characters and that the female is almost always the most amoral. The amorality of the female is clearly identifiable and to a significant extent a defining feature, whether they are protagonist or antagonist. This will be considered further in Chapter 5.

In his discussion of the tragic protagonist in Barker, Zimmermann makes reference to the Delphic maxim from classical Greece when he notes, 'For them "know thyself" does not mean the observation of the limits of the individual, but the annihilation of these limits. Contrary to the tragic hero they

are not necessarily destroyed by their endeavour' (Zimmermann 1999, p. 363). Barker's protagonists often directly will this relentless search for a deep knowledge of the self, although the initial impetus is usually triggered by a traumatic and catastrophic event, with war, civil war and revolution being common settings for Barker's plays.⁷⁹ The intense introspection for both the Greek and Barkerian protagonist is usually initiated by catastrophe, but Barker's characters may actually delight in and intensify the process towards self-knowledge. For instance, when priest, Orphuls, in Barker's *The Europeans*, deliberately murders his own mother and reflects on his subsequent discoveries. Barker's use of a religious character shifting from traditional religion towards a new secular and alternative spirituality suggests that this relentless intent to 'know thyself' has a religious intensity or dimension; the discoveries are framed in the form of a sermon:

EMPRESS: What have you learned?

ORPHULS: Learned...?

EMPRESS: Learned, yes, for neither you nor Starhemberg do things except for learning. Deliver us your sermon. Not on murder, but what came of it. Quick, now! And you! (*She calls to the WORKMEN.*) Yes! Down your tools and gather, cluster the Bishop, who will speak, cluster him, he knows things you do not. (*She turns away, waiting. The MEN reluctantly form a circle. ORPHULS prepares, and then with the force of inspiration, turns to deliver his oration.*)

⁷⁹ Occasionally it is initiated by a more personal trauma, for example the death of the father in *Dead Hands* (2004).

ORPHULS: All that occurs, does it not occur that I should be its beneficiary, nourished on it, be it filth or excellence? Even the death of love is food to the soul and therefore what is evil? Is there evil except not to do? I do not blaspheme when I say the gift of life is paltry and our best service to God is not to thank Him, endless thanking, no, but to enhance His offer, and yet you do not, I think if I were God I would declare with some weariness or even vehemence, how little they do with the breath I gave them, they exhale repetitions, they applaud the lie, they sleep even in their waking hours, why did I make them thus, I erred in some respect, they fill me with disgust, have you know notion of God's horror? I am thinking of the God in us whose profound groan is the background to our clatter [...] **You hide behind the so called simplicity of Christ but is that not a blasphemy?**

(Barker 1990, p. 38)

The knowledge discovered by the priest after his terrible actions, is very much a model for Barker's Theatre of Catastrophe where the protagonist and therefore the audience enter territory normally evaded in everyday experience.⁸⁰ The idea of the groaning God within presents a Dionysian like force that threatens to unravel stable subjectivity. While 'God' suggests an external totality the suggestion that He is 'in us' retains a focus on individuality, as Zimmermann argues for in relation to Barker's protagonist's

⁸⁰ A similar Nietzschean journey beyond normative notions of good and evil has already been considered in Chapter 1 with Dr Savage in *The Bite of the Night*.

experience of oneness and in line with Eckartian mysticism. The protagonist's drive for knowledge, because of its experiential and spiritual focus and framing, is very much a self-knowledge, in contrast to a rational and objective perspective. The eradication of established ideology makes it similar to a Socratic dismantling of current beliefs, but without the Socratic (or Platonic) faith in a positive rational and metaphysical conclusion. Barker's protagonists formalise their experience as best they can through language but it is a dismantling without faith in any positive end point. However, the structures (ideology) are seen as so oppressive that the dismantling is desired anyway.

The protagonist's journey to self-knowledge is usually intimately bound up with an erotic fascination with another character and their desire for this person powerfully intensifies or even initiates the journey. Zimmermann's suggestion that they are not necessarily destroyed by the endeavour is also true for Greek tragedy (e.g. Oedipus, Orestes, Medea) but as with Greek tragedy the death of the Barkerian protagonist is far from uncommon (e.g. Dancer in *Hated Nightfall*, The Queen in *Knowledge and A Girl*, Dojo in *He Stumbled*, J in *The Road, the House, the Road*). This is worth emphasising because Zimmermann's comment suggests a positive conclusion for Barker's protagonists, which is far from the case. In Barker's *Death, the One and the Art of Theatre*, we are given a series of statements that express his conception of the tragic protagonist. We can see from these comments how death is in fact a conclusion that the tragic protagonist requires:

The criminal	<i>'I am sorry for what I did, but only from the point of view, that had I known death was the consequence I should not have done it ...'</i>
The heroic criminal	<i>'I am not sorry for what I did, I felt compelled to do it, and if death is the consequence, I don't protest ...'</i>
The tragic protagonist	<i>'I am unforgivable, and if the consequences of my act had not been death I should never have undertaken it ...'</i>
The criminal	<i>'I did it to impress others ...'</i>
The heroic criminal	<i>'I could not deny myself the ecstasy of doing it ...'</i>
The tragic protagonist	<i>'I did it to be revealed to myself ...'</i>
The criminal	<i>'Give me another chance ...'</i>
The heroic criminal	<i>'I am content to die ...'</i>
The tragic protagonist	<i>'If you gave me more life I should throw it back in your face. Do you think I did this to be forgiven?'</i>

(Barker 2005, p. 77-78)

The order of these statements and their increasing uncompromising position suggests a hierarchy of the rebellious individual with the tragic protagonist placed in the highest position. The criminal, a rule breaker, suits Barker's model because of his interest in tragedy as a process to challenge the fundamental moral structures of society. The refusal to engage with any form of forgiveness seems to be a direct challenge to Christian-humanist narrative

conventions where some level of apology or consolation for terrible actions are sought for in the protagonist's final moments on the stage.⁸¹ It is interesting to see how ecstasy is the primary motivation of the heroic criminal, whereas self-knowledge is still the main driving force for the Barkerian tragic protagonist in 2005, in line with Orphuls's sermon (1990).

Music and Nietzsche's Tragedy

When comparing Barker's theatre to Nietzsche's construction of Greek tragedy, Zimmermann does not engage with a very significant difference: Nietzsche sees the element of music as essential to tragedy. The full title of the book reads *The Birth of Tragedy out of the spirit of music* and Nietzsche is dismissive of tragedy that, as with Barker's, relies only on the word: 'In the pre-established harmony that obtains between the consummate drama and its music, the drama achieves a supreme degree of vividness that verbal drama alone cannot achieve (Nietzsche 1993, p. 103).

Nietzsche's equation of music and the Dionysiac and the word/concept with the Apollonian would suggest an Apollonian bias in Barker's dramaturgy. To defend Barker's work as tragic in Nietzsche's sense of a balance between the two artistic forces, we could draw upon Zimmermann's (now qualified) observation that Barker rejects the moralising and rationalising *aspects* of the Apollonian. The rejection of this aspect would therefore strengthen the Dionysian element in his work. You could also note that although Barker

⁸¹ The association of the criminal with the protagonist does not cohere with Aristotle who felt that the bad fortune of the tragic hero should not be due to 'any moral defect or depravity' (Aristotle 1996, p. 21).

rarely uses what can be comfortably defined as music, he does use discordant and chaotic sounds in his productions, which arguably offer an alternative non-verbal expression of the pre-verbal realm of the Dionysian. However, a notable Dionysiac element in Barker, which is absent from Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* is the predominance of sexual desire as a Dionysian ecstatic experience.⁸² Although sexual desire as a mode of tragic ecstasy was not a focal point for Nietzsche, it has a clear connection to tragedy via its god, in that sexual ecstasy is a significant part of Dionysian ecstasy and is associated with both his male and female mythic followers, the satyrs and maenads, respectively.

⁸² In Richard Foreman's play *Bad Boy Nietzsche*, Foreman seems to be suggesting that sexual desire is something that is conspicuous by its absence in Nietzsche's writings, with Nietzsche becoming aware of his sexual desire as a confusing discovery late in the play: 'Help me! – I have this appendage on the front of my body that swells up sometimes. It does – it really does! It's called my penis, I suppose. [...] A great variety of species on this planet have a similar system that swells up. But why is this necessary? Why? Why?' (Foreman 2007, p. 34). Nietzsche's inability to ascribe purpose and meaning to the behaviour of this appendage suggests that its significance lies beyond his philosophical formulations.

Chapter 4 Performance and Darkness

Visions of Hades and the Dead

The artist has no duty except to himself, by which I mean to say, to his instinct (not his conscience [...]). If he obeys this injunction to speak his darkness, he will – inevitably – serve a public, for theatre speaks what is not spoken elsewhere, [that] is its supreme beauty.

(Barker 2011b, p. 179)

In the dark a person's soul is more easily opened.

(Dionysos in Euripides' *Bacchae* 2007, p. 29)⁸³

Theatre as Religion

In *The Journal of Religion and Theatre*, Norman A. Bert sets out a somewhat surprising argument about the relationship between religion and theatre. Rather than restricting his project to drawing parallels between the two phenomena Bert, as the title of the article suggests, strives to show that 'Theatre Is Religion,' attempting to argue that theatre is not only similar to religion but is in fact a form of religion. Such a potentially problematic assertion only becomes possible when Bert sets out his own definition of what religion actually is:

⁸³ In Seaford's literal translation the line reads: 'darkness possesses solemnity' (Seaford 1996, p. 93).

Simply defined, religion is the creation and reenactment of myth for the purpose of realizing—in both senses of that word as "perceiving" and "making actual"—and celebrating the relationship of human beings with supra-human, spiritual forces. [...] [R]eligion relates human beings to spiritual forces beyond their control.

(Bert 2002, p. 2)

This definition is not wholly satisfying because it fails to make specific reference to the afterlife. For many religions (particularly Western), what distinguishes it from other forms of human phenomena is its speculation or belief in what becomes of the human being or its soul after death. This modern attempt by Bert to reframe religion in a (somewhat paradoxically) secular way reflects a need to retain the positive spiritual aspects of religion without a need for a faith in the beyond. Although 'supra-human forces' may include a notion of being beyond earthly existence, because its generality can include such secularly compatible notions as the force of nature, the conventional relationship between the afterlife and Western religion is reduced to the optional. Similar attempts at creating a secular mode of spirituality, which is elevated to the religious or pseudo-religious, can be seen in Bataille and, in theatre through the theory and practice of Artaud. For Bataille, as we saw in the previous chapter, religion is the deep emotional experience before meaning is formed. Artaud's model is not dissimilar to Bataille, seeing the spiritual role of theatre as a place of deep and intense

emotional awakening generated by the awareness of the instability of human existence. The theatre for Artaud teaches that freedom is an illusion when viewed from the perspective of death:

[A] “*theatre of cruelty*” means theatre that is difficult for myself first of all. And on a performing level, it has nothing to do with cruelty we practise on one another [...] but the far more terrible, essential cruelty objects can practise on us. We are not free and the sky can still fall on our heads. And above all else, theatre is made to teach us this.

(Artaud 1993, p. 60)

As we have seen, Barker also poses Bert’s question about the relationship of religion to (in this case his own) theatre, ‘Is this because theatre is a religion?’ (Barker 2005, p. 2). However, he avoids Bert’s full embrace of the term or phenomenon by attacking (in his opinion) religion’s delusional assertions of truth: ‘What distinguishes it from all religion is this, however: that it recoils from *truth*. (Barker 2005, p. 2) When we connect Barker’s and Bert’s perspectives together, along with Bataille’s and Artaud’s positioning of religion in the terror before clear meanings, we see that uncertainty itself about human existence and the absence of fixed truths is central to the secularized religious position. For Barker this state is generated in theatre through proximity to images of death.

Whereas Barker's model embraces what he sees as the essentially confrontational nature of religion as a model for theatre, as he states, 'The fact is that theatres annihilate one another as all religions annihilate one another' (Barker 2005: p. 2), for Bert his model offers a meeting point for cultures: if religion/theatre is primarily about the exploratory process of myth/stories/plays, rather than fixed doctrines/ideologies, then all religions (and theatres) are, at core, connected by this process rather than being conclusion or (fixed) truth focused.⁸⁴ Such a spiritual perspective is of course in tune with the mystic tradition and therefore the negative theology of Eckhart. Bert embraces this strong connection with mysticism, where a focus on experience over truth helps to strengthen an otherwise anti-intuitive argument about theatre actually being religion:

Finally, and perhaps most significantly of all these observations of theatre's religious characteristics, the experience of theatre is similar to the mystical experience of religion. The practice of religion may result for the worshipper in ecstasy, insight (epiphany), inspiration, attachment to the community, or a sense of apotheosis.

(Bert 2002, p. 6)

It would seem then that a key possible difference between religion and theatre (or at least spiritually orientated rather than politically orientated theatre) would lie in their relationship to the role or ideas of the afterlife. In religion a

⁸⁴ The potential paradox here for Barker is that the clash of exclusivist religions is based on their claim to certain truths over others. He precludes this position for his own theatre, which can then only result in a binary model: theatres that deny truth and theatres that posit truth.

focus on the afterlife offers some level of closure to the search for meanings whereas in spiritual theatre the focus becomes on a present existence, although one where fixed truths are destabilized or even (temporarily) eradicated. In the case of Barker, although an afterlife seems to be rejected (or at least defined as inadequate) Barker's drama invokes images of death and the voices of the dead to such an extent that the realm of the dead is imaginatively placed at a disturbingly close proximity to the living. In *Death, The One and the Art of Theatre*, a text that contains his most religiously agnostic passages, Barker expresses his fascination with death as a magnetic force of the unknown, and even tentatively offers the possibility of an afterlife:

If death were simply nothing we would fear it less and contemplate it less. The anxiety surrounding death arises from the possibility it is *not nothing*. This anxiety is fuelled by the rumour of its being *something*.

[...]

Life is experienced as a number of things, many contradictory. We do not know if death is not similarly complex. But, it will be objected, life and death are not simple antitheses (movement/stillness noise/silence...). How loud is the silence of the grave? If death utters, it does so in a language learned only by the dying.

(Barker, 2005, p. 45-6)

This chapter focuses on some of the encounters with the dead, the underworld and death-like experiences in Greek literature and ritual that shed

some light on the spiritual value or function of tragedy and its proximity to death, before relating these ideas to Barker's tragic theatre. It will initially look at two Greek traditions, *nekyia* and *katabasis*, and how they can be seen to relate to Greek drama and Barker's tragic drama, with a specific focus on *Found in the Ground* (2001). It will then examine Greek mystery cult and how performance and death-like experiences are used as a means of spiritual transformation and how Persephone, the Queen of the Dead, dominates Greek conceptions of the underworld. These ideas will then be related to Barker's mysterious radio play *The Road, the House, the Road* (2006).

Encounters with the dead: *Nekyia* and *Katabasis*

No pagan or Christian character entering the after-life describes it in terms of disappointment. Only we dare contemplate the *inadequacy* of paradise ...

(Barker 2005, p. 99, emphasis his)

This quotation about the optimism of pagan and Christian culture regarding the afterlife in contrast to his own view, is one of Barker's attempts to separate his spiritual tragic theatre from the previous and dominant European religious perspectives on death: paganism and Christianity. Although such an observation is immediately verifiable with regard to Christian eschatology, the pagan position is, as you might imagine, far more complicated and diverse. In fact, the foundational voice of Greek culture and narrative, Homer, contradicts Barker's argument in his bleak and shadowy portrayal of the Hall of Hades in

the *Odyssey*. In Book XI of the *Odyssey*, 'The Book of the Dead', we are offered a detailed vision of the afterlife, when Odysseus actually voyages to Hades and encounters the dead. As Odysseus discovers, even for the great Achilles, the afterlife in the Homeric imagination is a negative and empty experience:

"My lord Odysseus," he replied, "spare me your praise of Death. Put me on earth again, and I would rather be a serf in the house of some landless man, with little enough for himself to live on, than king of all these dead men that have done with life.

(Homer 1946, p.184)

This bleak portrayal of the afterlife dominates Homeric poetry, as Sourvinou-Inwood observes in *"Reading" Greek Death* (1995):

'All men must die' is a constant motif in the epics. In *Odyssey* 3 236-8 the disguised Athena tells Telemachos that 'death is common to all men, and not even the gods can keep it off a man they love, when the portion of death which brings long woe destroys him'. Everybody dies and goes to Hades, even the children of the gods, even the great Herakles. This is a central tenet of mainstream Homeric eschatology in all its strands.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Sourvinou-Inwood goes on to note that Homer makes reference to some belief in a positive afterlife for a few mortals, but only as a rare exception, notably Menelaos (Sourvinou-Inwood 1995, p. 17).

(Sourvinou-Inwood 1995, p. 17)

Although the experience of death itself is bleak in Homer, the benefits of journeying into Hades are positive for Odysseus. He is firstly able to learn valuable information from the dead that will aid his safe voyage home. He is also able to improve his wisdom by learning about the world of the dead and by having the opportunity to talk with famous heroic characters about the events and experiences that lead to their deaths. Many of these figures, that include Oedipus, Agamemnon, Teiresias, and Ajax, will be brought back to life on the Athenian stage in fifth century tragedy to re-enact these events for the audience, where these narratives will once again be viewed as an educational experience.⁸⁶ The idea that Odysseus's encounter with the dead is educational is expressed by his deceased mother, Anticleia, who says to him, 'But you must hasten back now to the light of day. And bear in mind all you have learnt here, so that one day you can tell your wife' (Homer 1946, p. 177).

Book XI of the *Odyssey* offers us an interesting model for tragedy, in that it views an encounter with death as an educational event for the protagonist. In a similar way that Odysseus learns from the shades of heroes, these same heroes will share their stories in tragedy. The greatness of tragedy's proximity to death, greatness because Barker would see the word educational as tainted by enlightenment ideas of reason and progress, is expressed by

⁸⁶ As Wise observes, 'we know from Aristophanes' *Frogs* that plays were expected to *teach* as well as *delight*' (Wise 1998, p. 72).

Barker, metaphorically, through this very Greek place of the dead:⁸⁷ 'Very great plays yield no meanings. They move like the mouths of the dead on the banks of the Styx' (Barker 2005, p.20). In support of this model of the afterlife as an educational place, Martin Palmer, in a discussion of concepts of Hell observes how the ancient Greek and Roman narratives that depict an encounter with the underworld seem to often have the function of a 'spiritual morality tale' (Palmer in Bragg 2006). Odysseus's encounter with the dead at the mouth of Hades is clearly echoed in the descent into Hades of the protagonist Aeneas in Virgil's *Aeneid* (c. 20 BC) Book 6. In terms of the Christian tradition the focus on the afterlife becomes an even more dominant strand of the epic narratives. Dante has Virgil as a guide on the first stage of his three-part spiritual journey through the afterlife that begins with Hell in the *Inferno* (c. 1308-1321).⁸⁸ In the British tradition, the unlikely protagonist for a Christian epic, Satan, in Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) is plunged into the darkest regions of Hell, 'bottomless perdition' (Milton 1996, p. 8) by God, following his failed rebellion. Satan then has to travel through Hell and beyond in order to encounter mankind in Eden.

In his study of the underworld in twentieth century poetry (2009), Michael Thurston explores two related forms of narrative that focus on an encounter with the dead: *katabasis* and *nekyia*:

⁸⁷ Barker's *Bite of the Night* is subtitled *An Education*. In this play Barker challenges traditional notions of (university) education with the internal *via negativa* journey of the protagonist Savage, explored in Chapter 2.

⁸⁸ Virgil explains that he is in Hell because he was unaware, like many wise pagans, of the Christian God: 'They lived before the Christian age began. / They paid no reverence, as was due to God. / And in this number I myself am one' (Dante 2006 p. 31).

The Underworld descent tradition actually conflates two narrative topoi – the *nekuia*, in which the shades of the dead are invoked and confronted, and the *katabasis*, in which the protagonist actually enters (literally “goes down” into) the Underworld.

(Thurston 2009, p. 2)

Both of these forms are present within classical Greek culture in mythology, religious ritual, literature and drama. A famous example of *katabasis* in myth would be the twelfth and final labour of Heracles where he had to fetch the three-headed dog, Cerberus, from Hades.⁸⁹ The other term, *nekyia*, ‘derives from the Greek word for death’ and means an invocation of the dead: ‘interaction’ with dead spirits (Thurston 2009, p.4-5). An example of a *nekyia* in Greek theatre is in Aeschylus’s *Persians* where the previous great Persian leader Darius is summoned from Hades and told of the terrible defeat of his people at the hands of the Greeks.⁹⁰ This *nekyia* gives the only extant Greek tragedy based on contemporary events rather than myth a religious and otherworldly dimension, which allows a distancing from the present that creates an alienating perspective.⁹¹

⁸⁹ The twelfth labour of Hercules is summarised in the mythography of Apollodorus (2007 p. 36-7) and briefly mentioned in the mythography of Hyginus (2007 p. 110).

⁹⁰ Three ‘ghosts’ make an appearance in extant Greek tragedy. The other two are Clytemnestra, in another play by Aeschylus, *The Eumenides* and Polydorus in Euripides’ *Hecabe*. However, the appearance of these other two ghosts does not involve or constitute a *nekyia* from the point of view of the characters because they did not actively summon them.

⁹¹ The need for a distancing device in tragedy, usually myth in Greek tragedy or myth or history in Barker, has already been discussed in Chapter 3.

In terms of theatre and *katabasis*, although none of the extant tragedies are set in the underworld we do know that such plays existed. For example, Sourvinou-Inwood notes that a tragedy of uncertain authorship called *Peirithous* 'seems to be set in Hades' (2003, p. 480). Aristotle in his categorisation of four kinds of tragedy uses the example of 'plays set in the underworld' (Aristotle 1996, p. 29) to describe the fourth kind: 'simple tragedy / 'tragedy of spectacle' (these are the most accepted reconstructions: the name of this kind of tragedy has not been preserved in the text).⁹² The only extant Greek play that is set in the underworld is the comedy *The Frogs* by Aristophanes, which will be discussed later. In addition, Seaford refers to two satyr plays that were either set or were probably set in the underworld, respectively: *Sisyphos* by Aeschylus and *Keres* by Aristias (Seaford 2006, p. 84).

Even though the extant Greek tragedies are not geographically set in the underworld, the proximity of this place is significantly threatening in a number of plays. We have already mentioned the *nekylia* in *The Persians*. In *Hecabe* and the *Eumenides* restless ghosts enter the theatre space (a tragic tradition continued via Seneca in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *Richard III*).⁹³

⁹² The other three kinds of tragedy are: complex tragedy, tragedy of suffering and tragedy of character. Two names have been suggested for the missing category and both are regarded as valid (Heath 1996, p. 57): Heath opts for 'simple tragedy' (p. 57) whereas Janko uses 'tragedy of spectacle' (Janko 1987, p. 121). Janko argues that 'Spectacle matched the examples well (p. 121): the underworld would have been a location particularly suited to spectacular presentation; the *Daughters of Phorcys* would have included hideous supernatural women (either Gorgons or Graeae) (Janko p. 121) and the trilogy *Prometheus* would be dominated by gods and immortal characters, as the extant *Prometheus Bound* demonstrates. Janko notes that all the plays in the example may relate to plays by (or ascribed to) Aeschylus (p. 121).

⁹³ Watling refers to Seneca's use of ghosts as a device eagerly embraced in early English tragedy, despite the fact that 'there are only two ghosts in [Seneca's] *dramatis personae* – Tantalus in *Thyestes* and Thyestes in *Agamemnon*' (Watling 1966, p. 28). In both these plays

There are continual references to Hades in Sophocles' *Antigone*, and Antigone imagines and describes how she will soon meet her family there (Sophocles 2004, p. 54). In Euripides' *Heracles*, a character particularly famous for his *katabasis*,⁹⁴ enters the space shortly after emerging from the underworld: 'How glad I am to return to the upper light and see you!' (Euripides 2003, p. 47). In Euripides' *Alcestis*, Heracles wrestles with Thanatos (offstage) to stop him taking Alcestis to Hades (Euripides 2003, p.24 and 32).

There seems to be some evidence, however, of a reluctance to offer a vivid and concrete portrayal of Hades in Greek poetry in Homer and also, arguably, Aristotle. In the *Odyssey* it is very significant that the fantastical events of his voyage are all recounted indirectly by the hero himself rather than by the poet. This distancing device avoids the dilemma of a poet having to directly narrate the 'unseeable realm' of the dead (Sourvinou-Inwood 1995, p. 15). When Aristotle summarises the plot of this epic his rationalist engagement means that he does not mention any of these fantastic events, which enforces the idea of their unreliability. When discussing the 'types of tragedy', Aristotle may have been critical of the 'type' that includes the underworld when he mentions 'spectacle' at another point in the *Poetics* (the type is either the 'tragedy of

the ghosts appear in the prologue as the ghost of Polydorus does in Euripides' *Hecabe*. In *Hecabe* we see the ghost performing a function of privileged introductory knowledge from beyond the living human world, a role normally given to a god in Euripides. From this we can see how the functions of gods can shift into ghosts in early English tragedy, probably due to the monotheistic Christian context. The ghost of King Hamlet is a Shakespearean example. In *Macbeth* the Witches at the start of the play occupy a similar role disseminating knowledge from beyond the human world, but in a supernatural form relevant to the Jacobean.

⁹⁴ In Aristophanes' *The Frogs* Dionysus visits Hercules before descending into Hades to see if he can get 'a few tips: any useful contacts down there' (Aristophanes 1964, p. 160), etc.

spectacle' or 'simple tragedy'⁹⁵). Aristotle is also sceptical about theatre's ability to present irrational events (which would be particularly relevant to a portrayal of the underworld): 'While it is true that astonishment is an effect which should be sought in tragedy, the irrational (which is the most important source of astonishment) is feasible in epic, because one is not looking at the agent' (p. 41).

The distance and unreliability suggested in the portrayal of the dead at the mouth of Hades in the *Odyssey*, along with the bleak and empty existence expressed by Achilles, serves to present death as a mysterious force but one that is ultimately an insubstantial state. In his study of Greek myth and philosophy, Hatab argues that the expression of death in myth is about the need to express the powerful existential experience generated by the idea of death in some form:

We have seen that the mythical mind gives a sacred form to any state which has existential significance. The Greeks were practically obsessed with giving form to everything. Kerenyi says that the Greek mind simply *acknowledged* non-existence and gave it the *form* of Hades.

(Hatab 1990, p. 51)

⁹⁵ See footnote 92. Spectacle as an aspect of tragedy is seen as inferior to other elements, 'Spectacle is attractive, but is very inartistic and is least germane to the art of poetry' (Aristotle 1996, p. 13).

The distance created from expressions of Hades in Greek literature, a distance that expresses a mixture of ultimate unknowability (common in Greek religion) and the existential expression of non-existence in shadowy form (in Homer), makes it particularly difficult to present them in the physical space of theatre (as opposed to the mental/imaginary space of epic). The extant exception is a comedy, where a sense of parody can generate humour from comic attempts to stage such a fantastical world. Even when we come to the mystery cults of Greek religion (that are not featured in Homer) the initiate's transformation to belief in a blissful afterlife is experiential and emotional rather than conceptual or rational (as we will see later).

It is unsurprising then that tragedy's preoccupation with dying often invokes Hades and suggests an intoxicating proximity to the land of the dead, but Hades itself is usually kept offstage. This proximity to the impossible space of Hades helps to charge drama with a powerful spiritual and eschatological dimension, although one that is far bleaker than the Christian idea of an afterlife for the faithful. Hence, Antigone describes her descent from the light into this unknown world of darkness:

Given away to death!

Remember this citizens.

I am linked on Hades' arm,

Taking my last look,

My last walk in the light.

Soon the sun will go out

On a silent shore
And Hades will step aside.
He will give me to Acheron,
Lord of the pitch-black lake,
And that bridgroom's cold hand
Will take my hand in the dark.

(Heaney and Sophocles 2004, p. 50)

Classical scholar Lada-Richards even feels able to describe Antigone's experience as a *katabasis*, due to the proximity to this realm expressed through her language (1999, p. 113).

In 2005 Barker offers an image or even a poetic definition of tragedy that references the classical idea of journeying to the underworld and speaking with the dead:

The play only appears to be about the living because the actors are living. The *characters* have never lived, nor by the same token, can they ever be said to be *dead*. Theatre is situated on the bank of the Styx (the side of the living). The actually dead cluster at the opposite side, begging to be recognized. What is it they have to tell? Their mouths gape ...

(Barker 2005, p. 20)

Barker's quotation implies that tragic theatre exists in a liminal space between the living and the dead, where 'characters', who are neither one thing or the other, are created by writers and actors in this void. The anticipation to hear the voices of the dead from an afterlife conceived as similar or identical to that of the ancient Greeks (due to the reference to the river Styx) echoes Odysseus's 'educational' encounter in the *Odyssey*. Here we have a definition of theatre by Barker that frames it as an imaginative and imperfect expression of an encounter with the ultimately unknown realm of the dead.

The importance of tragedy in theatre history shows the close links between theatre and death, which is highlighted in Barker's description of tragedy as an event that takes place on the banks of the Styx and the dead are brought back to life as if a *nekyia* is taking place. In the *nekyia* in the *Persians*, Aeschylus uses this ritual to create an encounter with the dead and history. This resurrection of a great leader in a contemporary space serves as a model for how tragedy functions in relation to history: the (supposed) long dead of Greek myth are resurrected in the sacred space of the playing area, that forms part of the sanctuary of Dionysus (the audience remain outside the sacred performance space).⁹⁶ Therefore the *nekyia* – a summoning of the dead and encounter with the dead – can be seen as a defining feature of Greek tragic drama where the action and reaction of the characters in the *Persians* expresses the approach of tragedy itself, where horror is engaged

⁹⁶ Like the heroes of many tragedies Darius is great but also 'other', i.e. not an Athenian. This is also an important distancing device: the tragic fall does not happen to an Athenian leader or take place in Athens. In fact Athens is where tragedies that have occurred in other cities find their resolution: Aeschylus's *Eumenides* and Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* (Colonus being part of Athens). The exception is Euripides' *Hippolytus* where the mythic founder of Athens, Theseus, suffers the terrible tragedy of losing his wife and son; although even in this play the action takes place away from Athens in Trozene.

with indirectly through a dialogue with the dead/past. Of course the concerns are necessarily with those in the present, but the distance of time, and the distance and alienation generated by supernatural elements, serve as a protective screen over issues or ideas too difficult to face directly.

Although the *Odyssey* seems to have initiated the important role of *katabasis* in epic poetry, 'the tradition's inaugural moment' (Thurston 2009, p. 3), that develops through Virgil, Dante and Milton (in Dante's *Inferno* the underworld is the almost exclusive location), the events in book XI of the poem are not strictly speaking a *katabasis* but a *nekyia*:

The eleventh book of the *Odyssey* narrates a *nekyia*; while he interacts with the shades of the dead, Odysseus does not actually descend into the underworld. Instead he remains in a liminal space created by ritual, a space he is able to leave at will.

(Thurston 2009, p. 4)

However, there are katabatic associations in that his *nekyia* is enacted at the very mouth of Hades after a long journey (rather than summoning shades to a civilised location; as in *The Persians*); many spirits arrive from this realm (rather than a specific ghost, like Darius) which increases the sense of actually being in Hades; and finally, as noted by Thurston, that 'characters who meet Odysseus in Hades tend to refer to his journey as an actual "descent."' (p. 5) Thurston goes on to conclude that the ambiguities of the

Odysseus example allow for a useful distinction between the two narrative forms:

What really distinguishes *nekuia* from *katabasis*, then, is perhaps a matter more of emphasis than of actual generic difference; while Odysseus may or may not descent into the Underworld, the emphasis of the episode is on his interaction with spirits. In similar stories that involve their heroes' actual descent into Hades – the tradition of *katabasis* – more attention is given to description of the physical space of the Underworld and its inhabitants.

(Thurston 2009, p. 5)

In Greek comedy we have the only extant example of a *katabasis* in drama with Aristophanes' *The Frogs*. In this play the journey into the underworld is undertaken by the god of theatre himself Dionysus. The god is descending to choose one of two great deceased tragedians – Euripides or Aeschylus – to bring him back to Athens to reinvigorate the city.¹ The search for a great tragedian by Dionysus in the underworld shows the proximity of Hades to tragic theatre (and may be parodying or referencing underworld located tragic plays). Like Aeschylus's *Persians*, this play is able to resurrect powerful figures of the recent past. However, in this meta-theatrical drama it is two playwrights who are encountered (and not summoned because the location is the underworld where they already dwell), offering a self-conscious expression of theatre's ability to resurrect the past and important figures from

the past. In this comedy, therefore, we have a concentrated expression of theatre's proximity to Hades and its related ability to resurrect the past, both mythic and historical, in the highly self-conscious form of the god of theatre himself embarking on a *katabasis* to find two dramatic poets that dominated fifth century Athenian tragedy.

Barker's desire to avoid fantasy (Barker 1989, p. 89) means that *nekylia* rather than *katabasis* predominates in his expression of the realm of the dead. However, there are also examples where *images* of Hades are subtly invoked in Barker's theatre.

Barker's theatre is almost always engaged with a sense of the past as either history or myth.⁹⁷ Rather than an attempt to faithfully reproduce the past or myth, Barker, like the Athenian tragedians, is engaging imaginatively with these narratives to open up a dialogue that causes us to review the present world. In fact it is the ancient narratives of classical and Hebrew culture that Barker shows a specific interest in due to their foundational status and influence and their challenge to contemporary ideology and morality:

If the ideology of transparency is one of instant communication, the great narratives of antiquity – almost entirely tragic in character – possess moral ambiguities which cannot be incorporated into the project of absolute enlightenment. [...] These narratives remain dimly familiar to us – they are after all, the deep humus of the European soul

⁹⁷ Or forms close to myth, e.g. folktales like *Snow White*.

– but how many of us are able to name them? [...] It has been one of the many disastrous consequences of naturalism in the theatre that the idea of the contemporary has dominated subject matter to the exclusion of nearly every mythical, biblical or classical subject.

(Barker 1997, p. 173-4)

Therefore, Barker's engagement with the narratives of history and history's narratives not only adopts a similar model to the classical tragedians but includes their narratives as a key area of engagement because of their foundational status in European culture. This is most explicit in Barker's *The Bite of the Night* where the play's location in the 'The Ruins of a University' (Barker 1998, p. 11) in the present initiates a return (and equation with) a foundational moment of destruction and ruin in European culture: the fall of Troy. From these conflated 'ruined spaces' Barker explores the emergence and ideologies of a variety of political and cultural systems or attitudes.⁹⁸ The focus on ruin and destruction as a starting point of dramatic exploration, due to the absence or decline of social order and cultural stability, is a clear expression of Barker's interest in tragedy as a genre because it can operate as a vortex to ideological stability. This play resurrects the ancient voices of myth and culture (including Homer and Helen of Troy) in the sacred space of tragic theatre, which is coded as the ruined space of contemporary culture: an ideologically blank canvas from which the voices of the real and mythic dead

⁹⁸ These ideologies are given simple names that express their underlying prejudice or perspective: e.g. Paper Troy, Mum's Troy, Clean Troy, etc. They are therefore not precise historical movements but rather attitudes and prejudices that inform different political movements to various degrees.

can re-emerge. Barker therefore creates spaces that like the *nekylia* and *katabasis* allow conversations and dialogues with people from the past beyond the limits and preoccupations of realism. His recalling of Homer to the ruined present echoes Aristophanes recalling of the great tragedians to an Athens in severe political decline as a source of renewal. Both plays conjure these characters from within an abject and damaged space: the ruins of the university/Troy and in Hades itself: the land of the many dead.

Choruses of the dead

There are often haunting suggestions of an afterlife like world in Barker's theatre:

The spatial dynamic of several Barker plays are strong examples of a literally 'hell-raising' trope, in that some force conventionally repressed or marginalised as 'abject' (in Julia Kristeva's sense of 'something rejected from which one does not part') erupts into the centre of the stage action to claim dramatic privacy and wreak havoc. The 'living dead' – in that they are consigned to insignificance within the dominant discourse – turn the tables, and discover language.

(Rabey 2009, p. 7).

The early catastrophic plays offer clear examples of this hell like world, where a strong aura of death pervades the characters because some major event

has resulted in chaos and destruction, often a war (e.g. *The Europeans*, *The Last Supper*, *The Bite of the Night*) or revolution (*Hated Nightfall*). In some of Barker's later plays, this encounter with death is shifted from the intrusion of social chaos, although it is often still there in the background, towards increasingly isolated encounters, where the protagonist finds themselves in a building or location outside of normal society, and is pulled into the darkness of this other world; an example being the ominous castle where the surgeon Doja is summoned in *He Stumbled* (as discussed in Chapter 3). Sometimes this isolated location is reached after a long journey, emphasising the protagonist's separation from society and invoking a sense of a world/space beyond normality. The journey, the isolation and the prevalence of death in these plays, work together to create a space that subtly echoes a *katabasis* to Hades. Examples include *The House of Correction* and particularly *The Road*, *the House*, *the Road*, which I will discuss in detail later.

As well as the locations, the characters and choruses also play a major role in invoking a Hades like realm. In *The Last Supper* the prophet Lvov 'dreams' a chorus of The Masses who periodically return to challenge his individualism. As the poem in the theatrical programme version of the play-text shows, these are not the living voices of the public, but the voices of the dead:

Since every human being dead
Since time began can no longer
be identified
We will describe them thus

THE MASSES

(Barker 1988)

Lvov is haunted by encounters with the dead throughout the play in the form of the Masses from history and is also currently in a world of the dying created by the ongoing war around him, a war which he expresses and reflects on in his eight parables that tell of the encounters of three wandering soldiers (the Macs).

In *Seven Lears* (1990) the chorus are again associated with the dead, as they explain when they introduce themselves in the opening scene:

GAOL: We are the dead who aren't dead yet
 Ever so sorry
 Not dead yet

(Barker 1990b, p. 1)

The Gaol represent all those imprisoned by the state and are encountered by the young Lear and his brothers when they are out playing. Like the Masses in *The Last Supper*, the Gaol are not actually present in the same space as the characters – the encounter appears to be a psychological one for the children as they become aware of all those who suffer under their father's government. The dying Gaol presents a concentrated and disturbing

expression of the children’s awareness of the pain and violence administered by political systems and more broadly the problem of human suffering in general. As with Odysseus’s difficult encounter with those who have suffered and been confined to Hades, Lear’s encounter is educational, the start of his education towards kingship. His two brothers respond in a shallow and dismissive manner, ‘Are you our father’s enemies? If so, however bad this is, it can’t be bad enough for you!’, but this shallowness is soon followed by both of them committing suicide which places Lear in the position where he will be king. Lear’s response is one of sympathy and this leads to a complex exploration of political strategies to improve life – an experience that ignites his desire for learning and wisdom.⁹⁹ In *Arguments for a Theatre*, the gaol is one of three locations that Barker employs to suggest the place or setting of his plays (in a general or metaphorical sense) in a chart that distinguishes between his theatre and more conventional theatre expectations:

Supplied	Denied
[...]	
The gaol	The room
The spoiled landscape	The garden
The cemetery	The market

(Barker 1993, p. 132)

⁹⁹ In the second part of his childhood education (which together, in terms of the play structure, comprise *FIRST LEAR*) he is taught by a Bishop whose approach to education is to make him familiar with the injustices of life through unjustified and inexplicable treatment: ‘You will detest me and your innate sense of justice will cry out for satisfaction. When one day, that cry ceases, your education will be over’ (Barker 1990b, p. 3). There is therefore a development for Lear from seeing the suffering of others to experiencing directly (though less severely) pain and suffering.

We can see how the opening scene of *Seven Lears* can be viewed as a condensing of these places, with the Goal of prisoners both dead and 'not dead yet' who are residing in, '*Darkness. A Pit in the Kingdom of LEAR's father*' (Barker 1990b, p. 1; 2009a, p. 99):¹⁰⁰ a pit suggesting a place 'spoiled' through human excavation. Rather than plays that portray the chatter and conversations of the market place, the traditional public centre of human societies, we are offered plays that hope to converse with the dead and the dying. In a recent interview, Barker mentions both these examples of a chorus but is keen to separate them from any moral dimension: 'I used it in *The Last Supper* and *Seven Lears*, precisely as a dislocation, a public disclaimer of naturalism. These choruses are not however, a sort of public; they are without virtue' (Barker 2011a, p. 198). His definition that they are not 'a sort of public' is somewhat surprising in that 'the public' is the very word used in the prologue to define what appear to be the chorus of The Masses in *The Last Supper*. The first prologue, delivered by two characters, states: 'DORA: The Public Had to be God / ELLA: Since God had to be' (2009a, p. 12) and when the chorus of the Masses first appear they say: 'The crowd is also a divinity' (p. 20) explicitly connecting them to the comments in the prologue. Perhaps their dead status makes them sufficiently other to the 'public' in the current and living sense. The fact that they are the voices of the many dead allows for this idea of the Masses as a new God to take on a mysterious and otherworldly quality that adds a sense of the eternal pain and longing of

¹⁰⁰ In this first publication of the text the stage directions continue with a line that grounds the physical presence of the gaol more in reality: '*The rattle of a bunch of keys*'. The removal of this line in the 2009 publication enforces the idea of the Goal as not actually being present in the space physically with Lear and his brothers.

humankind; which would be considerably diluted by a purely current expression of the voice of the people.

In Barker's *Hated Nightfall* the chorus again seem to be closely associated with the dead, particularly in the staging decisions of the 1994 production directed by Barker. The play is set in 1917 during the Russian Revolution and the chorus are composed of revolutionaries who are pressurising the protagonist, a royal tutor called Dancer, to continue with his initial loyalties to the revolutionary cause. Dancer is holding the Tsars captive for the Bolsheviks but he is beginning to question the new ideology imposed by the Communists. The chorus therefore provide the outward expression of this new ideology and, as with *The Last Supper* and *Seven Lears*, they are presented as part of the protagonist's psychic rather than physical space. When various 'Officials of the Revolution' (Barker 2009b, p. 171) arrive Dancer gleefully murders them: expressing his contempt and rejection of this new order.¹⁰¹ Although not explicitly expressed in the text, each murdered member of the chorus could then rejoin this chorus, increasingly adding the angry and otherworldly voices of the dead to their rebukes. The proximity of this chorus to the dead is made particularly clear in The Wrestling School's 1994 stage production where they emerge suddenly through trap doors in the stage as if rising in anger from their graves.¹⁰² Again the growing amount of corpses in the revolution outside and those murdered by Dancer himself –

¹⁰¹ Barker's own strong affiliation with Marxism and subsequent rejection of this movement and all ideology seems to find autobiographical expression in this clash between Dancer and the chorus of Marxists.

¹⁰² Two short extracts from this production, that include the chorus, can be viewed on the Wrestling School website (The Wrestling School 2010a)

expressed in this chorus – generate a *nekyia* or *katabasis* that opens up a space beyond ideology for the protagonist:

CHORUS: DANCER

YOU HAVE STABBED THE AGENT OF THE REVOLUTION
HE WAS ON YOUR SIDE!

DANCER: *My side?*

Do I have a side? (*They are aghast.*)

Oh, how horrified you are to find me pure ...

Yes ...

Rinsed of all belief ...

YOU'D PREFER ANY OLD CATECHISMS TO THE ECHO OF
THE UNBELIEVER

Lies

Filth

Encrusted ideology

(Barker 2009b, p. 183, emphasis his)

Barker's use of a chorus of the dead can also be seen in his earlier Marxist plays. In the unproduced television drama *Heaven* (1978), 'ghosts of the village war dead [...] chiefly of the First World War' emerge from the memorial in the church graveyard, 'infantrymen in mud-encrusted uniform' with an 'unearthly gait' (Barker 1978, p. 97). Like the choruses in Barker's later theatrical plays, the dead are hostile to the politics of the protagonist – in this

case his communist views: 'Shame on vile traitors in our midst!' (Barker 1978, p. 97.) A dead communist sympathiser then emerges offering his own argument. Here we see Barker using the dead to offer the perspective of past ideals and beliefs but also to challenge traditional views through the communist character (who Barker would ideologically sympathise with at this point in his career).¹⁰³ Where the dead within the otherwise realistic drama of *Heaven* seem somewhat unconvincing as a device, this device of a chorus of the dead is far more suited to his new stylised, tragic subgenre: the Theatre of Catastrophe. Yet, still, in many ways *Heaven* serves as a precursor to the dominance of the dead and dying as chorus in his tragic drama from 1988 onwards.

Around the same time that Barker employs a chorus of the dead in this television script, individual dead characters start to feature in his stage plays.¹⁰⁴ In *Birth on the Hard Shoulder* (written 1977) a stockbroker called Finney murders his family on the night of a general election because he feels a second term for the re-elected socialist Labour government will destroy the country. He is about to commit suicide in a disused isolation hospital when an unnamed 'Spectre' appears in the room, his presence initially signalled by a 'repetitive, tubercular cough' (Barker 1982b, p. 83).¹⁰⁵ Like the shade of Achilles in the *Odyssey*, the Spectre warns the protagonist of the emptiness of

¹⁰³ In *The Love of the Good Man* (1978), the setting is the site of the battle Passchendaele two years after the end of World War 1. The theatrical space therefore becomes a sacred space of the many dead but in this instance no supernatural resurrection occurs.

¹⁰⁴ Rabey observes that 'Barker's first theatrical use' of the 'presence of the dead' 'seems to me to be Tovarisch in *Fair Slaughter* [1977]; and thereafter the Spectre in *Birth on the Hard Shoulder*' (Rabey, 2014).

¹⁰⁵ The play initially shows its interest in encounters with the dead in Scene 2 where three high-ranking police officers are using an Ouija board (Barker 1982b, p. 76).

the world in which he resides: 'I am to tell you there is nothing satisfactory in death. Your lungs are healthy' (Barker 1982b, p. 84). In contrast to the catastrophic theatre's choruses of the dead that threaten the individuality of the protagonist, the Spectre, who has returned to search for his postcard from King George VI, seems to initially hold conservative values similar to Finney and incites the reluctant anti-hero to take action to improve the country:

SPECTRE: **The English!** You are to help the **English!**

FINNEY: I'd like to die, can't I just die?

SPECTRE: Struggle the hardest when things look the worst. Nothing is certain. Nothing is lost.

(Barker 1982b, p. 84)

Although an individual character/performer rather than a group, the absence of a name for the Spectre gives him a more generalised and choric identity, a spokesperson for the many who have died in the hospital, and who, like the dead in *Heaven*, appears to be hostile to socialism. However, from an audience perspective the Spectre in fact presents a critique of conservatism: his death through tuberculosis suggests he was the victim of poverty and the King's visit to the hospital can be read as a strategy to pacify the dying poor. This ambiguity is increased in the Spectre's third and final encounter, where it becomes uncertain whether his previous request for Finney to 'help England' was in fact ever a challenge to the socialist society. The Spectre's description of his role in the First World War where he is critical of the generals, 'Sitting

on yachts with iced cocktails in their hands, while we were sucking pebbles and our bowels gushed with dysentery' (Barker 1982b, p. 114), strongly suggests the Spectre actually wants Finney to challenge the class system that is supported by conservative politics. In the final stages of the play Finney indeed changes allegiances and tries to stop the secret activities of the right, but is incarcerated for his initial murder before he can create any impact. In *Birth on a Hard Shoulder*, therefore, Barker subtly employs this spokesperson of the dead to challenge the protagonist's political ideals, but without his awareness of the situation.

A common trait of the dramatic chorus is its role as an observer and commentator on the action but rarely a participant. This makes the dead, whether individual characters or groups, essentially choric in nature, restricted by their detachment from the living world of action. Barker blends Greek tragedy's use of both a chorus and of ghosts to create a chorus of the dead in the Theatre of Catastrophe. However, his use of individual dead characters also continues in his later theatre works, notably in two plays that are set in the same heroic and mythical world that provided the raw narrative material for Greek tragedians. Barker's *Defilo (Failed Greeks)* (1996) and *N/A (Sad Kissing)* (2002) both involve narratives related to the siege of Troy. Unlike Barker's earlier engagement with the fall of Troy as a spring board for an expansive exploration of twentieth century ideology in *The Bite of the Night*, both of these plays utilise a more concentrated focus on the unities of time and place and a smaller grouping of characters, thus corresponding more closely to the form of classical Greek tragedy.

In *Defilo*, a Greek ship on the way to Troy is shipwrecked and the survivors, King Filo, Durer his lover and a priestess, Filo's son and four sailors are marooned on a bleak, arid and inhospitable island. The treacherous and relentless struggle for survival on the island suggests a hell or purgatory on which the characters' lives exist in an alternative world to the expected destiny of honourable war and probable death in Troy. As Rabey observes, 'like other Barker characters they find themselves in an anti-historical position and location ('Not Troy'): physically and perhaps terminally marginalised, consigned to the periphery of the conventional grand historical narrative' (Rabey 2009, p. 163). There is a suggestion of subtle supernatural forces at work directing the fate of the characters, a god and a ghost, two tropes of Greek tragedy.

Firstly there is a mysterious hermit on the island, Aitchison, who the characters refer to as a god. Like Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, the desert island setting becomes a place of introspection, shedding of old selves, and reinvention against the uncivilised backdrop of nature. Aitchison, like Prospero, tries to impose his own moral scheme on the characters but a scheme that, like the island setting, is relentlessly cruel and oppressive to human behaviour. Reduced to a state of pure survival the ecstasy of the King and his lover seems a terrible indulgence and the hermit forbids any intimate sexual acts (Barker 1996b, p. 48). It is later suggested in the play that the hermit's oppression of intimacy is due to jealousy because of the absence of love in his own life (Barker 1996b, p. 101). Aitchison's divine status is

unravelling near the end of the play when he runs desperately into the sea to escape onto a passing ship. Shocked by this action, Filo exclaims 'YOU'RE THE GOD HERE ... / YOU'RE THE RESIDENT' (Barker 1996b, p. 115). Filo's ordeal has led him to a state of supreme detachment 'I have no opinion' (Barker 1996b, p. 114) and his decision to stay alone on the island when Aitchison has fled could suggest he is the new divinity in residence. However, this divine status has come at a significant loss; 'Filo is reminiscent of Barker's Vanya, who alone has fought off the moribund diminutions of the 'god' Chekhov, but sacrificed his sexual muse in the process' (Rabey 2009, p. 165). Like Beatrice in relation to Benz in Barker's *Rome*, Filo's detachment and inability to submit to higher forces, 'Oh, how I want to pray but God's too poor to pray to' (Barker 1996b, p. 119), places him beyond the 'god' character, who becomes correspondingly flawed and therefore human. Filo's divinity is short lived, however, because his disappointed and moralistic son returns and kills his 'criminal' and 'savage' father (Barker 1996b, p. 120).¹⁰⁶

The second otherworldly character is the drowned Helmsman, 'a baleful talking revenant' (Rabey 2009, p. 164). Although a single dead figure, the lack of a sense of individual personality in his speech – it is purely focused on Filo – suggests a choric and generalised perspective of the dead. Filo blames The Helmsman, described as 'A Curse' in the *dramatis personae*, for inexplicably causing the shipwreck. He speculates that he may have been a suicide and

¹⁰⁶ At an earlier stage of the play, Filo's son questions his father's process of relentless detachment as a strategy to survive: 'You are saying – since hope can only be a trap – an enticement to further despair – the survival of those who wish to survive must come from another source – a hopeless source – hopelessness itself perhaps...? (*He looks uncomfortable...*) I don't know, I ... (*He stops...*) Not all will wish for their survival – under such circumstances' (Barker 1996b, p. 35).

ascribes to the character a religious acceptance of fate, 'I saw him / Did anyone else observe this / A placid look / Religious / And resigned / He did not lift a finger to preserve himself' (Barker 1996b, p. 3). When the corpse of the Helmsman finally speaks to Filo, he adds to Filo's ordeal by explaining his son has now reached Troy and found distinction there (in contrast to Filo) and that his lover, Durer, has also survived her journey across the sea and is seducing a king she has encountered (Barker 1996b, p. 105). In the later stages of the play, Filo is alone with the dead and floating Helmsman who is now only able to utter a few words. However, the Helmsman, who seemingly instigated Filo's suffering by wrecking the ship, continues only to torment Filo by retrieving Durer's comb each time he throws the unwanted memento of his failed love into the sea.

Despite the terrible existential journey that Filo is sent on by the Helmsman and the subsequent detachment he experiences as a result of this process (intensified by the oppression of the hermit god figure), in the final moments of the play there is a moment of affirmation. Soon after Filo has been left mortally wounded on the beach, Durer appears and despite all that has occurred to the now highly sceptical and detached Filo, finally persuades him that she loves him (Barker 1996b, p. 123-4).

In contrast to the island location on the margins of history in *Defilo*, Barker's *N/A (Sad Kissing)* is set in Troy itself, immediately after it has fallen to the Greek army. Unlike Barker's *The Bite of the Night*, the action is confined to the immediate events following the defeat of the Trojans, and engages

primarily with the experience of key mythic figures, rather than larger social and political concerns. *N/A* stands for Neoptolomus / Andromache, and their relationship forms the centre of the play's action. The connections with classical tragedy are particularly strong in this play, probably more so than in any other Barker drama. The character of Andromache appears in two Euripidean dramas that also explore the aftermath of the Trojan War: *Trojan Women* and *Andromache*. The murder of her son, Astyanax, which features in the *Trojan Women*, is also a key event in Barker's drama. There are only four main characters in this play and for the most part, two of them are ghosts who have been murdered by Neoptolemus, who has taken Andromache as his concubine. Before the play begins, Neoptolemus has murdered the King of the Trojans and father-in-law to Andromache, Priam. Andromache's enforced relationship to the recent murderer of both Priam and, particularly, her son Astyanax, is the terrible situation Barker dramatises in this play, complex emotional territory that is played out in her exchanges with the two ghosts and Neoptolemus.¹⁰⁷ Rabey describes this powerful play as 'one of Barker's most moving and resonant plays of the period' (Rabey 2009, p. 170) and comments on the effectiveness of its use of ghost characters:

Whilst confronting the yawning gulfs of emotional loss experienced by both the living and the dead, the innovative presence of the posthumous characters manages to express their howling entwined psychic proximity and physical separation, whilst maintaining and asserting Andromache's existential drive further and beyond

¹⁰⁷ The play also features two female servants who offer the choral perspective of the living on the events of the play.

(Rabey 2009, p. 170)

The ghost of Priam represents the heroic male order and also the pressure on Andromache to remain emotionally loyal to her dead husband Hector. When warning her about her future with Neoptolemus 'He'll murder you', Priam stresses the exceptional nature of Hector, 'Few men have the tolerance you discovered in my son' (Barker 2002c, p. 58-59). Andromache's response shows her resistance to this manipulation and shocks Priam into an angry response that also reveals Priam's own erotic interest in Andromache:

ANDROMACHE: I have let your murderer inside me

And he

He certainly can brush my hair

(She is distraught, bewildered)

I can't apologise I can't I can't I can't apologise for this

(She wrings her hands)

Magnificent injustice

(She searches the face of PRIAM)

Can I?

PRIAM: You killed him

You killed Hector as surely as the spear of Achilles

ANDROMACHE: Yes

And I have often thought of that for whereas a woman's
passion will double a man's strength

PRIAM: Her contempt will halve it

ANDROMACHE: Yes

I was fatal to your son

[...]

PRIAM: I could smack and fuck you Andromache

(Barker 2002c, p. 60-61)

The suggestion that Andromache has caused the death of Hector and her ability to move existentially beyond established moral norms, displays two common features of a number of Barker's female characters: unapologetic immoral behaviour and an often fatal or destructive effect on male lovers. In the later stages of the play, Andromache shocks both Neoptolemus and Priam with revelations of her sexual encounters with Astyanax (Barker 2002c, p. 86). Such a taboo act strikes deep at moral normativity and therefore further disorders the attempts of the two adult males to control and contain her. Such a bond simultaneously reveals the terrible yet profound connection between Andromache and Astyanax further complicating the audience's perception of the sense of loss she must be experiencing.¹⁰⁸ In the final moments of the play, Andromache finally manages to dispel the shade of her son in an emotionally wrenching moment that expresses to full effect the tragic effectiveness of the ghost:

¹⁰⁸ The significance of incest within royal families in both Greek tragedy and Barker's theatre is considered in Chapter 5.

ASTYANAX: (*Unable to control his bitterness*) Yes so fuck now

Yes so fuck

Astyanax in the deadlake

Astyanax who saw his father jump behind a truck who heard his mother's cry¹⁰⁹ and saw the sky rush past him¹¹⁰

Astyanax who wrapped himself in poetry is drowning in the deadlake fuck now fuck I am only a mouth in the deadlake fuck you fuck you strongbones under the olives dig and fuck
(ANDROMACHE *removes her gaze from ASTYANAX, an appalling farewell. ASTYANAX runs off*)

(Barker 2002c, p. 96)

The repetitive use of the word fuck, referring initially to his mother's sexual activity but then seeming to shift into an expression of impotent anger, concisely and powerfully expresses the futile rage of Astyanax as his movement towards oblivion is intensified by Andromache's sexual relationship with Neoptolemus. The evocative and haunting images of 'drowning in the deadlake' and 'only a mouth in the deadlake' provide a suitably unpleasant picture of the dissipation of the soul into oblivion.

In Barker's *He Stumbled* (2000) there is an aggressive chorus of two priests who die half way through the play, but still continue to form a haunting chorus

¹⁰⁹ The significance of 'the [female] cry' in Barker's drama is considered in relation to the Maenad in Chapter 5.

¹¹⁰ Astyanax was thrown to his death from the battlements by Neoptolemus.

that challenges the protagonist from beyond the grave. This particular extract highlights the similarities of the Doja's journey with the educational *katabasis* of antiquity:

(...the dead priests erupt.)

FIRST/SECOND PRIESTS: HEY

HEY

DEATH'S AN EDUCATION

DOJA: Is it? Then there's something to look forward to.

FIRST PRIEST: Sarcasm –

SECOND PRIEST: Is the first thing we dispensed with –

DOJA: Pity, I find great comfort in it –

SECOND PRIEST: And humour, that is useless too –

DOJA: It's not the place for me, that's obvious –

FIRST/SECOND PRIESTS: DEATH IS THE END OF FREEDOM, DOJA ...

DOJA: The end of it...?

FIRST/SECOND PRIESTS: AND THE BEGINNING OF

(Pause...)

DOJA: What...?

(Pause...)

The beginning of what...?

(The priests sob, in a subdued, suffocated way...)

(Barker 2008, p. 208-9)

Doja's attempt to resist this dark wisdom through humour is immediately dispensed with by the priests, forcing Doja and the audience to engage with death more directly. Although they express the limits that death imposes on individual autonomy, they do follow this comment with a suggestion of the emergence (or birth) of something else. Such speculation may connect with Barker's concept of hope-lessness in *Death, The One*, which is described as 'a new condition', and where a new freedom is found in the 'now' once the inevitability of death is realised. This may be the 'education' of death that the priests speak of.

Whatever its precise meaning, this suggestion of something 'beginning' (although not fully expressed), a transformation from the assumptions and world view of the person prior to their encounter to a new way of seeing, has a relationship with the educational impact of the *katabasis* of antiquity: the characters are transformed and educated through the encounter with the dead. In fact its ambiguity may very well be key to its effectiveness: the 'unknown' opening up irrational, emotional and imaginative states in the audience as meaning is dismantled – the *katabasis* as *via negativa*.

In *Found in the Ground* (2001) the elderly Nuremburg judge Toonelhuis continually requests what seem to be the remains (in the form of piles of earth) of those he has sentenced for war crimes. The earth is brought to him on a tray and he digests the earth after pouring water over it. These actions seem to be a symbolic expression of the judge's desire to digest (process and understand) the dead he has judged. In the Wrestling School stage production

of this play (Riverside Studios 2009) the *mise-en-scene* was one of Barker's most non-naturalistic constructions. The space immediately conjured up a hell-like atmosphere with a smoking pit stage left that crackled with the sound of flames as books were tipped into it at intervals throughout the play.

The stage was for the most part lit in red and three life-size mechanical dogs rushed forward diagonally across the space on metal tracks, barking loudly, apparently to protect Toonelhuis from perceived threats (he was mostly set downstage right) and then retreat. The number of dogs when placed in this red and smoking space brought to mind the three-headed Cerberus from Greek mythology who dwells in the underworld and was encountered in the *katabasis* of Heracles; described as 'triple bodied' in Euripides' *Heracles* (2003, p. 35).

As well as the repetition of the rushing and barking dogs and the books tipped into the furnace there was also the regular movement of a naked 'headless' woman, Macedonia, across the space. In Scene 10 Macedonia's voice booms out:¹¹¹ 'I am all the Ann Franks (*Pause*.) The Ann Franks me (*Pause*) The ditches full of (*Pause*) The pits full of (*Pause*) Composers/Violinists/Physicists' (Barker 2008, p. 149), suggesting that she represents the many dead from the holocausts and genocides of the Second World War. The voices of the dead are presented in two other characters: 'KNOX: The Spirit of a War Criminal' (p. 121) and Hitler, who is the final encounter desired by

¹¹¹ The actress's voice is amplified through a microphone. The headless effect (specified in the text) is achieved by her wearing a circular black hat at a very sharp angle across her face. Barker seems to be trying to create an illusion of headlessness but at the same time maintain a sense of funereal but sophisticated headwear that is the preference in his costume designs.

Toonelhuis in what seems to be an attempt at understanding himself in relation to history and justice, having digested all the other war criminals. This impossible encounter with the long dead Hitler after a sustained engagement with many and various images and expressions of the dead, and framed as the protagonist's search for spiritual knowledge and understanding, is again reminiscent of the *katabasis* in Homer and Greek antiquity. In his study of *katabasis* Thurston explains how the protagonist's descent into the underworld will usually culminate in an encounter with a significant voice from the past that they have been seeking there:

[T]he protagonist, usually at the nadir of his journey, at a dark moment of exhaustion, confusion, or despair, is driven to seek counsel and guidance from the past preserved and the prophetic vision vouchsafed to a tutelary figure in the Underworld.

(Thurston 2009, p. 2)

The fact that for Toonelhuis it is Hitler shows Barker's desire for radical moral instability: the tutelary nature of the figure is inverted and instead he is the most infamous dictator and political murderer of the 20th century. However, the desire for the encounter – a search for explanations and answers to seemingly insoluble questions – is strikingly similar.

The continual focus on death through symbol and poetic language in this production/play, when coupled with an expressionistic and mechanical mise-

en-scene punctuated with the '*repetitive sound of an industrial process*' (Barker, 2008, p. 123), effectively wears down the audience's ability to read the performance text in a realistic or rational manner, offering the audience an experiential and emotional journey, rather than one based on narrative coherence. Arguably, this approach makes *Found in the Ground* the most Artaudian of Barker's play-texts / productions.¹¹²

This katabatic journey combines with an apocalyptic dimension in that we seem to be experiencing the obliteration of western culture through the furnace of texts.¹¹³ Although the play was first performed in 2009 it was written before 1999 and this *fin de siècle* sense of the apocalypse seems to express a desire to obliterate (imaginatively and mentally rather than literally) all the texts from his library, particularly the humanities: 'I said concentrate on the Humanities' (p. 150).¹¹⁴ A clue to the reason for this particular focus is suggested by a quotation from Adorno at the start of the printed version of the play: 'In the innermost recesses of humanism, as its very soul, there rages a frantic prisoner...' (Adorno, in Barker 2008, p. 120). This suggests a desire in Barker, which he expresses elsewhere, to free the (European) subject from

¹¹² This experiential focus was unpopular with critics, with Lyn Gardner in the *The Guardian* showing a preference for clear meanings: 'Howard Barker gives little away in his latest vision of hell on earth [...] It feels both monumental and unassailable, like a vast piece of theatrical granite. If only Barker would allow us near' (Gardner 2009).

¹¹³ Hell and the apocalypse are a related imaginary space in the Christian tradition and *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* points out the parallels between the Book of Revelation and Greek tragedy in terms of catharsis: 'Rev, like other apocalypses, also excites fear. It clarifies and emphasises the danger facing the faithful in this world, but it also portrays the terrors of the next world for those who prove unfaithful' (Collins 1991, p. 997).

¹¹⁴ I participated in a workshop on this text led by Howard Barker in 1999 at the Actors' Centre, London. It was presented as a recently written text, which he was keen to try out and explore.

the ideological dominance of humanism.¹¹⁵ Not only does the desire to concentrate on burning the Humanities suggest a specific hostility to this cultural movement but also Toonelhuis enquires later on in the text 'Have you burned Erasmus yet?' (p. 153): a primary figure in the emergence of humanism. *Found in the Ground's* enactment of the cleansing of humanist literature seems to be arguing for a Nietzschean dismantling and reconstructing of the subject at the dawn of a new millennium. The *fin de siècle* or rather *fin de millennium* prophecy or desire for the end of culture is a dominant trope of postmodern philosophy and art, and an idea that finds its prototypical expression in Nietzsche's madman announcing the death of God in *The Gay Science* in 1882 (Nietzsche 1977, p. 202). In fact the play enacts many aspects of the anxieties of postmodern thought about the end of stable meanings and the disintegration of culture. Philosopher Richard Kearney describes this apocalyptic dimension of postmodern thought in a manner strikingly relevant to Barker's subject matter and themes in this play when he writes:

After the holocaust of the second world war, Adorno asked, who can write poetry? After deconstruction, we may well ask, who can write philosophy? In our postmodern era of apocalypse both the poetry and philosophy of the human imagination would seem to have reached their end. What is to come is, apparently, beyond the powers of imagination to imagine.

¹¹⁵ In *Arguments for a Theatre* the 'humanist theatre' stands for everything the 'catastrophic theatre' intends to subvert (Barker 1997, p. 71).

(Kearney 1994, p. 295)

Emerging from and informed by this negation is the spiritual revelation of Toonelhuis, an epiphany that seems to be the central focus of the play's narrative and aesthetic. The judge describes this moment of revelation when in conversation with the deceased Knox:

TOONELHUIS: I have been

Most of my life

A magistrate

A prosecutor

And on thirty eight occasions passed sentence of death

A punishment

Quite inadequate

Oh

So inadequate

A MERE SYMBOL OF OUR COLLECTIVE

RAGE

Quite long ago

Quite long

In 1948

Oh what a year

And of these very few opted to lie

They might have

But they did not lie

Whereas people like you

(He ceases. The HEADLESS WOMAN proceeds to urinate on the ground. The sound preoccupies both KNOX and TOONELHUIS, whose heads turn in unison, tilted in the direction of the HEADLESS WOMAN. The torrent ceases.)

The ground

The washing of the ground

I was religious

Were you ever

Deeply religious

But now

Not since I saw a pissing girl

Not now

Not since I heard her urine flood the ground

Among the pine needles

A forest east of Mecklenburg

The ground

The washing of the ground

Swiftly she

How swiftly she

Not looking round

Pants clinging to her knees

The sun moved on the ground

It seemed

The sun moved with the breeze

First on her hair
Then off it
Breathless
Breathless me
Out walking
Breathless me
I'd sentenced five to execution
I NEEDED AIR
Hoss
Funck
Dolbuch
Klysek
Rimm
Christ was not in the forest
I looked for him
Bits of rifles
Cartridges
And this music of her urine
Washing the ground
Washing
Washing the ground

(Barker 2008, p. 137-8)

We can see from this speech the combination of factors involved in his spiritual awakening. The sentencing to death of humans who have been responsible themselves for the death of many can be seen to be overwhelming the belief systems of the protagonist: death and meaninglessness haunt the space throughout the play. The fact that he has sentenced as many as five (out of thirty eight) to death that day seems to be the foundation and drive behind his epiphany in the forest. In fact his search for Christ in the forest expresses this desire directly. However, instead of Christ, the epiphany is of an earthly and erotic order: Toonelhuis feels cleansed by observing and hearing a woman pissing in the forest. The naturalness, purity and eroticism of this event obliterates the moral, political and religious sensibilities of Toonelhuis and instead opens him up to the present and the erotic with an intense awareness of the subtle and captivating sounds and images of this event. The protagonist speaks the line 'I hear a woman pissing' many times throughout the play and the Headless Woman enacts this moment in a number of scenes: this strongly enforces the centrality of this spiritual epiphany to the play's aesthetic and vision.

In fact this moment of pissing on the ground can be seen as the delimitation of the theatrical space as a sacred space, a katabatic space of the dead and of, therefore, culture and ideology's absence (moral, political, religious, etc.) or destruction. This transcendence from the present (in terms of ideology) allows the characters to encounter one another across past and present. This encounter with the dead is of course a defining feature of the classical *katabasis* and *nekyia*. The whole play is haunted by the overwhelming spectre

of the many dead that is fused with this image of the pissing female, an expression of the now as sexual ecstasy, a now beyond or before ideology. The repetition and emphasis on Toonelhuis' breathlessness concentrates this sense of the immediate present. The repetition of the phrase 'washing the ground' merges and contrasts two key concepts or experiences: the many dead who are found in the ground and the sexual awakening of Toonelhuis through his secret witnessing of an act of urination. Both these experiences when combined (or perhaps where the second causes a re-evaluation or intensification of the first) cleanse Toonelhuis. This spiritual cleansing is similar to that administered by the hermit in Barker's poem 'Sheer Detachment', it is a cleansing of ideology, of belief.

When this spiritual awakening is read alongside the destruction of texts in the play this cleansing can be seen as a cultural *via negativa* where human thought is dismantled in order to move to more profound and ultimately inexpressible human experience. The burning of books suggests both a cleansing and also a hell: a blank canvas emerging from a ruined and despairing culture. Barker will use the image of book burning again in his 2006 radio play *The Road, the House, the Road* where the destruction of a document by the humanist Erasmus will become an even greater focal point of the narrative

A younger character in *Found in the Ground*, a nineteen-year-old librarian called Denmark, is also cleansed in a similar way when the Headless Woman urinates on him. Denmark is a trope on Hamlet (Stewart in *The Wrestling*

School 2009) and like Hamlet his bookishness has made him relentlessly self-questioning and inactive. However, this cleansing leads Denmark not to a sense of spiritual detachment but instead he attempts the forceful establishment of a new harsh political order (he is holding a gun): 'Critical moments in the history of a culture frequently require swift and violent actions the elimination of old values [...] FROM ME WILL COME NEW DISPENSATIONS (Barker 2008, p. 207). Denmark has learned this first sentence directly from the resurrected Hitler that suggests this is a comment on the dangers of modernist totalitarian politics and their desire to construct radically new societies, exemplified of course by Hitler's Nazism.

In *Found in the Ground* Barker is following a tradition that takes us back to Homer, where the protagonist undergoes a journey close to death, entering a space dominated by death, and even converses with the dead, in order to create a sense of spiritual and moral renewal in the audience.¹¹⁶ However, in the youthful Denmark this renewal leads to a new and even more oppressive ideology highlighting the dangers of such an encounter with the void.

Light and darkness and the tragic space

In her recent study of Athenian tragic drama, Edith Hall's choice of subtitle *Greek tragedy: suffering under the sun* (2010) emphasises the genre's relationship to the powerful natural light that illuminated both performer and

¹¹⁶ Barker sees his tragedy as creating a space of moral renewal: 'I don't think the theatre is about enlightenment, certainly not about didacticism. I think it is about creating a moral confusion in the audience, which I think is creative' (Barker in Spencer, 1990).

audience. Hall argues for the importance of the sun and sunlight in tragedy in her introduction by highlighting how the characters often mention the sun as they or others close to them approach death. The introduction opens with a quotation from Euripides' *Alcestis*, 'Admetus to his dying wife': 'The sun looks upon the suffering of both of us, / Neither of whom has done anything against the gods / To deserve your death (Euripides in Hall 2010, p. 1). For Hall 'one of the main poetic images for denoting the boundary dividing life from death is sunlight' (Hall 2010, p. 2). The emphasis therefore in Greek tragedy, according to Hall, is on the living sunlit world, the world of life and light:

All these tragic heroes and heroines uttered their laments under the sun which beat down upon them and whose light they were about to leave forever; the audiences who watched and listened shared that sunlight with them.

(Hall 2010, p. 3)

Such an emphasis on the performance conditions of Greek tragedy places the genre in a more optimistic position than a performance of a classical tragedy in a modern theatrical setting might suggest: the powerful natural signifier of life and its illumination of all in the space separates the audience from the realm of the dead, where some of the characters will depart, as it highlights the communal and democratic nature of the polis, as does the device of the chorus. Tony Harrison, in his introduction to his translation of the *Oresteia*

(2002) also notes the impact of sunlight in tragedy and outdoor performance and how it pushes the perspective towards the public:

Full daylight, the conditions in which most of the great verse dramas were played and where actor can see audience as clearly as they see him, is a great way to discover the nature of this kind of theatre [...] Granville Barker also wrote of Greek drama, and indeed of open-air full daylight theatre in general, that it suffered in the transition 'from sunlight to limelight. The mere transference from outdoors in will prove deadening.' [...] [The theatre at Epidaurus was] originally flooded with spring sunshine illuminating equally actors and some 15,000 in the audience

(Harrison 2002, p. 6-7)

The visibility of others in Greek drama places emphasis on the many still living and on the public response and reflection on the repercussions of individual actions and the death of individuals. It seems to be this public emphasis that attracted the incorporation of Greek tragic theatre related devices in Brechtian theatre: a shared level of illumination for both actor and audience and the use of the chorus and direct address. Such devices help to avoid the closed domestic and individualistic world of naturalistic drama. The emphasis on life in Greek tragedy could also be surmised from the time of year in which they were designed to be produced, 'originally Greek theatres were built to operate in the spring, in March and April' (Peter Hall in Harrison 2002, p.7), the spring

being a time of renewal and re-birth. The establishment of religious cults at the close of many tragedies also suggests this perspective of rebirth.

When we examine the role of light/darkness and associated imagery in Barker's plays we encounter a very different perspective that separates him from classical tragedy. In an essay entitled 'Theatre without conscience' Barker talks about the darkness of the black box theatrical space as being essential to the imaginative power and validity of theatre (Barker 1997, p. 72-8).¹¹⁷ After he defines theatrical art as essentially 'promiscuous', in contrast to the moralising, humanist and Brechtian inspired 'Theatre of Conscience', Barker argues for the importance of darkness to theatrical art:

Let me suggest that the theatre is literally a box, physically and morally a box. What occurs in the box is infinite because the audience wishes it to be infinite – there is no burden of proof at any moment. It is a black box, when the lights are off, because, as we all know, darkness permits the criminal and the promiscuous act. I wrote a play called *The Bite of the Night*. Darkness permits the thought, darkness licenses, it bites, and sometimes you can be bitten by love and sometimes by fear.

(Barker 1997, p. 74)

Later in the essay Barker concludes that the form of this theatrical art is necessarily tragedy: 'And what is the form of this landscape [of a pre-moral

¹¹⁷ Presented as a paper at Aberystwyth University in 1990 and then published in the 2nd edition of *Arguments for a Theatre* in 1993.

world’], for there is only one? It is tragedy’ (Barker 1997, p.77). It is interesting that this conclusion of an essential connection between tragedy and darkness occurs late on in the essay, in that if the terms were employed at the start the powerful examples of Greek and Shakespearian tragedies would undermine the argument. It is only once he has argued for the black box as a space for art that allows the promiscuous act, that tragedy can be introduced. The idea of darkness and night features in three of the titles of Barker’s plays from the early catastrophic drama *The Bite of the Night* (1986), *Hated Nightfall* (1994) and the marionette play *The Swing at Night* (2000). In addition to Barker’s comments above, the title of *The Bite of the Night* seems to also refer to the painful encounter with darkness and oblivion that the protagonist encounters in his search for knowledge.

Arguably, it is important to reduce awareness of other audience members in a Barker performance to reduce the socialising impact (and moral impact) of seeing others, so that the audience have more chance of leaving with a greater sense of isolation from a sense of community, which is clearly Barker’s objective: ‘In tragedy, the audience is disunited. It sits alone. It suffers alone’ (Barker 1997, p. 19). As well as encouraging individualism, Barker’s theatre aims to create an anti-rationalism and state of unknowing; he therefore attacks the level of illumination in the main theatres and how for him this signifies an ideological leaning toward revelation:

The bright theatres of our time, so critical as to be the favoured form of national companies, so revealing as to be not merely morally perfect

but commercial – repudiates all that is obscure, *lightless*, morally confused. Our national theatres are palaces of light, the foyer itself a dazzling antechamber to the intellectual enlightenment that must follow the opening of the doors.

(Barker 1997 [1996], p. 184)

As we have noted already the original tragic theatre was performed in broad daylight and as a backdrop it had a panoramic view of nature stretching out into the distance (due to the raised area in which the Greek amphitheatre is constructed). This dwarfing of man against the macrocosm of nature is a very different way of reading man than that found in a dark space with a monochromatic metallic set. An approach using darkness and thus encouraging audience (physical) passivity and relative invisibility is at odds with the Attic tragic space. Barker's desire for a dark space in opposition to the democratic and public visibility of an Attic or Brechtian theatrical production seems to be related to Barker's desire to isolate the audience from the moral and ideological illusions fostered by normative society: 'the street'.¹¹⁸

The art of theatre asserts its absolute independence of the street. It values the door. It values the wall. It leaves the street to the street. In

¹¹⁸ The term 'the street' could be deliberately reminiscent of Brecht's famous 'Street scene' article where he sets out a model for an objective and scientific theatre based on bystanders demonstrating the cause of a car crash they have witnessed (Brecht 1964, p.121).

any case, who says the street is real? It *pretends* to be real. The fact so many persist in the fiction that it is real is of no concern to us.

(Barker 2005a, p. 3)

Again the closed nature of the black box theatre is stressed, and the darkness within the space will further eliminate the sense of the street as the audience also become invisible. For Barker this eradication of normativity allows the performers to take on an identity that appears other than human and not reducible to ordinary people:

[T]he actor [...] is not entirely human, nor do we wish him to be. He is not – and here as in most ways I totally reject the principles of community theatre – merely someone who might be in the audience on another night, the grocer in a funny hat, or your uncle pretending to be your ancestor – but quite other than us, gifted in special ways, not least in body and speech, [...] that is the lost secret, and poetic speech is nearly religious in its power.

(Barker 1997, p. 77)

This celebration of the actor, which expresses an urge to reach for the religious, highlights another reason for the preference for darkness: the primacy of speech and poetry in his theatre, experienced without distraction

where its 'nearly religious' power can move closer towards creating a spiritual and irrational experience in the audience.

Although a black box theatre is a common and therefore practical space to produce theatre in the twentieth and twenty-first century, Barker's insistence on the importance of darkness in his theatre, both literal and metaphorical, sets out a very clear difference to the early religious tragedy of classical Athens. However, another form of religious drama took place in classical Greece which seems to have influenced Greek tragedy but which makes use of darkness as a realm for spiritual and imaginative engagement with death. In the next section we will look at another aspect of performance in Greek culture, the mystery initiations, and consider how this internal ancient performance event offers comparisons of a spiritual nature with Barker's black box theatre.

Ancient mystery cult and tragic drama

I approached the frontier of death, I set foot on the threshold of Persephone, I journeyed through all the elements and came back, I saw at midnight the sun, sparkling in white light, I came close to the gods of the upper and nether world and adored them from near at hand.

(Apuleius *Metamorphoses* in Burkert 1987, p. 97)

Death is the secret of secrets, the origin of the idea of the secret, of which desire is the highest manifestation *in life*...

(Barker 2005a, p. 35)

The quotation from Apuleius' fictional *Metamorphosis* (c. 170-180 AD) is one of the tantalizing rare expressions of the secret experiences of the ancient mystery cult, which it is assumed had been experienced by the author; mystery cult was a popular religious experience in the classical world. Although the precise events that make up the experience in mystery cult were protected by laws that punished revelations, what is interesting for a consideration of death and theatre is that these cults were interactive performance events that engaged with death-like experiences and encounters with divine beings (as the above quotation infers). For Nietzsche, mystery cult is where the spirit of Dionysus continued when Attic tragedy went into decline: 'Dionysiac philosophy [...] lives on in the mysteries' (Nietzsche 1993, p. 82). For Artaud, the mysteries were an influence on the more disturbing elements of Greek tragedy that should serve as a model for modern theatre: 'The terrifying apparition of Evil produced in unalloyed form at the Eleusian Mysteries being truly revealed, corresponded to the darker moments in certain ancient tragedies which all theatre must rediscover' (Artaud 1993, p. 20-21).

Mystery cults were a common religious experience and performance event before and during the cultural and political dominance of fifth century Athens. Therefore, Dionysian drama, present and highly visible in the social space of

the Theatre of Dionysus, also had a dark and secret parallel space in the sacred drama of Greek mystery cult. As well as being the god of performance in large-scale theatre, Dionysus is also a significant element in two prominent fifth century cults: the eponymous mysteries of Dionysus but also the mysteries of Eleusis.¹¹⁹ The importance of the secret nature of these spiritual experiences is expressed in the meaning of the word used to describe the cults, 'mystery': 'the root of the word is *my-* which seems to be an onomatopoeic root suggesting – through the keeping together of the lips – silence, a secret kept (Louth 2006, p. 204).¹²⁰ Rabey observes how the significant development in Barker's theoretical writing in 1997 is the use of the secret 'as a key concept and quality' (Rabey 2009, p. 24).

Seaford explains that there is a suggestion that the mysteries of Dionysus were active in the late sixth century BC, with more substantial evidence in southern Italy circa the first half of the fifth century (Seaford 2006, p. 51). The most detailed evidence of this cult is in Greek tragedy itself, where Euripides' *Bacchae* explores the mythic origins of this cult in Thebes and the futile challenge of the autocrat Pentheus to Dionysian mysteries. Marvin Meyer includes large sections from this play as one of the major sources on Dionysian Mystery cult (Meyer 1987, p. 65-81) and Seaford asserts that 'Of the fifth-century evidence for the Dionysiac mysteries the most important is *The Bacchae* itself' (Seaford 1981, p. 253). Seaford has carried out extensive analysis of this play, highlighting many possible hidden references to the

¹¹⁹ Morgan refers to this relationship: 'The Eleusinian Mysteries, with their own Orphic elements and their associations with Dionysos and the Bacchic rites of purification, became an Athenian festival in the first half of the fifth century (Morgan 1992, p. 229).

¹²⁰ The religious term mysticism, which is very relevant to Barker via Eckhart, originates from 'mystery' cult (Louth 2006, p. 204).

practices of this secret cult within the text (Seaford 1981; 1987; 1994; 1996; 2006). He concludes that the 'Bacchae is, if properly understood, invaluable evidence of the subjective experience of the Dionysiac initiand (without of course reflecting it directly), at least at the end of the fifth century.' (Seaford 2006, p. 52). Seaford's extensive research on this topic and the resultant parallels between Dionysian mystic initiation and the experience of Pentheus in *The Bacchae* are usefully summarized in his 2006 book on Dionysus:

[T]he riddling language used by Dionysos when speaking to Pentheus of mystic initiation corresponds with the riddling language used to confuse and intrigue the initiand in the initial phase in the mystic tradition

[...]

When in *Bacchae* Pentheus says on emerging from his house dressed as a maenad on his way to being dismembered, that he sees two suns and two cities of Thebes, this derives I believe from widespread use of the mirror in the initial stage of Dionysiac mystery-cult to intrigue and confuse the initiand

[...]

[D]uring his unsuccessful attempt to imprison Dionysos in the darkness of his house, Pentheus exhibits very odd behaviour, which corresponds in many details to descriptions we have of the initial anxiety of the mystic initiand.

(Seaford 2006, p. 52-3)¹²¹

The 'riddling language' finds a parallel with other tragedies where the ambiguities of the divine prophecies are regularly misunderstood by the protagonist, for example in *Oedipus Tyrannos*. In Barker's drama there is also a focus on complex and confusing language that makes straightforward interpretation and responses deliberately difficult to establish. Robert Shaughnessy examines how Barker uses language to generate a sense of incoherence in the audience: 'Instead of the illusion of access to the essential, unified self of the speaking subject that is offered in transparently 'expressive' realist discourse, it shifts across a plurality of voices and modes of address. [...] The result is that the character thereby constructed is contradictory, discontinuous, open-ended' (Shaughnessy 1988, p. 266). Barker in poetic form sets out the importance of plethora in his work and because the visual element of Barker's theatre is usually minimalist it can be assumed that it is primarily language that is employed to generate this experience:

In excess
theatre proclaims its divorce
from
the myth of ordered life

¹²¹ Seaford also mentions cross-dressing in *The Bacchae*: 'Pentheus allows himself to be dressed in female clothes, as a maenad: this, in my view, reflects the gender-reversal characteristic of rites of passage' (Seaford 2006, p. 52-3). Cross-dressing is of course a feature in the all male Athenian tragedy where the dichotomy of female character and male actor could add to the sense of ritual liminality in tragic performance. It is, however, not something Barker draws upon in his work. In fact according to The Wrestling School director Gerrard MacArthur, you should avoid casting actors against the gender of the role because of the impact this has on the sexual dynamic that is so important in Barker's ecstatic drama (MacArthur 2012, personal conversation regarding the casting of *The Ecstatic Bible*).

Too many narratives
too many digressions
too many themes
being the condition
of
willing surrender

The play of plethora
being a poem
cannot be reduced
not being
a communiqué
cannot
be
abbreviated
acknowledged
or
approved
[...]

a flood
breaching the dike
of common experience
and inundating

the ordered pasture
of
communicable material
(society)

(Barker 1997, p. 140)

A plethora of language is used to overwhelm conventional responses, shifting the audience into a more liminal state and detaching them from social norms. As the protagonist's subjectivity is expressed as unstable, this encourages a similar unraveling of the audience member's own sense of stable subjectivity. As the language overwhelms the spectator, the minimal visual elements may therefore become charged with a more focused symbolic power. In the case of the naked female antagonist, often a dominant image within the tableau of Barker's sparse black box space, they could then become a locus to express this very voiding of meaning that has been dismantled through a plethora of language and invocation of death.

As well as the riddling language, there is also a use of mirrors in mystery cult to generate confusion in a darkened space. Barker's 2004 production of *Dead Hands* has clear connections with the transitional journey of the ritual process and in Barker's 2004 production of this play for The Wrestling School he chose to employ multiple mirrors against a black backdrop, surrounding a corpse that lay suspended on a platform (See Fig. 1). The effect was one of strange otherworldliness, with the mirrors adding to the highly self-conscious

and disorientating level of self-questioning in the protagonist's speech. This ritualistic play is analyzed below.

Seaford's comment about the generation of anxiety in the initiand is an identifiable feature of tragedy as the protagonist and audience move towards the terrible outcome. For Barker anxiety in the audience is of particular importance and is generated by the obliteration of conventional moral positions: 'The anxiety comes from what's said and done, because they are profoundly resistant to conventional morality, obviously' (Barker in Gritzner and Rabey 2006, p. 33). In his examination of *Bacchae*, Seaford highlights a particular example of the odd and anxious behaviour of Pentheus that shows how the play arguably dramatizes one of the dominant experiences in mystery cult: the experience of a powerful light that offers peace and freedom from the darkness, terror and deathlike (or simulated death) ordeal of the initiand:

[I]n the culmination of Pentheus' anxiety there appears a miraculous light, which he attacks with a sword, identifying it with the god [...]. This corresponds with the mystic light (in the darkness) that brings salvation. Whereas the isolated and terrified chorus-members greet Dionysos as 'greatest light', Pentheus persists – horrifyingly – in his stubborn hostility.'

(Seaford 2006, p. 52)

However, the rejection of Dionysian divinity (and oneness) by Pentheus illustrates how the tragic protagonist is separated from the initiated and the chorus: they remain isolated and detached in their anguish. This distinction and the rejection of mystic light reflect the dangerous level of individualism exhibited by the tragic hero. Similarly, Barker's protagonists, like many classical Greek tragic protagonists, remain in a state of anguish with little if any salvation. Redemption is absent from Barker's theatre. In Greek tragedy the members of the chorus were not only seen to represent a particular group within the world of the play, but on a ritual level, they were seen as worshippers of Dionysus (Wiles 2000, p. 142) and even imagined to be transformed into satyrs during the performance. In *Bacchae*, where the chorus within the world of the play are also explicitly worshippers of Dionysus (although female maenads), it emphasizes the ritual and spiritual schema behind the dramatic world: the tragic protagonist, like the initiated, stands outside the sanctuary of the Dionysian chorus or, in the case of mystery-cult, the chorus of the initiated. Barker's choruses of the dead or the nearly dead, function in a similar way to the Dionysian choruses. Where the ancient satyr chorus of Dionysus represents oneness with nature beyond the temporality of individuality, Barker's choruses also express an infinite and formless world, the realm of the many dead, which pulls apart the protagonist's self. This could be viewed as the process of tragedy, and a defining feature of this ancient religious form of drama. The light experienced by the chorus, a concluding event in mystery cult, symbolically presents Dionysus and therefore you could assume Dionysian oneness, and also perhaps sunlight and its regenerative power, 'I saw at midnight the sun' (Apuleius in Burkert

1987, p. 97); blazing sunlight also being the counterbalance to death in ancient tragic drama. However, Pentheus, the defiant subject, remains steadfastly individual and therefore intensely anxious, refusing the ritual closure of acceptance of the god, 'Pentheus' death [...] is a failed rite of passage' (Segal 1997, p. 161). Barker's protagonists are Dionysian in their channeling of anxiety into pure ecstatic experience. Rather than a final ecstatic embrace of a god (which in the majority of Barker's plays would need to be a Christian God), they instead focus on a female that is then deified by the channeling of this unfettered ecstasy.

Eleusinian mystery cult

The god Dionysus may also have been a character in the more famous and probably more ancient Eleusinian mystery-cult; 'Dionysus (as Iakchos) is important to the Eleusinian mysteries' (Seaford 2006, p. 56). The Mysteries of Eleusis are referred to in detail in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (Nagy 2011), which was composed between 650 and 550 BC (Seaford 2006, p. 51) and so was an established religious tradition before the golden age of Greek tragedy; with Aeschylus, the oldest of the three extant tragedians born in 526/5 BC. Gilbert Murray's study of the *Oresteia* (Murray 1952) shows a number of connections with this trilogy and the mysteries of Eleusis (Eleusis was the town where Aeschylus was born).

Goblet D'Alviella in *The Mysteries of Eleusis* (1981) highlights the importance of an encounter with death (a simulated death or *katabasis*) in ancient mystery cults:

In order to obtain a new soul, the old one must be relinquished, that is to say, one has to die first. Therefore most initiations include an apparent death; the neophyte may be subjected to a simulated sacrifice or a journey through the land of the dead may be imposed on him. 'To die', said Plutarch, [...] 'is to be initiated'. One could add, vice versa, that initiation is to die. It is at least a temporary death in order to return to life under other better conditions. From this aspect, initiation is really regeneration.¹²²

(D'Aviella [1903] 1981, p. 59)

We can see already how the encounter of the neophyte (or initand) offers a parallel for Barker's protagonists in their encounter with the dead and (often) their journey towards their own death. Because Barker's protagonists are characters in a play, they serve as a mask or avatar for the audience who (in an admittedly qualified sense) can experience indirectly through empathy something not unlike an initiation ritual centred on *katabasis* and sacrifice. Barker himself argues that tragedy (with the implication of his reason for favouring tragedy) causes a level of transformation in the individual. In his first declaration of a tragedy centred approach in 1986 ('49 asides for a tragic

¹²² Classical scholar Burkert offers a similar summary: 'The basic idea of an initiation ritual is generally taken to be that of death and rebirth' (Burkert 1987, p. 99).

theatre'), Barker mentions the outcome of tragedy as one that alters the audience's state of mind: 'After the tragedy, you are not certain who you are' (Barker 1989, p.12).

This alteration in consciousness, which Barker views as the outcome of tragedy, connects with my previous discussion of Barker's work in relation to a range of components that when taken together could serve as a model for Barker's sacred theatre. These include the appropriation of Eckhartian *apophatic* and mystical theology, tragedy as a 'sacred' site of 'no meaning' and the role of *katabasis* and the character's journey towards their own death as an education. Barker's use of the term 'education' with regard to his tragedies,¹²³ (as opposed to his rejection of enlightenment and didacticism), can therefore be viewed as not simply about ideas and information, but about emotional and spiritual experience that is unlocked following the dismantling of established meanings or 'truths'.¹²⁴ Burkert in his study *Ancient Mystery Cult* (1987) notes that 'participation in mysteries was a special form of experience, a *pathos* in the soul or *psyche*, of the candidate is clearly stated in several ancient texts (Burkert 1987, p. 89). Burkert offers the specific example of Aristotle's comments, which offers a possible parallel, particularly when the dual focus on death is factored in, with the experiential dimension of Barker's theatre:

¹²³ For example the subtitle to *The Bite of the Night* and the reference to death as education in *He Stumbled*.

¹²⁴ I don't think the theatre is about enlightenment, certainly not about didacticism' (Barker in Spencer 1990).

Aristotle is said to have used the pointed antithesis that at the final stage of mysteries there should be no more “learning” (*mathein*) but “experiencing” (*pathein*), and a change in the state of mind (*diatethenai*).¹²⁵

(Burkert 1987, p. 89)

The importance of emotional experience as the main outcome of the performance event finds a degree of parallel in Aristotle’s analysis of tragedy. Aristotle’s focus on the sense of release of an audience’s emotions as the outcome of tragedy: ‘effecting through pity and fear the purification [*katharsis*] of such emotions’ (Aristotle 1996, p. 10) suggests that any rational response is secondary to ‘experience’. Perhaps this sense of release is in fact the sense of freedom experienced in the model of the sacred outlined earlier, with the emotional intensity serving to create liminality in the audience as ideological and moral perspectives momentarily dissolve in a voiding of thought. I would imagine that the experience of a purification of thoughts instigated by certain emotions could easily be misunderstood by Aristotle as a release *from* these emotions.

Despite the intellectual and philosophical nature of his plays, Barker’s preoccupation with ecstasy and the writing of ‘texts of emotion’ also place his work (at least according to his own theory) more within the realm of experiencing than learning, if learning is defined as passing on fixed truths

¹²⁵ In an earlier text, *Greek Religion* (1985), Burkert also includes the more tragedy relevant word ‘suffer’ as a translation of *pathein* (Burkert 1985, p.286).

and/or stable abstract information. Learning as the communication of fixed truths is of course problematic in any approach that eschews author authority, 'The audience cannot grasp / everything; nor did the author' (Barker 1989, p. 91), and instead emphasises the audience's creative and emotional responses.

Aristotle's observation about the importance of the experiential in mystery cult over knowledge and of the emotional importance of the tragic experience in catharsis both find a parallel with Barker's own discoveries following his intense engagement with the tragic dramatic form: the primacy of emotional experience over conventional knowledge. Euripides' *Bacchae* clearly expresses this relationship between tragedy and mystery cult and this connection opens up the possibility of viewing other tragic protagonists, both ancient and modern, from the perspective of avatars for the audience to experience the ritual journey of death and rebirth. Such a position is not particularly radical in that the dominant point of view of the main character is a naturally strong position for the audience member to identify with. However, what it does allow is a consideration of how the audience member, indirectly through the protagonist, benefits or is at least altered through tragedy, in a way that may relate to the initiand in ritual. The notion of rebirth from death in Greek mystery cult finds a new form of expression in Barker's Christianized tragedy where his characters discover new selves that emerge from the cleansed sacred space of the post-apocalyptic landscape (as discussed in Chapter 1).

Through this consideration of mystery cult events and forms we are able to perceive (as with *nekyia* and *katabasis*) the importance of near-death or deathlike experience in Greek spirituality and ritual. This connection between mystery cult and tragedy, where the tragic action and its increasing movement towards death invoke in the protagonist a related experience to the simulated death of the initiand in mystery cult, may therefore offer some clues to the spiritual impact of Greek tragedy and Barker's modern spiritual tragic drama (and by extension tragedy in general).

Performing death

The idea of mystery cult as a prototype to modes of spiritual theatre is implied by Peter Malekin in the study *Sacred Theatre*, in which he highlights some of the 'intriguing features' of the Eleusinian mysteries and their influence on theatre performance: 'the descent to the underworld, the emergence into the bright light of 'splendour' (D'Alviella, 21) and the sacred drama' (Malekin in Yarrow 2007, p. 48). As mentioned in Chapter 3, *Sacred Theatre* suggests that 'the optimal subjective experience of liminality is performance' (Yarrow 2007, p. 15). It is unsurprising then, that performance is such a key element, if not the defining element, of ritual. With liminality being a state in which identity is blurred, the role of performance is arguably necessary to break the participant's physical and mental habits and behaviour that support their sense of identity. The usefulness of performance to dismantle identity can be seen in its use as a *via negativa* process by Grotowski in the rehearsal space; for Grotowski the purpose of theatrical art is 'to peel off the life-mask'

(Grotowski 1991, p. 21) in order to reveal deeper truths.¹²⁶ Lehmann's observation in *Postdramatic theatre*, that performance is at core not plot but transformation, is also relevant here. Performance in ritual allows the initiand's physical and mental sense of self to be dismantled as their state of mind undergoes transformation.

Precise details about the ancient mysteries are uncertain. There is strong evidence that the secret events of the Eleusinian mysteries contained sacred drama (D'Alviella 1981, p. 22-3; Sourvinou-Inwood 2003, p. 167) and therefore shared the use of *dramatic* performance and mimesis with Greek theatre. In fact, Greek sacred drama was a place in which deities were impersonated, serving as a model for the epiphanies in Greek tragedy:

The nearest real-life equivalent to divine appearances of the Eumenides type was, for the audience, divine appearances in sacred drama, in which the deities were impersonated by cult personnel; as far as it is possible to tell, in sacred drama deities and mortals interacted directly.

(Sourvinou-Inwood 2005, p. 460)

Dionysus is a god particularly associated with transformation and liminality (wine, theatre, ecstasy and the borders of life and death) and therefore his

¹²⁶ Grotowski shares with the mysteries the use of the language of rebirth when describing the spiritual goal of his theatre: 'The actor is reborn – not only as an actor but as a man – and with him, I am reborn. It is a clumsy way of expressing it, but what is achieved is a total acceptance of one human being by another' (Grotowski 1991, p. 25).

role in the ritual performance event of ancient mystery cult is unsurprising. Dionysus appears as a character in two extant Greek plays: *The Bacchae* and Aristophanes comedy *The Frogs*. In both of these texts there is a chorus of initiates who worship Dionysus. In *The Frogs*, Dionysus is experiencing his own *katabasis* in a search for two deceased playwrights (Aeschylus and Euripides) and encounters a chorus of deceased but happy Eleusinian initiates who proclaim the name 'Iacchos' (Dionysus) (Aristophanes 1964, p.169). In *The Bacchae* the tragic chorus are composed of his followers, a band of Maenads, and Dionysus on his arrival in Thebes forcibly creates another (offstage¹²⁷) chorus¹²⁸ of female followers that have the appearance of those who have been initiated in the Dionysiac mysteries. The forced worship is a punishment for the city for rejecting Dionysian worship at the birthplace of the god himself. Dionysus explains the situation in the prologue:

Thebes here was the first in Greek land that I made ululate, and clothed with the fawnskin, and gave into the hand the thyrsus, the ivy weapon. For the sisters of my mother, who least should have done so,

¹²⁷ This second group are offstage with the exception of Agave, who returns from Mount Kithairon with the head of her son Pentheus, who due to her possession she initially believes to be the head of a young lion. Although offstage, this group are referred to throughout the play, and their activities are reported in two long messenger speeches (Euripides 1996, p. 103-109 and p. 123-129). The *Bacchae* is therefore dominated by two groups of Dionysiac worshippers that reflect adherence to Dionysiac mystery cult.

¹²⁸ In Seaford's close translation of the play this second group are referred to as a chorus, or more specifically 'choruses' who are following each of the three possessed members of the female royal household: 'And I see three thiasoi of female choruses, of which Autonoe led one, your mother Agaue the second, and Ino the third chorus (Euripides 1996, p. 103). The close association of chorus to Dionysus in cult worship and as a Greek theatre device served as a key idea behind my student production of Euripides' *Bacchae* (Melton Theatre 2011), where Dionysus was presented in chorus/ensemble form, including moments when he is formed by all but one of the cast of twenty-six in the prologue and again in the final epiphany (the actor playing Pentheus was the only one to be excluded from the chorus). This production, inspired by my research, also drew upon aspects of Dionysiac mystery cult, for example the role of the mirror and darkness in the disorientation of the initiate, offering a staging of the play that focused on Pentheus as an unwilling initiate of Dionysus and Dionysus as chorus.

denied that I, Dionysus, am the son of Zeus [...]. And so I stung them with frenzies from their homes, and they are dwelling in the mountain, their mind deranged. And I forced them to wear the trappings of my mysteries.

(Euripides 1996, p. 69)

There is strong evidence that the lost portions of the final section of the play resulted in the establishment of a Dionysiac mystery cult in Thebes (Seaford 1996, p. 252).¹²⁹ Mystery cults seemed to offer hope of happiness in the afterlife but only after the initiands undergo a performance event that symbolizes or pre-enacts death and, according to some scholars, even imitate a journey into the underworld. In his study of the role of Homer and tragedy in the development of the city-state, *Reciprocity and Ritual* (1994), Seaford argues that mystic initiation (both Eleusinian and Dionysiac) involved an encounter with death or some form of death-like experience: 'Like mystic initiation in general, Dionysiac initiation meant subjection to an experience akin to death' (Seaford 1994, p. 283). Therefore two of the aspects of the god, theatre and death, are connected in this performance of death. This religiously framed performance of death, in a dark space and its close relationship to the performance of death at the Theatre of Dionysus, finds later expression in Shakespearian tragedy with *Macbeth's* retreat into darkness.¹³⁰ Here we have

¹²⁹ 'In the first, general part of the speech [...] D. surely announced the establishment of his cult at Thebes: (a) that was his aim in coming there (39-40, 46-9, etc.); (b) Eur.'s tragedies frequently end with the deity founding cult' (Seaford 1996, p.252).

¹³⁰ Dark in both imagery and theatrical setting: Macbeth observes how 'Light thickens' (1.4. 50-3); the play may have had performances in the Blackfriars theatre or other indoors theatre to more effectively present this dark world (Wilders 2004, p. 2).

a protagonist also undergoing a *katabasis* like journey towards his own death, haunted by visions of the dead, as well as encountering other strange visions and supernatural beings.

As you start to consider aspects of the mystery performance event, further parallels with Barker's drama can be established: a performance event in which the initiands/audience are brought into an ideologically (identity) deconstructive proximity to death; the use of darkness and symbolism to generate a ritual / liminal space that also deconstructs normativity; the use of strange sounds and pre-performance events that deconstructs a sense of everyday reality; a theatrical space that through references to death and the dead emphasise the irrational and the emotional over rational detachment and normal ways of seeing: both worlds conjure up a world on the limen of life and death.¹³¹

However, there is one important and significant difference that needs to be addressed with regard to Barker's spiritual drama. In ritual performance and mystery cult the initiand is placed in the central role of the performance event whereas in Greek tragedy and Barker's tragedy there is a level of distance created with the central figure, the protagonist, performed in front of the audience member. With tragic drama this distance is probably welcome

¹³¹ Barker's use of his pre-performance 'Exordium' is a device that uses strange images and sounds to pull the audience away from everyday perspectives: 'The exordium is my substitute for properly possessing the performance space. I have often said that the foyer is an obstacle to a spiritual experience, an area of trivia littered with the detritus of entertainment' (Barker 2006, p. 30). Although largely created by Barker as director in the space, occasionally the exordium is described in the play-text, as it is here in *Found in the Ground*: 'THE EXORDIUM *The repetitive sound of an industrial process. A naked woman, headless, perambulates in front of three kennels. A pyramid of books smoulders. When the sound ceases the woman stops*' (Barker 2008, p. 123).

because the harrowing subject matter does not usually end in positive closure for the central figure. It could be argued that although the encounter with death would not be as unsettling as an immersive performance experience, the viewing of tragic drama may offer a related sense of disorientation, anxiety and 'voiding of thought' in the audience member.¹³²

An analysis of Barker's *Dead Hands* shows how some of the elements of mystery cult and the associated ritual elements of Attic tragic drama can be seen to operate within his work.

¹³² Modern ritual theatres that attempt to immerse the audience in a tragic theatrical experience include Artaud's stage layout with the audience on swivel chairs in the centre of the action (Artaud 1993, p. 74) and Grotowski's environmental theatre experiments (Grotowski 1991, p. 20). However, for Grotowski the modern spectator seemed to be too self-conscious for such an approach: 'Grotowski realized that coercing the audience to participate in the rehearsed actions of the performers only leads to more alienation, not authentic participation' (Słowiak and Cuesta 2007, p. 16-17).



Figure 1: *Dead Hands* (Robert Workman 2004)

Dead Hands

Barker's plays have often celebrated the secret. Here the secrets of the dead inspire extreme speculation. [...] If death is the last great secret, then those who witness it must surely be drawn into its mystery?

(The Wrestling School 2004)

Barker's chamber piece, *Dead Hands*, centres on the intellectual Eff returning to the family home to pay his respects to his recently deceased father. Also paying their respects to the deceased are his brother Istvan and his father's mistress, Sopron. Although the setting is unusually domestic for a Barker play, this is counterbalanced by strange events that make the boundary between the real world and the projections of the protagonist's psyche difficult to discern; the characters 'move in a dreamscape where intimate desires burst through social propriety' (Sierz 2004, p. 1420).

The set design for The Wrestling School's 2004 production of *Dead Hands* adds to this dreamlike element, with suggestions that the location is on the border between the living and the dead. As with the opening scene of *13 Objects*, the set is designed to symbolically centre the play on death. Whereas *13 Objects* starts with the digging of a grave, *Dead Hands* opening stage direction reads '*An open coffin on a table*' (Barker 2004a, p. 7). In The Wrestling School production (see Fig 1) rather than opting for a traditional

coffin the corpse is suspended on a platform, with the frame wrapped in bandages to suggest mummification. Suspended mirrors that also have bandaged frames surround this platform, subtly implying through their clear association with the platform that they are also doorways or windows into death. The multiple mirrors also present the individuals from numerous perspectives, generating a disorientating level of self-consciousness that is paralleled in the highly introspective focus of much of the protagonist's text. The suspended nature of all the set items in this production (a common approach to set design in *The Wrestling School* productions), with the exception of a single wooden chair, add to this sense of a dream like world, their floating appearance evoking a sense of impermanence and illusion. Eff, like the possessed Pentheus in *Bacchae* and (by extension) the initiand in Greek mystery cult, enters a liminal world between life and death, where mirrors enhance the sense of disorientation in an illusionary dreamscape. *Dead Hands* takes place in this single location and in what appears to be real time. It therefore adheres to the classical unities of time and place.¹³³ This concentration of time and space when combined with the dreamlike world of the play and the gravitational pull of the corpse as a symbol of death greatly enhances the sense of the performance space as a sacred space for the audience (scene changes and jumps in time would create a less compressed and more episodic experience).

The play is centred on a universal human ritual – funeral rites - and therefore clearly announces an interest in religious and spiritual territory from the

¹³³ '[T]ragedy tries so far as possible to keep within a single day, or not to exceed it by much' (Aristotle 1996, p. 9). 'Greek tragedies are set in a single place, with only two clear exceptions [Aeschylus' *Eumenides* and Sophocles' *Ajax*]' (Wiles 2000, p. 122).

outset. In addition to this, the focus on the death of the father, with the father's cultural and psychological association with patriarchal authority, also expresses an interest in the progression to full adulthood, replacing the authority of the absent father. Mystery cult relates to both of these rituals with its focus on death leading to rebirth. The first stage of a rites of passage ritual, separation, is suggested at the very start of the play by the long journey Eff has made:

EFF: What a journey

(He sits.)

What a journey oh

[...]

The weather that characterized the journey was unremittingly

(Pause.)

No

No

No it did remit on leaving somewhere the unremitting vileness ceased

the road began to steam in glaring sunshine birds became vociferous

insects swarmed

(Barker 2004a, p. 7)

The ominous and bleak unremitting rain provides a pathetic fallacy for the distraught Eff in his transition from normal experience towards the corpse.

The starkly contrasting interruption of glaring sunshine adds an aspect of the

uncanny to the journey, with the sudden eruption of birds and, particularly, insects, providing an unsettling (and prophetic) explosion of life from the vileness. This uncanny journey announces the play's strange and dreamlike reality.

In Sean Carney's analysis of this play he sees connections with *Dead Hands* and the generational tensions in Greek tragic drama, describing the play as 'Barker's ravaging of the Oedipus myth in catastrophic terms' (Carney 2013, p. 112). As with Oedipus, the death of the father opens up the possibility of a sexual encounter with the mother. In the case of *Dead Hands*, explicit incest is avoided in that the focus of desire is the father's mistress Sopron.¹³⁴ Eff's intense desire for Sopron is due to 'the eruption of a reckless joie de vivre created by the spectacle of the cadaver' (The Wrestling School 2004). However, death also seems to be a component of Sopron herself, who possess the dead hands of the play's title. The juxtaposition of the hands with the rest of her appearance generates a confused response within Eff: 'Seeing these antique hands I was swept by contradictory and unfamiliar feelings whilst decay inevitably causes one to flinch in her case this repulsion was tempered and to some extent abolished by a powerful awareness of her beauty' (Barker 2004a, p. 17). Death and desire are expressed as intimately connected through her hands and Sopron seems to be as much a symbol of death and desire as a real character. Her opening monologue suggests an ephemeral quality and hints at her being a projection of the desire of others: 'be smoke always he said to me by which he meant take on the shape of

¹³⁴ Barker engages with actual incestuous acts in two plays: *The Gaoler's Ache for the Nearly Dead* (1998) and *The Fence in Its Thousandth Year* (2005). See chapter 5.

others surely be formed by them concede be moved as smoke is by the air'
(p. 12).

Before the audience encounter Sopron, Eff's reflections on grief suddenly shift to a sexual fantasy about her entering the room: 'Marching in here naked but for shoes' (p. 8). The sense of a dream like world of the play is strengthened by Sopron then entering '*naked beneath a coat*' (p. 11), which then slips from her shoulders when she leans across the coffin. This occurs a number of times in the play and leaves Eff frustrated at his failure to act upon this erotic display. Such a failure to act sexually with his father's mistress suggests a hesitation to replace his father and thus, symbolically, to enter full adulthood.

In terms of the use of language in *Dead Hands*, Aleks Sierz identifies some of the features that distinguish it from realism:

Barker's characters don't talk in normal dialogue – they spill out streams of words, which are sometimes poetic, sometimes incantatory, and which give insights into their thoughts; commentaries on the motives of themselves and others; and wild imaginings.

(Sierz 2004, p. 1420)

However, what is unique in this particular Barker play is the constant use of repetition of sections of text that give the play an incantatory feel. The most prominent section of text repeated, due to its sexually explicit content, is the

sexual act Eff imagines performing on Sopron: 'I wanted her whole cunt in my mouth the flesh the fluid and the hair stiff hair I imagined and if she pissed so much the better' (Barker 2004, p. 7-8). Carney suggests that this 'highly stylized phrase' conjures the display of nudity over the corpse: 'Eventually these words become a kind of mechanized mantra that seems to summon the act into existence' (Carney 2013, p. 112), and that this suggests events are projections of the protagonist's psyche: 'Indeed the possibility exists that the action of the drama is entirely a dream or fantasy of Eff's mind (Carney 2013, p. 113). As with Toonelhuis's spiritual awakening in *Found in the Ground*, urination in *Dead Hands* becomes, through repetition, a powerful symbol of simultaneous erotic desire and spiritual cleansing. This mechanized mantra or incantatory phrase adds to the spiritual and ritualistic experience of the play, with the repetition creating a sense of a constant loop in time or even stasis, rather than dramatic action. Narrative or plot become secondary and illusory therefore emphasising a sense of the present and now. The characters also seem unable to leave the space for any length of time; Sopron buys a train ticket but the station has been closed and Istvan is unable to get his hair cut because the barber chokes and dies while he is waiting. These elements work together to magnify the draw of death at the centre of the space. Although Eff's initial assessment was that he feels attraction to Sopron despite her hands, it gradually dawns on him that the dead hands are in fact the very basis of the desire: 'whatever grief existed in me was extinguished by the most compulsive desire a desire not inflamed by your nakedness awesome as it was but by your hands' (Barker 2004a, p. 36-37).

Like other Barker antagonists, Sopron seems to be detached from common human emotional experience: 'She cannot feel [love] and therefore cannot say it' (p. 49) and this detachment seems to fuel Eff's desire 'I am / In precisely the same way my father was both / exhilarated and enslaved' (p. 49); perhaps her association with death and its inevitability makes desire for her predestined, as it was for his father who he now succeeds. Eff remains convinced that his father from beyond the grave orchestrates this encounter with Sopron. The father is associated early in the play with God, which adds to the idea of supernatural forces operating to direct his life towards Sopron. Both the word father and God create 'nausea' in Eff (p. 11), perhaps an indication of his desire to resist his fate.

This suggestion of fate directing his life but in a mysterious and not fully comprehensible or positive way, is a familiar aspect of pagan tragedy, where the tragic action and the chaos it expresses is given a level of meaning through reference to fate, however terrible it is for the recipient (with Oedipus being a clear example). Barker's suggestion through Eff of the dead father's influence on events, with subtle connections to God, allow a similar pagan notion of fate (with the absence of free will) to offer some shadowy level of meaning to the structure of this play. At the end of the play Eff's musings on his journey to the house seem to ironically refer to this inevitability as he sits on the single chair within the space:

EFF: I might have
 (He stops. He is quite still.)

Stopped

Stopped reflected and turned around but what is obvious

to me now

(*Pause.*)

I did not I did not turn around

(Barker 2004, p. 72)

When reading *Dead Hands* in relation to ritual and Greek tragedy a number of parallels have been drawn. The separation, the liminal space between life and death, the confusing language, the disorientating use of mirrors, the anxiety and de-individuation all relate to Greek tragedy's secret and nocturnal spiritual cousin, mystery cult. However, Eff, like many protagonists in Barker's plays, does not (metaphorically) step into the light, but instead remains in sexual rapture in the darkness, with a female who simultaneously personifies both death and ecstasy.

Carney's insightful analysis of *Dead Hands* in his study *The Politics and Poetics of Contemporary English Tragedy* (2013), seems to falter slightly in the concluding moments when he offers an account of the spiritual heritage of the play:

Ultimately, the power of such ecstasy must be to offer to the audience a de-familiarization of self that is an intimation of the unconscious, and that will mortify consciousness, transforming it into a form of theatre.

Yet ecstasy is not just a matter of personal loss but emerges from a long Christian tradition of religious ecstasy, in which spiritual devotion allows moments of metaphysical transport and intimations of divine bliss.

(Carney 2013, p. 116)

Although Carney proposes a parallel with Christian ecstatic experience, as noted earlier in this thesis, divine sexual ecstasy from a male perspective is largely absent from Christianity due to the maleness of two of the persons of the trinity, with the third being genderless. Therefore I would suggest instead that Barker's spiritual engagement with sexual ecstasy and death is not so much a revision of Christian ecstasy but instead a return to the tragic ecstasy of paganism: a Dionysian ecstasy. This tragic sexual ecstasy will be considered in the final chapter.

Death in female form

Although Hades and Charon are more commonly associated with death in the modern perspective of the Greek afterlife, it seems that Hades' wife, Persephone, was, at the time, preeminent in her association with the *fear* of death and the journey of the soul in the afterlife. As Susan G. Cole observes:

Hades was the Zeus of the other world, but it was Persephone whose word carried terror. Her name conjured up such fear, in fact, that in

ordinary speech it was rarely used (Plato, *Cratylus* 404c-d). As bride of Hades, this *arrhetos kore* grew up to be queen of the dead, but her job had associations that made her name too dreadful to pronounce. Even when she was worshipped together with Demeter, mother and daughter were addressed simply as “The Two,” an expression nevertheless so powerful that only women were actually supposed to utter it. In Aristophanes’ *Frogs* Persephone is simply *he theos*, “the goddess,” and Death, although a god, receives no offerings. As Aeschylus says toward the end of the drama, quoting a line from one of his own plays: “Alone of the gods, Death does not crave gifts” [...] Prayers to Persephone were either prayers to the dead or curses on the living. No parent ever considered naming a daughter after her [...], and it should be no surprise to discover that even the place where she dwelt had no name of its own. We are in the habit of calling this place the underworld,” but the Greeks themselves, seeking security in euphemism, preferred simply *domata Persephoneia* or, more often, *domata Haidou* (“Persephonian domains” or “halls of Hades”).

(Cole 2003, p. 196)

To this can be added the importance of Persephone in the earlier narrative of Homer’s *Odyssey* where it is the goddess that Odysseus fears and the male Hades seems a background figure: ‘Sheer panic turned me pale, gripped by the sudden fear that dread Persephone might send me up from Hades’ Halls some ghastly monster like the Gorgon’s head’ (Homer 1946, p. 188).

According to Cole, Persephone was perceived to have the final say in whether the dead enjoyed a positive or negative experience in death, a decision based on whether or not they lived a peaceful and moral earthly life: 'kept their oaths and never troubled the earth or disturbed the sea' (Cole 2003, p. 196). The initiate of the mystery cult of Eleusis (or cult of Dionysus) believed that they had received, in their initiations, the secret words that would allow safe passage to the positive realm of the afterlife. This was due to the protection that initiation to Dionysus was believed to give and helps to explain his role as a god on the margin of life and death. As one tablet from a burial site reads: "Tell Persephona that the Bacchic One himself has released you" (Cole 2003, p. 211). Cole explains that Dionysus was a highly influential figure in the sacred meadow of the underworld where paths diverge; but it was his mother, the goddess of death, that had the final say: 'Dionysos is the one who negotiates; Persephone is the one who decides' (Cole 2003, p. 211).

This association of the female goddess with the terrible fear of death due to the decisive encounter with her at the point of death gives us a classical model of death as the female that is absent from the Christian tradition. As we saw in Chapter 2, Barker, in *Death, the One*, chooses to equate the fear of death within a female figure who is connected, via Eckhartian theological appropriations, with the divine. We have also seen how Barker's evocation of the afterlife draws upon classical Greek ideas of Hades rather than Christian notions of heaven and hell. Although Barker's drama stresses bleak and disturbing aspects of life, he avoids a vision of an afterlife that equates with

Christian images of hell. This is probably due to Barker's rejection of a Christian spirituality and worldview and that such hell imagery would also suggest the existence of its opposite, heaven.

So, in *Death, The One*, we have a picture in which an evocation of Hades is generated alongside a narrative in which *the one* is encountered in/as the author's awareness of death and the subsequent new condition of hopelessness this inspires. This *one* is an object of intense sexual and spiritual desire, and Persephone herself was an object of sexual desire for both the gods, for example Hades, and mortals, for example Theseus' friend Peirithoos (Apollodorus 1997, p. 33 and p. 84, respectively).¹³⁵ A third myth also connects Persephone with sexual desire, but this time it is her own desire for Adonis, in an intense rivalry with, significantly, the goddess of sexual desire, Aphrodite (Apollodorus 1997, p. 131).

This combination of fear in and desire for a goddess of death is removed from the dominant expressions of death and hell in the Christian tradition, and shows that in Barker's rejection of Christianity and secular beliefs, he has expressed ideas that find some connection with classical Greek perspectives on femininity and death. In the Christian tradition the female is equated with sin that leads to death, stemming from Eve's responsibility for the fall of man in the Garden of Eden; but death and hell are male realms in Christianity, presided over by Satan, God and the archangels.

¹³⁵ Poet Charles Stein offers an interesting perspective on desire for Persephone: 'Persephone's beauty is precisely legendary—no one can find her to see her, thus she inspires powerful fantasies which may begin with the imagination of the Korê but lead inexorably to the willingness to enter into proximity to death to attain her' (Stein 2014).

There is a long tradition in European culture of equating the female with sin and death. In John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), a powerful fusion of Greco-Roman and Christian mythology, the female association with sin in Eden is expressed with sin being personified as female. Satan on his ascent from hell encounters his own daughter Sin at the gates of Hell, and she is a mixture of beauty and monster: 'The one seemed woman to the waist, and fair, / But ended foul in many a scaly fold, / Voluminous and vaste, a serpent armed / With mortal sting' (Milton 1996, p. 49). A second figure at the gates of Hell is Death, the incestuous son of Satan and Sin. The birth of Death caused the bodily distortion of the once fair Sin (p. 52). In Milton, the female personifies sin that generates Death, but death is male and separate in identity. For the Greeks, the land of the dead is presided over by both a female and male god who are feared and inspire dread and awe but are not equated with sin.¹³⁶ Through Persephone an erotic aspect to death (from the heterosexual male perspective) is allowed to find expression in Greek religion, whereas in Milton the initial attraction of the mother of Death, Sin, is now mostly destroyed by the birth of her son. In Barker, the female ('the one') is located in a space that blurs or finds a meeting point between erotic desire, immorality and death. Barker's personification of the female as sin seems to stem from Christian culture but the female as an expression of death seems closer to the Greek conception of Persephone, Queen of the Dead.

¹³⁶ Although for the Greeks Thanatos - death itself - was male (Euripides 2003, p. 2).

Persephone is a primary character in the sacred drama of Eleusis and her journey into the underworld and residence there among the dead, with ultimate power over the dead, has made her a terrifying goddess; but one still desired. She is also, in some traditions the mother of Dionysus (Burkert 1985, p. 288), and both gods play a central role in Greek eschatology as expressed in their prominent role in the mysteries: where Dionysus negotiates with Persephone before she finally decides the fate of the dead.

This female personification of the fear of death who is also (appropriately) the mother of tragedy (personified as Dionysus), re-emerges through the many female protagonists in this theatrical genre, protagonists also on a border between life and death, pulled into a death-like world that empowers and separates them from those more firmly in the realm of the living. Examples include some of the most famous characters from Greek tragedy: Antigone, who describes herself as death's bride (Sophocles 1954, p. 190), Electra, Clytemnestra and Medea. These figures, like many of Barker's female protagonists, exist in a world between life and death. In Barker's case they inspire the fascination and dread of others and are often themselves beyond easy psychological identification for the audience, God like (in terms of the Eckhartian-Barkerian construct) in their detachment.

There is another aspect of Persephone that extends the significance of death in female form: the maternal role of the goddess of death whose breasts suckle the reborn soul/human in the underworld: 'Suckled like a new born infant, the deceased is, in effect, transformed into or adopted as the child of

Persephone' (Edmonds 2004, p. 90). This maternal element of the deity serves as a reminder to her dual role as fertility goddess (as the daughter of the agricultural goddess Demeter) and the similarities between birth and death.

In Barker's *Found in the Ground* two characters are reminiscent of Persephone: the Headless Woman and Burgteata. Macedonia, the Headless Woman, as discussed previously, is a fusion of two powerful memories: the many victims of the Second World War holocaust and a transcendent sexual epiphany of a woman pissing. This combination of the erotic and death may have been a feature in the awe and fascination of Persephone. Toonelhuis' daughter, Burgteata, also represents a Persephone like figure in that she couples with the dying like a mother bringing people into the world:

Burgteata: I sleep with the dying

[...]

AND IT'S NOT EASY TO DENY A DYING MAN

What are you there for after all

To comfort

To console

And you are naked obviously

The pair of you

The living and the dying

Naked

Both

Exactly like a birth
Mother
Infant
Struggling
Not to enter
But to leave
(Pause)
Think of me as your mother I would say

(Barker 2008, p. 129)

Persephone was also a paradoxical figure that stood for both new life and death and her erotic aspect added a sexual dimension to the imaginative projection of the underworld. The strange and godlike associations of an erotic female on the border of death adds an additional layer to the very Greek vision of Hades that is conjured in *Found in the Ground*.

In Barker's libretto for the opera *Terrible Mouth* (1992), about Goya's imagined visit to a country house converted into an improvised war hospital occupied by THE CHORUS OF THE MAIMED, we see an earlier version of the female personification of atrocity that suggests a prototype for Macedonia. The artist experiences a spiritual awakening to atrocity that is expressed theatrically as an encounter with a FIGURE IN A HOOD who '*addresses GOYA in a voice of inhuman pitch: There / is / no / love / like / yours / for / me / what / some / flee / from / but / your / pen / honours / Goya*' (Barker 1992, p.

17-18). Goya responds 'Atrocity ... how beautiful your mouth is.' This moment is merged with Goya's sexual encounter with the lady of the house, the Duchess of Alba, who has become the victim of atrocity in that she is about to be taken away by the enemy. This ending to the play shows Goya's full discovery of the power of atrocity, which is presented as female. It is as if the sexual and horrific experiences combine into one: a Persephone like merging of horror and intense sexual desire.

The Road, the House, the Road

This radio play (broadcast 2006; published 2008) is of particular interest when considering parallels in Barker's drama and Greek mystery cult. It is also of interest in that it was broadcast a year after *Death, the one and the Art of Theatre* and can therefore usefully serve as the expression and exploration through drama of some of the mystical ideas set out in this text. As with the narrator in *Death, the one*, the protagonist in this radio play undergoes an intense encounter with death and/as 'the one' (although this term is not explicitly used in the play the connections, as we will see, are very clear).

The play is set in 1519 and begins with the protagonist, a scholar called Johannes Aventinus (Barker 2008, p. 224) who writes under the name J, travelling home alone along an isolated road. J describes the road as long and dull and having little variation in its landscape. An atmosphere of otherworldliness is suggested by a sense of absence, including the absence of

common signifiers of nature and life, with J noting that ‘a bird would be nice’¹³⁷ (Barker 2008, p. 217). The monotony of the road and the absence of life and activity suggest a space of ‘separation’ (in terms of ritual stages), from both civilization and nature, a separation that becomes intensified as the play progresses. The scholar’s reflections on the monotony and inactivity of the journey generate a sense of anxiety and liminality: the road appears to be absent of distinguishing features and any sense of place; other than simply being a road, foregrounding the act of travelling itself over any sense of location. This opening serves as an effective metaphor for the *apophatic* journey the protagonist undergoes as he moves ever closer to death (both his own and others), the action that constitutes the trajectory of the plot.¹³⁸ A further suggestion of this movement towards metaphorical and spiritual darkness can be seen in J’s observation that ‘dusk is coming on’ (p. 217). The winter setting of the drama (p. 220) and the use of strong rain and wind sound effects also creates an unpleasant location that helps to indicate an ominous and unnatural place; violent wind and rain and, particularly, freezing temperatures are associated with images of hell, as is the case in the Second and Ninth level of hell, respectively, in Dante’s *Inferno*.¹³⁹

As well as the parallels with Barker’s appropriation of Eckhartian mysticism, there are also clear parallels in *The Road, the House, the Road* with the

¹³⁷ Barker may also be making a subtle reference to the underworld in that the Roman conception of the entrance of the underworld is defined by its absence of birds: ‘Above it no creature that flies could, without severe peril, / Pass upon fluttering wings, so appalling the breath that came spewing / Out of its blackened jaws to the vaulted dome of the heavens. / That’s why the Greeks named Avervus *Aornos*, ‘The Place that is Birdless’ (Virgil 2007, p. 135).

¹³⁸ Rabey also defines the journey with reference to negative theology, ‘the ominous journey (something of a *via dolorosa/negativa*) of the scholar Johannes’ (Rabey 2009, p. 226).

¹³⁹ As of course, and more commonly, is the other extreme of temperature in infernal fire.

structure and elements of what is believed to have constituted the Greek mystery initiation process. As with the initiand in the mysteries the protagonist undergoes separation from society following abuse from others; he enters a world in which a sense of death is dominant and personified in the form of a female; the terrifying proximity to death unravels the protagonist/initiand's sense of self through the eradication of primary moral and ideological principals creating a liminal (or sacred) space; and there is finally a transcendence and acceptance of death (a coming to terms with death).

After reflecting on the monotony of the road, J observes a figure ominously 'shoot up from nowhere' and then move towards him. This figure starts to inexplicably abuse the scholar with the repeated use of the word 'filth'.¹⁴⁰ The torrent of abuse initiates a panicked and emotional reaction in the scholar who fears for his life. At an early stage in the mysteries the candidates were verbally abused (Burkett 1985, p. 287) which would both intensify emotions and also damage the initiand's sense of personal integrity.

Following the initial and unexpected abuse the stranger, called Biro, threatens J with a knife and forces him to question and reflect on fundamental aspects of his life such as his profession, his facial features, his birth and the role of fate: i.e. forces beyond the control of the individual.

BIRO: You say

You say what is the point of scholarship

¹⁴⁰ In the published text the initial abuse builds from 'filth' to 'cunt.' The use of the word 'cunt' was omitted from the Radio 4 broadcast due to censorship from the BBC.

J: (*feigning impatience.*) It is very late and we
BIRO: SAY IT FOR ME

 [...]
BIRO: I like your face
J: It's my father's ...
BIRO: Thank him then because if you had any other I'd have made a
 hundred holes in you
J: I do I do thank him
BIRO: No say it properly
 (*The rain ... the wind*)
J: Dear father thank you for your melancholy and kind face which on
 this occasion as on others has spared me some undeserved and
 unexpected savagery
BIRO: Good now your mother
J: My mother
BIRO: Thank your mother because in her selflessness she let you be
 shaped in her womb according to your father's image her own
 might not have moved me

(Barker 2008a, p. 219-20)

This questioning serves to instigate intense and irrational modes of self-reflection in the scholar about his origins and identity. Barker's choice of a scholar or other suitably intellectual person as the protagonist occurs in a number of Barker plays (e.g. *The Bite of the Night*, *A Hard Heart*, *Hated*

Nightfall) and it allows him both an excuse for his favoured use of complex philosophical reflections but also as a way of challenging and extending intellectual perspectives with the intense emotional events and experiences of tragedy.¹⁴¹ In *The Road*, the scholar, a man of education, experiences a darker and more spiritually profound education in the *via negativa* of *katabasis*. As well as having the rational perspective intrinsic to the profession of scholar, J also, very early in the play, aligns himself with normative expectations and responses:¹⁴² ‘to some extent I am of course I am conventional’ (p. 217). His conventional character is further enforced by his strong desire to return from his journey to domestic stability: to see his newly born child and his young wife (p. 222).¹⁴³ At a later stage in the play his transformational experience eventually causes complete detachment from these initially strong feelings for his young wife and son, feelings that are his primary motivation to return home. This detachment echoes the Eckhartian mystic’s shift from earthly attachments and with Dr Savage’s rejection of his family at the start of *The Bite of the Night*.

The mysterious character of Barbara, the lady (played by Barbara Flynn in a suitably controlled and enigmatic way that has clear similarities to Victoria Wicks’ numerous performances as the Barkerian antagonist) in the isolated large house that is strangely not on the map (p. 224), that is stumbled across

¹⁴¹ Barker’s desire to shatter and expand the conceptions of the scholarly mind through catastrophe find expression in the comments of the queen, Dover, in *Ego in Arcadia* (1992): ‘When the war began [...] I conscripted geniuses for the infantry [...] knowing if they die, how wonderfully they would be transformed’ (Barker 1996, p. 279).

¹⁴² Although with a very significant qualification in the light of his behaviour at the climax of the play.

¹⁴³ A return to his family after a long journey is, famously, the motivation of the protagonist in Homer’s *Odyssey*.

in terrible weather conditions, recalls immediately the horror genre expectation of a place and character of an unearthly and dark nature. This ominous atmosphere allows the listener to become partially prepared for the very dark and disturbing climax later in the play.

In his first encounter with Barbara at the door of her house, J is surprised to discover that this lady is the wife of the abusive stranger and that it was she who asked him to 'threaten and intimidate' him (p. 227). This negative and manipulative action combined with the openness and directness with which she states this makes her intentions and character both ominous and unknown. Her cool and deliberate delivery and her aggression towards conventional attitudes and behavior rapidly establish her as a familiar Barkerian female character, a character whose amorality and detachment becomes the catalyst for the erosion of the ideology and identity of the male protagonist. J is deeply concerned at the potential loss of his scholarly documents after they have been soaked through in a puddle: 'PROBABLY RUINED YES A SCHOLAR LIVES FOR DOCUMENTS A SCHOLAR WITHOUT DOCUMENTS IS (*He sobs*)' (p. 224). This outcry suggests that his very identity is bound up in scholarly texts. Once in the house and by a '*great fire burning in the grate*' (p. 228), J explains the origins of these documents and highlights people's lack of respect for their care, including the use of documents to light fires. Barbara's surprising, direct and aggressive response, 'I burn books,' offers another challenge to J's *raison d'être*. J then talks enthusiastically about tomorrow and seeing his family which Barbara simply rejects by interrupting with 'Who cares?' and following this up with a very dark

challenge: 'Your child for all you know is dead' (p. 229). Barbara continues these direct challenges to J and his attempts to engage in pleasant conversation by attacking his friend the renowned scholar Erasmus and explaining that she hates both Erasmus and him. This first sequence of the play can be seen as a process of separation from social norms and beliefs.

J enters an enormous library and discovers that Barbara holds every book he has ever written. He reflects on the impossibility of such a collection and it is clear that this narrative is deliberately evoking a strong sense of the irrational and otherworldliness:¹⁴⁴

AND THIS LIBRARY THIS HOUSE AND THIS LIBRARY WHY HAS
NO ONE HEARD OF IT [...]

To assemble such a collection [...] IT CAN'T BE DONE [...]

AND THIS WOMAN WHO IS SHE

(Barker 2008a, p. 238)

J is very surprised to discover that this library contains every document that he has ever written. As the play progresses we learn that Barbara has spent many years studying J and through this analysis of his work is convinced that he is a murderer, in the sense that he has the potential to murder. Although there are no explicit references to this potential, Barbara is convinced of this fact, much to J's incomprehension.

¹⁴⁴ This is even compared to other Barker plays. Compare for example the relatively solid and realistic setting in the radio play *Let Me*, which was broadcast the same year.

This murderous potential is the reason she has manipulated events so that J enters her house that night. Barbara is suicidal and wants to be murdered by J. The revelation of the murderous potential behind the rational mind shatters the security of the self and highlights the human's proximity to the forces of violence and death. J's civility is effectively eradicated so that he agrees to undertake this murder in one of the strangest and most unsettling engagements with death in any of Barker's plays, as J narrates as he enacts his precise murder of Barbara:

J: Yes I have not been a murderer before I am late for all things it
 appears marriage killing possibly I will be late for my own death
 your heart is here

(He feels her ribs.)

 Here so if I thrust the point

BARBARA: Hard

J: Yes it must be hard the thrust

(A sudden plunge of horror.)

I DON'T BELIEVE I'M DOING THIS

(Barbara laughs lightly...)

BARBARA: But you are doing it and look me in the eyes you are not afraid
 you have no conscience and you will experience no guilt

J: No

BARBARA: None at all your entire philosophy equips you for this and when
 you see my blood rejoice in it don't shrink I could not bear to see
 you shrink from it

[...]

The blood will wash you Johannes it will cleanse your spirit of its
filth

(Barker 2008a, p. 258-9)

As Barbara's comments suggest, this immediate encounter with death is seen as a cleansing experience that removes the protagonist's conventional feelings of conscience (formed by ideology), releasing him into a sacred space.¹⁴⁵ Barbara's mysterious and seductive persona coupled with her preoccupation with death and the murderous drives in humanity, present to the listener a god-like and female personification of death: an expression of the forces of *eros* and *thanatos*.¹⁴⁶ When combined with the strange location and terrible weather, the play seems to offer the protagonist and listener a journey into a Hades like realm where they eventually meet a terrible but powerful expression of death in feminine form. The dream-like journey ends with J collapsing and dying on the freezing road outside the house.

This chapter has shown how the shift into more spiritual and tragic territory in Barker's drama has led to his plays taking on structures and themes that relate to religious ritual. In particular, elements of the *katabatic* ritual of Greek mystery cult, a very significant spiritual form that influenced Greek tragedy,

¹⁴⁵ Rene Girard's explanation of the ritual sacrifice as the catharsis of murderous feelings on a passive victim in *Violence and the Sacred* (1977) relates to J's cleansing expression of his repressed murderous potential.

¹⁴⁶ This is very much a play written for radio in that such a graphic death scene would have less impact if staged in theatre. Radio offers an immediacy and intimacy to this scene as if we are close to the carefully described body of Barbara as the knife penetrates it.

can be related to Barker's irrational and death focused drama. The association of femininity with both death and desire is expressed in the powerful goddess of Persephone in Greek paganism, the mother of the god of tragedy and ecstasy, and both are significant figures in mystery cult and conceptions of the realm of death. Barker's deification of death and ecstasy in female form in his tragedies, present a spirituality alien to Christianity but related to the spiritual dramatic form he chooses to engage with.

In terms of the female antagonist in Barker's drama I have considered two spiritual concepts that help to understand their elusive nature: Eckhart's 'the one' and Persephone the queen of the dead. In the final chapter I will consider four Greek archetypes from myth, poetry and drama that also have a relationship to Barker's theatre: Pandora, the maenad, the witch, the incestuous queen and Helen of Troy.

Chapter 5 Mythic conceptions of the female in Greek tragedy and the Theatre of Catastrophe

He named this woman Pandora, Allgift, because all the dwellers on Olympus made her their gift – a calamity for men who live by bread. [...] For formally the tribes of men on earth lived remote from ills, without harsh toil and the grievous sicknesses that are deadly to men. But the woman unstopped the jar and let it all out, and brought grim cares upon mankind.

(Hesiod 2008, p. 39)

SEMELE He cursed...always he cursed...it was an obsession with him...
GOLLANCZ Cursed who...? Cursed you...?
SEMELE Some woman...she was guilty of everything that afflicted the human
 race....
GOLLANCZ Some woman always is...

(Barker, *The Ecstatic Bible*, 2013)¹⁴⁷

Powerful female characters often play a dominant and significant role in Barker's Theatre of Catastrophe and in Attic tragedy. This chapter explores religious and mythic ideas regarding the female in Greek tragedy that relate to Barker's paradigmatic portrayal of female characters in his contemporary theatre. Four classical mythic conceptions of femininity will be examined that

¹⁴⁷ This quotation is from the edited script used in the Wrestling School directed student production of the text entitled *Scenes from an Ecstatic Bible*, 17 Jan 2013 at the Melton Theatre, Brooksby Melton College.

are then explored through specific Barker plays. These are the witch in *The Castle* (1985), incestuous queen in *The Gaoler's Ache for the Nearly Dead* (1998), the maenad in *Gertrude – The Cry* (2000) and Helen of Troy in *The Bite of the Night* (1988).

The female in Greek tragedy

Despite or perhaps because of the restrictions on females in Athenian society, Greek tragedy is a somewhat paradoxical space in that in an event performed and viewed primarily or even solely by men there is a strong interest in imagining and portraying the female and the female point of view. There is some debate about whether women were present in the audience in the Theatre of Dionysus:

If women were present, then it is generally assumed that those who came sat at the back, or maybe the sides, and the female presence was marginal. The plays were directed at male spectators. The best evidence for a female spectator is a seat which can be inspected today in the theatre in Athens: a throne in the front row for a priestess if Athene.'

(Wiles 2000, p. 66-7)

Athene is a powerful and active force in Greek theatre and with appearances in seven of the thirty-three surviving plays she is the most performed deity in

extant Greek tragedy. It therefore seems fitting that she is also represented in the audience by one of her own priestesses. Sourvinou-Inwood feels strongly that women did attend writing: 'In my view, there can be no doubt that respectable Athenian women took part in the City Dionysia and (A point still considered controversial) that they were present in the theatrical performances (2003, p. 177).

Out of the 33 extant tragedies 17 of the play titles are female (either singular for the protagonist or plural for a chorus of females). Even in extant plays named after a male protagonist it can still be a female character who dominates the action and is of greater psychological interest and complexity, as is clearly the case with Clytemnestra in *Agamemnon* and Phaedra in *Hippolytus*.¹⁴⁸ Only one extant tragedy, Sophocles' *Philoctetes* that involves a military expedition to an island, contains no female characters. Thus, Greek tragedy seems dominated by strong female characters and Oedipus aside many of the memorable characters from Greek drama are female: Clytemnestra, Antigone, Medea, Electra and Phaedra. Edith Hall refers to observations from ancient Greece that shows an awareness of the female dominance of Greek tragedy (and she also notes the enduring interest in this topic):¹⁴⁹

This has long been identified by scholars as a 'problem': since women were almost excluded from Athenian public life, it is seen as a paradox that they were so conspicuous in this most public of Athenian art-forms.

¹⁴⁸ When *Hippolytus* was updated the new title reflected an awareness of the primary focus on the female character with Seneca's *Phaedra* (circa 50 AD) and Racine's *Phedre* (1677).

¹⁴⁹ Two sources are mentioned from in and around the second century CE (Hall 2010, p. 126)

(Hall 2010, p. 126)

The importance of the female character and chorus in Greek tragedy becomes particularly visible and emphasised when compared to Shakespearian tragedy, where there is a clear dominance of male titles, protagonists and characters. Out of the twelve plays that were designated tragedies in the First Folio (1623) only three contain a female in the title and they are love tragedies and therefore by convention require the names of both lovers.¹⁵⁰ In Shakespeare, the strong or textually dominant female characters are primarily found in the comedies (for example Rosalind in *As You Like It* and Olivia in *Twelfth Night*).¹⁵¹

Part of the reason why such intense and powerful female personalities are so dominant in Greek drama may be because the tragic space was a place in which the male playwrights, actors and audience could explore the danger (or rather their projected fear) of the female who was deeply repressed within Athenian society. Froma Zeitlin, in her study of misogyny and myth in Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, applies a theory on matriarchy and myth by Bamberger to this trilogy. The theory centres on the idea that matriarchy is expressed and overcome in myth as a method of justifying the current patriarchal order. This view of 'the myth of matriarchy as myth' (Zeitlin 1978, p. 151) is in contrast to earlier theories that suggested that matriarchy in myth was expressing a memory of history.

¹⁵⁰ These are *Troilus and Cressida*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Antony and Cleopatra*.

¹⁵¹ Shakespeare's Histories are of course named after the male kings who dominate English history.

From a cross-cultural perspective, the *Orestiea* can be characterized as an intricate and fascinating variant of a widely distributed myth of matriarchy, the so-called Rule of Women, whose details differ but whose general scenario conforms to a consistent pattern. Such myths are normally found in “societies where there also exists a set of cultural rules and procedures for determining sexual dimorphism in social and cultural tasks.” Women once had power, but they abused it through “trickery and unbridled sexuality,” thus fostering “chaos and misrule.” The men, therefore, rebelled. They assumed control and took steps to institutionalise the subordination of women. The point of myth is not the recording of some historical or prehistorical state of affairs, but rather that women are not fit to rule, only to be ruled (Bamberger 1974: 276, 280)

(Zeitlin 1978, p. 151)

Even if the myth did contain a memory of history, the function of the myth as a means of reasserting the normative gender roles remains the same. Susan Deacy, in her study of Athena (2008), a goddess who was seen as a product of the shift from patriarchy from matriarchy, also discusses this change of perspective in classical studies:

The quest for a historical kernel behind particular myths fuelled nineteenth-century interpretation of mythology but it has long since

been regarded as outmoded (Hall 1996). As an interpretative model, it has been replaced by a focus upon a myth's various contexts, whether social, political or gendered.

(Deacy 2008, p. 40)

Zeitlin notes how in Greek culture the 'variations, repetitions, and frequency' of the Rule of Women in myth is 'consonant with the generally agonistic outlook of the Greek world, while the consistency of the portrayal of the women reflects perhaps the deep-seated conviction that the female is basically unruly' (Zeitlin 1978, p. 152). This agonistic outlook that allows for the existence of variants makes ancient Greek society particularly amenable to the emergence of drama and its expression of multiple perspectives through characterisation (as discussed in relation to the appearance of atheistic perspectives via character dialogue in Chapter 3).

This accommodation to multiplicity in both society and, it would seem, particularly in drama, allows for the powerful expression of the (allegedly) female perspective, paradoxically, within a society that represses the female. The 'deep-seated conviction', or fear that the female is unruly finds powerful expression in drama because both the artistic form of drama (dialogue) and the Greek culture in which it emerged (democratic), embraces variation and difference. In drama the exploration of difference - conflicting perspectives or

needs - is part of its essential form and structure.¹⁵² Therefore, this combination of openness to different perspectives and the misogynistic fear of females in power, leads to the emergence of powerful and threatening females whose tremendous strength of will and intelligence threaten the social order. Edith Hall, having warned against over generalising the female characters in Greek tragedy, is still able to assert key features of the female protagonist when she writes:

There is, nevertheless, a marked tendency in the extant plays to story patterns revolving around women who are transgressive (that is, women who break one of the 'unwritten laws', develop an inappropriate erotic passion, or flout male authority).¹⁵³

(Hall 2010, p. 128)

Barker can, therefore, arguably be seen to be continuing the Greek tragic archetypal portrayal of the female as a principal of misrule, but he also enhances the erotic element and fuses the archetype with his own radical approach that seems to stem from his Brechtian and Marxist dramatic

¹⁵² The multiple (or as a minimum binary) perspective of drama, combined with the living actor's potential to increase the force of the argument through characterisation is probably a reason that the more monological religious and ideological position of Christianity repressed the theatre (see Chapter 3). Lamb observes how the dramatic form of Barker's *The Ecstatic Bible* contrasts with the more monological structure of Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: 'The reference to the absence of God is particularly reminiscent of Nietzsche whose philosophical project was not dissimilar to that outlined here. In his case, however, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is a fictional device, which acts as a mouthpiece for its author's thinking. With Barker, characters and action are in the first instance products of his dramatic imagination; the reflections which arise appertain to the characters in situ and should not be construed as endorsed by the dramatist' (Lamb 2006, p. 152).

¹⁵³ Hall goes on to observe that 'every single transgressive woman in tragedy is temporarily permanently husbandless' (Hall 2010 p. 128).

heritage. As a result the highly intelligent and destructive female of misrule becomes an erotically infused emblem or focal point of the radical sensibility of his post-Marxist Theatre of Catastrophe: the ideologically destructive female is both a source of radical politics and erotic desire and the intensity of the erotic desire *initiates* the radical politics of anti-ideology in her and others. It would seem that the female protagonist's challenge to established order in classical Greece becomes a positive principal of normative ideological transcendence and dissolution in Barker's Theatre of Catastrophe.

Aristotle observes how the tragic protagonists are 'people held in high esteem and enjoy great good fortune, like Oedipus, Thyestes, and distinguished men from that kind of family' (Aristotle 1996, p. 21). The female protagonists in Greek tragedy are usually members of a ruling royal household and are therefore in positions of relative power, although subordinate to the ruling male leadership (e.g. their husband or father).¹⁵⁴ This subordination can cause the conflict and subsequent rebellion that marks a number of Greek tragedies, e.g. Medea's conflict with her husband Jason and the Corinthian King Creon and Antigone's conflict with her uncle King Creon (this time of Thebes). Aristotle is careful not to define the female protagonist in an identical manner to the male tragic hero. When discussing the attribute of 'goodness' of character he qualifies the definition by stating that 'there is such a thing as a good woman and a good slave, even though one of these is perhaps deficient and the other generally speaking inferior' and when defining 'appropriateness'

¹⁵⁴ All the female tragic protagonists are of high and royal birth but in certain instances they are held captive by foreign forces and therefore have little access to their normal privileges. These include Hecuba who in both *The Trojan Women* and *Hecuba* is held captive by the Greeks. In both Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris* and *Helen* a barbarian people holds the eponymous princess captive, Taurians and Egyptians respectively.

he says that 'it is possible for the character to be courageous, but for this to be an inappropriate way for a woman to display courage or cleverness' (Aristotle 1996, p. 24). With regard to the first of Aristotle's comments, Sue- Ellen Case notes that 'Women seem to occupy an ambiguous station. Though they may be subjects of tragedy, Aristotle implies that as subjects they are inferior to males' (Case 1988, p. 16). The limited nature of goodness and courage in the female protagonist adds to the idea that women are not fully capable of ruling effectively. The role of the female protagonist or dominant character is often limited to rebellion rather than the assertion of a new order, as in the examples of Clytemnestra, Electra and Antigone.¹⁵⁵

In Barker's theatre, the female antagonist, despite her high status position (often of the highest form of the queen), is usually someone who challenges normative ideology in her transgressive sexual behaviour and in her rejection of such cornerstones of contemporary Western morality as the need for pity and equality (as discussed in Chapter 2 with reference to Helen of Troy in *The Bite of the Night*). In Barker's two longest plays, *The Bite of the Night* and *The Ecstatic Bible*, the transgressive female characters of Helen and Gollancz give birth to daughters, Gay and McChief respectively, who become tyrannical and brutal leaders. In both cases the daughter is disturbed by the chaos and amorality of the world/their world (a chaos and amorality exemplified and symbolized by their mother), and instead choose to use their superior intelligence and transcendent perspective on morality to create their own political order. In these two plays we see in this mother to daughter evolution

¹⁵⁵ Although in divine form the female, as the goddess Athena, is exemplary at restoring order, most notably in the *Oresteia*.

a portrayal of the female as amoral as both a force to challenge social order and then as a violent force creating a new social order. Tragedy's interest in the myth of the Rule of Women seems to therefore continue in these elements of Barker's tragedy. It is of course important to note that for Barker, in the case of the mother figures at least, such transgression is a positive if not a defining feature of his drama's *raison d'être*.¹⁵⁶

Female desire in Greek tragedy

The spiritual role of sexual desire in Barker's tragic theatre, where its status is often referred to in religious terms - 'a religion of sexuality' - may be further understood by a consideration of sexual desire in tragedy's early pagan religious form. In Attic tragedy, female antagonists and protagonists are often portrayed as not fully in control of their desires, which can be sexual desires but also other violent drives, usually revenge or the pursuit of power. In Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, the antagonist Clytemnestra experiences all three extremes of emotion, and this sets the stage for the strong willed and independent tragic females in later Greek tragedy. She ruthlessly pursues political power and revenge in the violent murder of her husband and King, Agamemnon, and his concubine from Troy Cassandra, aided by her adulterous partner Aegisthus. Aeschylus's Clytemnestra is a powerful and

¹⁵⁶ Two of Shakespeare's well-known tragedies also seem to include tragedy's preoccupation with the mythic idea of the Rule of Women, *Macbeth* and *King Lear*. In a similar way to Clytemnestra, Lady Macbeth and Lear's eldest daughters are portrayed as scheming, very strong willed, ruthless, and have no initial doubts about acting outside of accepted moral parameters. When they actually attain power they are shown to be either too weak to maintain authority or are very easily distracted by sexual transgression and therefore become unable to rule effectively: Lady Macbeth is unable to commit the King's murder and then becomes haunted by nightmares and Lear's eldest daughters are both seduced and manipulated by Edmund.

striking presentation of female independence and immorality and she will be considered in more detail later in this chapter.

In the example of Phaedra in Euripides' *Hippolytus* we see initially an overwhelming sexual urge in Phaedra's terrible lust for her stepson Hippolytus and then the desire for revenge when he rejects her, her suicide orchestrated as an act of violence on the self that will damn him. In this play the female antagonist is unable to control two subsequent and related emotional forces.

PHAEDRA: Love is without mercy: I shall die defeated. Yet my death shall
be a curse on another's life, and teach him not to trample on my
agony.

(Euripides 1953, p. 49)

Similarly in *Medea*, what was initially intense love becomes violent revenge where her jealousy and fury at Jason's new proposed wife leads her to murder her own children. The terrifying extremity of this action causes the protagonist to no longer be capable of integration within the normative moral order. This is expressed theatrically via the convention of the crane that is more commonly used for gods to enter and exit the scene. As she ascends towards the chariot of the sun god Helios (her grandfather) into the realm of the gods, symbolically and theatrically speaking, it seems as though the immorality of her actions are beyond the realm of ordinary mortals and the only way to make sense of her terrible acts is to suggest they are beyond

easy human understanding, as are many of the seemingly cruel activities of the gods. Medea asserts that 'Zeus knows how you've been treated and what I did' (Euripides 2002, p. 39) and the final chorus conclude 'Olympian Zeus ordains [...] The unexpected is god's way, / The lesson of this story' (Euripides 2002, p. 41). The use of the crane and the connection of her terrible actions with harsh divine directives clearly equate Medea with the divine. Her exit finds a connection with the god Dionysus in Euripides' *The Bacchae* who at the close of the drama also announces his terrible scheme in a divine epiphany before he ascends.¹⁵⁷ Aristotle's well known criticism of the *deus ex machine* device specifically refers to the ascent of *Medea*, so perhaps this moralizing and rationalising philosopher finds Medea's transcendence and divinely sanctioned evasion of any form of justice too unsettling.¹⁵⁸

Although Medea's terrible actions are motivated by her strong desire for Jason, the desire itself is not transgressive in the way that Phaedra's desire is. As well as Phaedra, another prominent example of incestuous desire is Jocasta in the Oedipus myth and associated plays, where the taboo of mother son sexual relations is part of the shocking revelations that lead Oedipus to blind himself. Where this case of incest is finally highly visible the same myth contains, arguably, a continuation of the incest taboo in the next generation, at least according to Judith Butler's interpretation of Sophocles *Antigone*.

¹⁵⁷ *Bacchae*, along with Euripides' *Alcestis*, *Andromache* and *Helen*, also end with a similar final chorus about unexpected yet divinely sanctioned conclusions (Walton 2002, p. 51).

¹⁵⁸ '[T]he resolution of plots should also come about from the plot itself, and not by means of a theatrical device, as in the *Medea*' (Aristotle 1996, p. 24). A few lines earlier Aristotle shows an objection to what he considers excessive immorality in theatre: 'An example of unnecessary badness of character is Menelaus in [Euripides'] the *Orestes*' (Aristotle 1996, p. 23).

Butler bases her argument on an analysis of the famous passage where Antigone talks about the intense feelings she has for her brother:

Opposing Antigone to Creon as the encounter between the forces of kinship and those of state power fails to take into account the ways in which Antigone has already departed from kinship, herself the daughter of an incestuous bond, herself devoted to an impossible and death – bent incestuous love of her brother, how her actions compel her as “manly” and thus cast doubt on the way that kinship might underwrite gender.

(Butler 2002, p. 5)

Butler’s particular perspective on Antigone as a potential subversive force against normative sexuality, is very much in line with Butler’s post-structuralist gender project that strives to deconstruct the dominant tradition of heterosexual gendered normativity, as set out initially in her seminal text *Gender Trouble* (1990). There are similarities here with Barker’s appropriation of the Greek tragic model of rebellious female characters as a way of challenging contemporary ideology. Female characters that were originally a threat to the established order for the audience but are then largely contained by the drama (with some exceptions, e.g. Medea) are now embraced as a positive force to unravel what is perceived to be a repressive ideological system.

It is interesting to contrast Butler's reading with Seaford's anthropological and religious perspective on incest in Greek drama in order to create a more complex assessment of incest in classical tragedy. For Seaford, such incestuous inward looking feelings suggest an intense form of endogamy and therefore an extreme elitist perspective that clashes with the Dionysian communal perspective. The protagonist/individual and chorus/the people dynamic formally manifest this clash and conflict in Greek tragedy. Seaford argues that this is a common trait of Dionysus in myth and tragedy: the god destroys the individual ruling family so that the people may continue. Again, it is the Oedipus myth in Greek tragedy that is considered and Seaford gives the examples of the three moments of royal downfall: the self-destruction of Oedipus, the mutual killing of the sons of Oedipus and finally Antigone:

In Antigone's case the tendency of the household to autonomy is represented not only by her flouting of the public edict by performing death ritual for her dead kin but also by various suggestions that the family of Oedipus remains doomed to catastrophic endogamy: in particular, Antigone's explicit prioritization of natal kin over marriage.

(Seaford 1993, p. 141)

Seaford also argues that the incestuous implications for Antigone and her brother are even stronger in Euripides' *Phoenician Women*: 'The suggestion of a quasi-erotic relationship between Antigone and her brother are stronger than in Sophocles' (Seaford 1993, p. 141). In Greek tragedy, therefore,

incestuous drives are expressed in the character of Antigone and with Phaedra and Jocasta such incestuous feelings are even consummated. Seaford's argument is that they are problematic and therefore result in destruction because their extreme form of endogamy threatens the communal needs of the polis. In contrast Butler's post-structural lesbian feminist position perceives an ancient radical individualism in the subversive power of this incestuous drive motivating Antigone's rebellion.¹⁵⁹ Barker's post-radical tragic theatre also celebrates the self-destructive individualism and anti-social drive of incest in some of his plays. For instance, incest is an important strand of *The Gaoler's Ache for the Nearly Dead* (1998), *N/A Sad Kissing* (2002) and *The Fence in its Thousandth Year* (2005). Again, the incestuous activities in these three plays are among the royal family and are viewed as actions that threaten the very moral and philosophical fabric of society.

To explore this connection further let us consider the earliest text *The Gaoler's Ache for the Nearly Dead*. In this play Barker imagines an incestuous relationship between Marie Antoinette and her son Louis. The action takes place after the French Revolution has already occurred and the family are incarcerated. The eponymous Gaoler is asked to observe the cell containing the royal family and report back his observations to use as further condemnation of the Queen. Trepasser, a demagogue, seems to be the primary instigator of this surveillance and is intending to use the information in the Queen's trial. The Gaoler's initial reports although 'concise' are gently

¹⁵⁹ Sarah Kane's third play *Cleansed* (1998) is a modern example of incestuous sister and brother sexual relationships utilised as a challenge to social order. Her second play used incest in a similar way and this time drew directly upon Greek myth and tragedy in *Phaedra's Love*. For Kane, as with Butler, the use of incest to challenge conventional ideology is seen as a positive radical force rather than a dangerous expression of individualism.

criticised for their 'arid and colourless account' and being 'one dimensional' (Barker 1998, p. 225). Although encouraged to expand his observations, the gaoler struggles to adopt a position other than that of objective and concise reporting. Perhaps there is a comment here on what is in Barker's view the limitations placed on language in documentary theatre and realism where factuality dominates over the imagination. In the 1980s Barker felt that language had suffered under the influence of political ideologies aligned with socialism and democracy: 'Speech as art was spattered with a double contempt, by the left who required workers to grunt and the right, who were coming to the masses at last, levelling princesses to the suburban mode' (Barker 1989, p. 15). By showing the gaoler, a functionary of the revolution, as so limited in vocabulary and imagination suggests what is in Barker's view the limiting impact of ideology on the mind. The gaoler, however, moves from this position of obedience and limited imagination and emotional response through his observations of the Queen and her son. Caroline and Prince Louis are so empowered by their royal status that they are able to remain resistant and defiant even in captivity without any 'privileges.' With only each other to regularly communicate with they become locked into an intense cycle of desire and speculation. This ultimately leads to incestuous activities. However, they see themselves as so far beyond the common life that they view conventional moral restrictions as irrelevant to them. Instead, the monarchy's relationship to divinity and their superior extra moral behaviour allow the young prince to define himself as a divine being: 'I am your God (*Pause. She is perplexed*) There can be no other (Barker 1998, p. 237). After Caroline describes their illicit relationship as 'Heaven' Little Louis responds

with another assertion of his divinity 'And I'm the King of Heaven, obviously...!' (Barker 1998, p. 240.) He then goes on to define monarchy, somewhat radically, as transgression:

LITTLE LOUIS: You see.... I do know what a monarch is...

CAROLINE: What is it, then...?

LITTLE LOUIS: It is all that others cannot do...the monarch does...here even...I claim privilege... (*She closes her eyes, with pain...*)

CAROLINE: Then, it's...

LITTLE LOUIS: The crime of kings...! (*He explores her clothing. She sobs in the near darkness...*)

Why weep...?

WHY WEEP...! (*A faint wind blows. The voice of the GAOLER comes from the aperture*)

GAOLER Shan't tell... (*She sobs...*)

Shan't tell

(Barker 1998, p. 240, emphasis his)

In the climax of this pivotal scene we hear the voice of the Gaoler converted by his observations. The Queen is exhausted by the ordeal of repudiating all suggestions of their terrible intimacy '**My belly swells to think what my mouth so vehemently denies**' (Barker 1998, p. 240, emphasis his). The Gaoler had already witnessed their intimacies before the scene begins and

has been altered by the exposure to such powerful desire that causes transgression. This is shown by how his previously banal use of language has become inspired, searching and sophisticated, to the concern of Trepasser:

GAOLER: The child's no child.

TREPASSER: Is he not? He was when I knew him.

GAOLER: Nor is the mother in the least maternal. (*Pause.*

TREPASSER *smiles*)

TREPASSER: Your delivery captures the elevated tone of a Rhetorical Republic, and you a common gaoler...! But leave the fashioned sentences to me. Or the court will think I've tutored you

(Barker 1998, p. 236)

When the Gaoler begins to describe what he has seen he continues in this inspired mode, clearly relishing and transformed by the observations of illicit sexual intimacy (and continuing to unnerve Trepasser). His empathy with Caroline is so great that at the end of the scene he rejects his political role in the trial and claims to have witnessed 'nothing out of the ordinary' (Barker 1998, p. 245). The alteration of this ordinary man to a heightened and resistant state, a man previously banal in use of language and vision due to the reducing impact of political ideology, is a clear example of Barker's artistic project. Rather than the Greek tragic model where extreme endogamy as incest and hubristic individuality are necessarily destroyed by the Dionysiac

and communal force of the people, instead this very individuality infects and transforms the common man (who for Barker is like a loyal audience member that patiently observes and is then profoundly altered by the spectacle before them). It is Apollonian individuality that prevails, or is at least emphasised in the drama, over Dionysian communality. Dionysus as intense sexual ecstasy beyond civilising morality, emerging in a voiding of ideology, is very much present, but the individual nature of the Queen's sexual actions are the mirror for the common man to copy rather than the death of monarchy so that the community can be free from a dangerous inward looking. The Gaoler's transformation causes him to rape Little Louis before going into the court and claiming to see 'nothing out of the ordinary.' The savagery and immorality of this action shows the terrible intensity of his desires now that they are free from the confines of state regulation. As the Gaoler fails in his function to observe then condemn, Trepasser seems defeated and in this defeat his objective and judicial mentality give way to his own terrible desires '(*He turns to CAROLINE. The wind blows. TREPASSER, as if exhausted, leans on the desk...*) TREPASSER: Piss on me.... Piss one me....!' (Barker 1998, p. 245). Like Toonelhuis in *Found in the Ground*, a perverse sexual fascination with urination overwhelms his mind as the repressive apparatus of political ideology and law crumble away. Without the control, structure and purpose of ideology, previously repressed sexual desires rapidly overcome him.

The irony of this series of imagined events for an ex-Marxist playwright is that the character most celebrated for their individualism is of the highest status, a queen, and a primary symbol of the traditional social hierarchy that Barker

had previously set out to overthrow. Barker's rejection of socialist ideology and those who proclaim it results in a surprising swing to the opposite position, celebrating decadent and highly detached monarchs and aristocrats. The strident revolutionary demagogue Trepasser has to overcome his desire for the queen, and the gaoler, like Barker himself, is converted from condemning an extremely elitist perspective (in the Gaoler's case incest as concentrated endogamy) to be deeply moved by the power and resistance of their individualism.

The mythic female as a source of seduction and deception

In their destructive impact on morality and society, the female character in Greek tragedy can become a symbol or personification of the chaos that is the very core of the tragic experience. This equation of the female with calamity and the disintegration of ordered society is expressed in the myth of Pandora, the first woman, who Hesiod, a foundational voice in Greek myth for Athenian culture, tells us was created specifically as a punishment for mankind. As the quotation from Hesiod at the start of this Chapter shows, all the Olympian gods worked together to create the ironically and deceptively entitled 'Allgift' – Pandora – the first woman whose *purpose* was to bring 'calamity' to mankind. Mankind up until her arrival lived 'remote from ills, without harsh toil and the grievous sicknesses that are deadly to men (Hesiod 2008, p. 39).' Although like Eve in the Garden of Eden she gives into temptation, opening a jar that releases 'grim cares' upon humanity, unlike Eve she was specifically created to bring calamity, which suggests a deliberate and serious design flaw (or

perhaps tragic flaw) rather than her actions simply being a moment of poor judgement.

The myth of Pandora, as narrated by Hesiod, also suggests that the desire she creates in man is an intrinsic if not defining feature of her *raison d'être* as punishment for man. Therefore in this myth of female origins, sexual desire and the sinful nature of women are fused together as a core conception of the female (in a way that is similar to early Christian interpretations of the *Genesis* story). For Hesiod the intense desire is expressed as something originating from Pandora rather than as a response *within* the male: '[Zeus told] Aphrodite to shower charm about her head, and painful yearning and consuming obsession; to put in a bitch's mind and a knavish nature, that was his instruction to Hermes' (Hesiod 2008, p. 39). This highlights the clear element of projection of male desire onto the female, which mythically inscribes her as the *source* of immorality *because* of the painful seduction of her sexuality.

This dangerous seduction continues to find expression in Greek myth through the equation of desire for the female with her conscious use of magic to seduce man. A clear example is the highly influential epic poem *The Odyssey*. Adorno and Horkheimer, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), argue that in this poem it is possible to see the emergence of reason as a dominating force in Western civilisation. The central character of Odysseus is examined as a prototype of the patriarchal capitalist, employing reason as a means of emotional control that allows him to use cunning and deception to survive the

threat of both violence and seduction. This emotional detachment from the powerful drives of natural instincts (and therefore nature) generates a level of self-consciousness that allows Odysseus to navigate a path through the terrifying forces of nature that threaten to destroy him or pull him back into a prehistoric age. They therefore argue that this poem represents an expression of subjectivity or individualism forming *from* prehistory, initiating Western civilisation and a rational and systematic engagement with the world:

Eloquent discourse itself, language in contradistinction to mythic song, the possibility of retaining in the memory the disaster that has occurred, is the law of Homeric escape, and the reason why the escaping hero is repeatedly introduced as narrator

(Adorno and Horkheimer 1997, p. 78)

As this quotation mentions, the fantastical forces of the poem are presented by the protagonist himself and therefore kept at an objectifying distance from the reader/audience. Within the *Nostos* there is a clash with a pre-agrarian man-eating monster the Cyclops, a terrifying image of unchecked masculine savagery. However, many of the encounters of the *Nostos* are with female characters or creatures, which Odysseus needs to evade or overcome using reason, in order to return to his stable married life on Ithaca.¹⁶⁰

¹⁶⁰ 'Marriage belongs to the primal rock of myth in the basis of civilisation. But its mythic hardness and fixity stand out from myth as the small island kingdom from the infinite sea' (Adorno and Horkheimer 1997p. 75).

Some of these encounters present the female transformed into a terrifying force of nature: Scylla the whirlpool and Charybdis a sea monster that devours members of his crew. Of particular interest are the Sirens whose overwhelmingly seductive use of music places enchantment as the defining feature and danger rather than monstrosity and violence, although the ultimate result of those who succumb is still death. All of these monsters were initially immortal females in a human form, who have been transformed. The Sirens were originally companions of Persephone who attained their Siren form when she was forcibly taken into the underworld by Hades (Hyginus 2007, 146-7). Their impossibly seductive songs and simultaneous initiation of the victim's movement towards their death, and their association with the goddess of the underworld, make them the Other of Odysseus's male and proto-rationalist stable subjectivity that evades and therefore overcomes them. This early gendered clash of seduction and death with rational subjectivity, the ecstasy of the Siren's song gestured to via the Homeric song, expresses a pre- or extra-rational force that threatens to undo normative subjectivity.

Odysseus also encounters magical and enchanting females who are less overtly threatening, the nymph Calypso and the sorceress Circe, both of whom threaten to seduce Odysseus and drain his will to return to Penelope. Classicist Laura McClure refers to the *Odyssey* to show how female magic and seduction are connected in the Greek perception and how certain items are associated with this female magic:

[C]loth and drugs figure prominently in women persuading and gaining control over men in the *Odyssey*: both Calypso, who detains Odysseus for several years, and Circe, who transforms his men into pigs through her skilful use of herbs (Hom. *Od.* 10.235-36; 276; 290-92), are represented as singing and weaving in their houses, and both use words that seduce and enchant. Helen, also conspicuously surrounded by her weaving, possesses knowledge of magical drugs brought back from Egypt (*Od.* 4.227-32). Even the weaving of Penelope can be seen as a magical action that renders the suitors powerless until Odysseus returns. Whereas weaving suggests feminine wiles, the finished product, cloth, may also exert power as an *amalg*a or magical object: so the *kestos* of Aphrodite works erotic magic for Hera (*Iliad* 14.214-21).

(McClure 1999, p. 83)

This use of magical items (cloth and drugs) and enchanted speech is also used in Greek Tragedy. McClure shows how Clytemnestra's use of a purple cloth, which she persuades her husband Agamemnon to walk upon, would have been viewed as part of the enchantment. McClure also notes how Clytemnestra's speech includes the use of magical language but with a perverse intent:

Clytemnestra's speech has magical associations and, more precisely, that the final two lines of this speech are in fact modelled on traditional

closing formulas of magical incantations, thus realizing the many incantatory features of repetition, assonance, alliteration, and metaphor found in the earlier part of the speech. And yet, although this approximates magical language, it must be viewed as a perversion of feminine erotic magic in that it seduces in order to kill rather than to promote or maintain a sexual relationship. Such erotic spells typically sought to enervate or control their male objects while putting their female authors in the dominant position, at least temporarily, thus inverting normal gender roles in a dynamic similar to the one enacted in the carpet scene.

(McClure 1999, p. 82)

We see from this analysis that although not always apparent to the modern reader and audience member, there are associations with the female, seduction and magic in epic and Greek tragedy. In line with the idea of tragedy as a failed ritual, where the initiate dies rather than being reincorporated in society, this magic has dark and terrible consequences. Sometimes this is an unintended act as is the case with Deianeira's use of what she thinks is a magical love potion that poisons her husband Heracles, in Sophocles' *Women of Trachis*. However, at other times the female employs magic deliberately in order to cause death and pain, actions that destabilize male ordered society. This is the case with Clytemnestra and also the most identifiable and notorious witch of Greek tragedy, Medea. Her use of a poison

infused item of clothing to murder Glauce combines both these associations – material and drugs. Emma Griffith's notes in her study of Medea that:

Throughout history the figure of the witch has held a tremendous fascination as a point of intersection between two powerful discourses: concern about the divine, and concern about the position of women. In a patriarchal society, this is always likely to be an explosive combination.

(Griffiths 2006, p. 46)

In fact the three most notorious women in Greek tragedy: Medea, Clytemnestra, and her sister Helen, are all associated with witchcraft.¹⁶¹

The Witch in the Theatre of Catastrophe

The idea of the witch therefore has an association with classical tragedy, and in its associations with transgression, seduction and anti-orthodox spirituality it also relates to the portrayal of the female in Barker's theatre. Firstly, the recurring character type of 'the one' offers many qualities characteristic of a witch: her association with death, darkness and amorality, and the strong element of seduction, mystery and a detachment from common human concerns. In certain plays, where the sense of mystery and foreboding are intensified to what is suggestive of an other worldly level, as in *The Road, the*

¹⁶¹ Helen's connection with magic will of course appear in English tragedy when Doctor Faustus summons her.

House the Road, and *He Stumbled*, this is more apparent. For example the room burning with many candles in *The Road, the House, the Road* suggests a strange ritual is taking place. Barbara's request for J to murder her intensifies this idea of dark otherworldly desires. In two other plays by Barker the main female character is more directly connected to the idea of the witch. In his radio play *Knowledge and A Girl* (2000) based on the Brothers Grimm's *Little Snow-White*, Barker decentres Snow White, shifting the focus instead onto the witch character of the stepmother, who is of course traditionally viewed as the evil other (Grimm 2005). In the original narrative her witchcraft is clearly expressed through her use of a magic mirror. Rather than remove the narrative importance of the magic mirror, Barker creates a series of events that allow for what is effectively a talking mirror but one that also retains a subtle suggestion of otherworldly sources interacting with the queen. Early in the play the Queen is faced with the dilemma of two different servants in close succession being unable to hold a mirror for her without it dropping and smashing. The smashing of mirrors suggests bad luck based on traditional superstition. The Queen when faced with these strange events is compelled to read them as the supernatural, 'No the dropping of these mirrors cannot be coincidence [...] This is more difficult but I must be logical (*Pause*) I am not meant to see my face' (Barker 2002, p. 101). This establishes a tragic and pagan conception of fate being at play, in conflict with the will and actions of the protagonist. Eventually a third servant is suggested, 'a mother who is legless blind and 92' (Barker 2002, p. 104). She is able to hold the mirror, against the wishes of fate, because her blindness makes her 'hang on like grim death' (Barker 2002, p. 107). Her blindness and age in this tragic context

bring to mind the aged and divine wisdom of the ancient prophet Teiresias and Oedipus in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, a Greek mythic trope of outer blindness representing a sacred inner sight into the strange workings of divine action. Her control over fate and her association with 'grim death' also add to this mysterious characterization. This old blind woman allows for the speaking mirror to remain within the narrative with a degree of realism but without completely removing the irrational and magical element. The Queen's close relationship with the mirror means that dialogue of an intimate nature can take place between them, a verbal mirror for the Queen to see her own thoughts and fears, as in the original narrative. It also means that the radio listener can experience the Queen at close hand, as if viewing her through the magic mirror. The witchlike nature of Barker's Queen is expressed in her transgressive sexual encounters with other men. A moral transgression magnified due to her royal status. This is eventually revealed to the King through the Queen becoming pregnant, because pregnancy had been impossible between them, resulting in a sentence of death. In the final moments of the play the Queen, facing an agonizing execution dancing in red hot shoes, is thus able to cry out to the mirror to present her-self one final time: 'MIRROR (*A wind*) / I did not scream / MIRROR / Reflect my pride' (Barker 2002, p. 136).

In Barker's *The Castle* (1985), the central female character, Skinner, is listed as a Witch in the *dramatis personae*. The play's setting during the crusades means that Skinner as a witch expresses a spiritual and political position that is in opposition to the dominant patriarchy and Christian theology. Although

The Castle has a medieval setting, it has clear contemporary connections with second wave cultural feminism and, more specifically, the female occupation of Greenham Common in 1981. With all but the older males away on the crusades, Skinner has motivated the women to take control and alter the parish, including the 'common', and systematically unravel patriarchal authority and tradition to create a more peaceful and harmonious society:

SKINNER: First there was the bailiff, and we broke the bailiff, And then there was God, and we broke God. And lastly there was cock, and we broke that, too. Freed the ground, freed religion, freed the body. And went up the hill, standing together naked like the old female pack, growing to eat and not to market, friends to cattle who we milked but never slaughtered, joining the strips and dancing in the commons, the three days' labour that we gave to priests gave instead to the hungry, turned the tithe barn into a hospital and FOUND CUNT BEAUTIFUL.

(Barker 2006b, p. 17, emphasis his)

The transformed community expresses many of the socialist and counter cultural political ideas of the period, ideas intimately intertwined with socialist feminism. For example male law, religion, economics and sexuality are challenged and removed because of their perceived repressive influence on the poor and women. The relationship with the earth and animals moves from one of control and slaughter to living in harmony and with the sense of human

superiority. In short, woman has freed all that was controlled by man. The feminist appropriation of the witch as an expression of political subversion to a patriarchal order was used nine years earlier by the socialist feminist playwright Caryl Churchill in a Brechtian play set in seventeenth century England entitled *Vinegar Tom* (1976). Like Skinner, the play includes a 'witch' character - a wise woman called Ellen - who offers a peaceful and compassionate alternative to the violent male culture of civil war and witch persecution, giving those who visit her the support of gentle herbal remedies and spells, to help women deal with challenging parts of their life (Churchill 1985, p. 155). The imagery in Skinner's speech, of females in complete harmony with nature when man is absent, also relates to Greek tragedy and the images and dynamic of Euripides' *Bacchae*. Pentheus, who continually tries to control the maenads and their priest (Dionysus in disguise) through military strength, is challenged by the soldier who reports on what he has seen: 'They seemed so natural, not all / Drunk or debauched / Like you said, but at one with / The forest' (Euripides 2007, p. 44). As the Messenger continues in his speech, the fantastical images highlight the equation of the female with nature and/as resistance to civilisation that is also clearly perceptible in Skinner's speech:

FIRST MESSENGER: [...] Others - who had left
 Infants behind in the city –
 Took up a baby deer or wolf
 To suckle at their dripping
 Breasts and take their milk [...]

Some others used their fingertips
To dig hollows in the dust
Which filled with milk

(Euripides 2007, p. 45)

As with Greenham Common, a major point of difference is with the male preoccupation with instruments of war, and once the returning crusaders realise what has happened to their community they begin the construction of an enormous castle. As examined in the introduction to this thesis, this castle reverberates with an array of symbolism relating to male power, particularly man's continual pursuit of military technology.

Although the play is challenging and tragic in its exploration of violence, power, gender and sexual desire, the underlying argument remains a warning against war, and the female utopia is not seen as negative only very hard to maintain once the men return. This is different to *The Bite of the Night*, written directly after this play, where all ideologies, including ones that are explicitly female, are seen as repressive of the individual. As a result the dominant idea of the female antagonist in Barker shifts from an association with nature and harmony (symbolic of a utopianism that he still has some investment in) to her increased association with amorality and death (as examined in Chapter 2 and 4, respectively). The emergence of this new archetype in *The Bite of the Night* will be examined later in this chapter.

The pagan ideal of harmony between humanity (as female) and nature, expressed in *Bacchae* and *The Castle* contrasts with the anthropocentric Christian view that nature is there for man to use and under his control.¹⁶² The pagan perspective can also be seen in the play's engagement with sexual desire. Stucley's sexually ecstatic revision of patriarchal Christianity has an ecstatic parallel in Skinner's intense and obsessive desire for Ann. However, the obsessive level of this desire betrays an idealistic mindset that led to her leadership in the rebellion against patriarchal order. Such politically motivated activity contrasts with the personal nature of Ann's transgression, seducing the Islamic engineer Krak. Charles Lamb noted how it is Ann who operates beyond ideology (See Chapter 1), as will many future Barker female characters in the Theatre of Catastrophe. Her seduction of Krak is of course a betrayal of Skinner, who represents the ideological position she was previously associated with. This severe blow to Skinner's faith reveals the fragility of her ideals. In Barker's exploration of the witch archetype in Skinner he combines pagan conceptions of the association of the female and nature but also the socialist feminist utopianism attached to this notion: she is a witch presenting a radical challenge to morality in order to create and sustain a new political order. This is a characteristic that is not present in future witchlike characterisations in The Theatre of Catastrophe, including, for example, the Queen in *Knowledge and A Girl*. After Skinner, the female as witch (or witchlike) in Barker moves beyond political ideology to express amoral, irrational, and ecstatic forces.

¹⁶² 'Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness, to have dominion over the fish in the sea, the birds in the air, the cattle, all wild animals on land, and everything that creeps on the earth' (*Genesis 1: 26 Revised English Bible*).

Skinner's political aspect is expressed dramatically through her supernatural ability to experience future events, creating a theatrical effect that is more Brechtian than irrational. This occurs as a dream sequence in the snow, snow that she believes she has created through magic, where a chorus of knights appear:

(A heavy snowfall. SKINNER does not move. In the silence the sound of a metallic movement. Armoured figures appear from different directions. They congregate, are motionless.)

BALDWIN: (At last.) The oath!

ROLAND: The oath!

REGINALD: The oath!

ALL: We do vowe no peace shall be on earth, no ear of wheat
standen, no sheep with bowel in, no hutte unburn, no chyld
with blood in, until such tyme we have our aims all maken
wholehearte and compleate!

(Barker 2006b, p. 50)

The knights then express a rapid succession of terrible images of slaughter. Despite the archaic language of the oath, the imagery includes reference to modern warfare: 'Eighty millimetre gun went -'; 'Tracer from the half-track went - ' (Barker 2006b, p. 50). The knights therefore present a concentrated image of horrific male violence in warfare across human history, giving

Skinner a terrible insight into the apparent inevitability of war in patriarchal societies. These ghostly knights presenting images of death from outside the spatio-temporal setting of the action are a prototype of the choruses of the dead in the Theatre of Catastrophe. However, here their effect seems more Brechtian, creating alienation from the dramatic action of the plot in order to encourage a political response in the audience, i.e. patriarchy's predisposition for violence needs to be challenged. Skinner is moved to political action, murdering the head builder in an attempt to stop the building of the castle, with such action recalling the murders committed by the witchlike protagonists of Greek tragedy, including Clytemnestra's political murder that removes the powerful patriarchal war leader Agamemnon. Ann also instigates political action by murdering herself and her unborn child causing a number of women to do the same, an echo of the terrible and extreme rebellion of Medea against patriarchal control and exclusion. This politically motivated murder and suicide shows that Ann has not fully moved beyond political ideology, unlike similar sexually transgressive characters in later Barker dramas. Skinner is tortured for her murder and then punished by having the decaying body of the builder strapped to her back. Once her ideology has been broken by torture and Ann's betrayal and when she is wandering the common with the skeleton on her back, she then starts to become worshipped by the male characters. The new religion created around Skinner, 'The Holy Congregation of the Wise Womb (Barker 2006b, p. 74), might suggest an embrace of female politics and values and the ultimate success of the rebellion. However, in the final moments of the play what seems to be another brief premonition of warfare in the future suggests the cycle of violence will continue:

*(The roar as jets stream low. Out of the silence, SKINNER
strains in recollection.)*

SKINNER: There was no government...does anyone remember...there was none...there was none...there was none...!

(Barker 2006b, p. 77)

This final desire for the utopian, expressed at the very close of the play and despite all that has happened to Skinner, seems to offer a final expression of hope for utopian political change that contrasts with the female archetypes in the Theatre of Catastrophe who are 'hope-less'.

The Maenad and tragic dissolution

In her critique of the patriarchal prejudices of theatre's history, Sue-Ellen Case argues that at the very emergence of theatrical art the female is excluded when the male becomes the 'actor/dramatic subject':

The rise of drama, in the context of the Athenian state festivals dedicated to Dionysos, places theatre securely within this new patriarchal institution of gender wars. Theatre must be gender-specific to the male and enact the suppression of real women and the creation of the new 'Woman'. The maenads (the female celebrants in the

Dionysian festivals) must dance into oblivion, while the satyrs (the male celebrants) must become the first choruses of the new drama.

(Case 1988, p. 10)

Although the male controls the writing and performance of tragedy, the cult of Dionysus beyond the theatre seems to have been dominated by female worshippers (as expressed in Euripides' *Bacchae*). Even within the theatre space the many strong willed female protagonists threaten social stability in their challenge to male rule (as discussed with the exemplum of Clytemnestra). In his study of Dionysiac poetics and Euripides' the *Bacchae* Charles Segal notes the absence of the female perspective in Nietzsche's model, 'what is missing from Nietzsche's discussion [...] is a consideration of the feminine in relation to both Dionysus and Apollo' (Segal 1997, p. 158). Segal addresses this imbalance in his analysis of *Bacchae*:

The vehemence of Pentheus's resistance to Dionysus and the close association of Dionysus with women in the play together constitute a remarkable insight into the weaknesses of that Apollonian view of self and world that has come to dominate Western consciousness. "This structure of consciousness," to quote James Hillman, "has never known what to do with the dark material, and passionate part of itself, except to cast it off and call it Eve." [...] In setting women and Dionysus together against the king and his rigid definition of the city, the *Bacchae* forms a kind of quintessential tragedy.

(Segal 1997, p. 158-159)

In his study of the primacy of the female worshipper in Dionysian religion, Kraemer notes how sanity (that can be equated with social norms and order) is overturned by the insanity of divine madness:

In the many myths of the introduction of the worship of Dionysus, including those represented by Euripides' play, the reversal of sanity and insanity predominates. Those who yield to the divine madness of Dionysiac possession are the truly sane, while those who resist the holy insanity are truly insane. Those who accept the call of the god and surrender to the temporary possession suffer no harm, while those who struggle against the god invoke a second level of possession far more dangerous than the first. It is insane to be sane, sane to be insane.

(Kraemer 1979, p. 67)

Dionysus as a god of sexual ecstasy and death, both forces of subjective dissolution, fuses these two elements in the vortex of the tragic space. By excluding the female from the formalising Apollonian elements of writing and performing, she is pushed into the realm of the other and is seen to represent a force that threatens to collapse this subjectivity. The Maenad's dance into oblivion makes her correlative to Dionysian dissolution, which is a disturbing feature of tragedy. The literal tearing apart of Pentheus's body, in Euripides'

Bacchae, by his maenad mother in a Dionysian trance, acts as a powerful symbol of how Apollonian male subjectivity is fragmented by the female gendered Dionysian force of tragedy.

In Barker there is clearly a preoccupation with the female ('the one') as a force of amorality and ideological disintegration. Sometimes the female is herself clearly positioned as the protagonist whose behaviour and actions disrupt social stability, as is the case with Galactia in *Scenes from an Execution* and Skinner in *The Castle*. This finds a parallel with Greek tragic protagonists who also generate such disruption such as Clytemnestra, Antigone, Electra and Medea. The most common model in Barker's plays is to have a male protagonist (Apollonian subject) who is increasingly transfixed by a female antagonist (Dionysian other). This antagonist further disrupts a subjectivity already disorientated by a catastrophic context and pulls him further from rational stability, into ecstasy and towards death. I have already examined how a careful reading of Barker's *Death, The One and the Art of Theatre* seems to suggest this model or archetype of 'the one' is coterminous with tragedy's movement beyond meaning and towards 'the end of the world.'¹⁶³

This reading has no clear parallel in extant Greek tragedy but can perhaps be glimpsed in Homeric poetry where Odysseus's stable (married) self is threatened by the seduction of various female beings (Circe, Calypso and the Sirens). Odysseus of course resists the seductive dissolution of his

¹⁶³ There are a few inversions of this model in Barker but they are rare. One example is *A Hard Heart* (1992) where the highly rational female military genius Riddler (Apollonian subject) finds herself eventually seduced by the vagrant Seemore. At the close of the play Riddler observes 'My fleshed usurped my mind ... Desire played its old havoc with Reason' (Barker 1992, p. 44).

subjectivity. Euripides' *Bacchae* follows a related pattern with the young male subject Pentheus being seduced by the effeminate Dionysus with the promise of spying on the female Maenads (one of whom is his mother suggesting a Freudian dimension similar to Orestes and Oedipus). Pentheus' sexual experience is short lived as he is torn apart by the Maenads. The extant tragedy that is specifically preoccupied with the destructive and disordering aspects of intense sexuality is Euripides' *Hippolytus*. However, unlike Barker's dramas, the male protagonist is destroyed *indirectly* by sexual desire in that it is his stepmother Phaedra whose overwhelming level of sexual desire results in her suicide. It is then Phaedra's death and her accusation of rape that lead to Hippolytus' death rather than him being sexually attracted to her. As Aphrodite explains in the prologue, it is because he has insulted and rejected her, 'Calls me the most pernicious of the heavenly powers; He abhors the bed of love; marriage he renounces' (Euripides 1953, p. 28), that Hippolytus must be punished. The suggestion then is that it is Hippolytus' own deep sexual repression that results in his destruction by the explosive powers of sexual desire. As with Pentheus, his rejection and repression of the irrational forces of sexual desire lead to his destruction. Pentheus, unlike Hippolytus, is eventually overcome with sexual desire once the god possesses him.

The equation of the female (Maenad) with Dionysus pervades the Athenian tragic space. It is an unstable and amoral space of inversion and disruption where women can take on the roles of men, often with destructive effect. Men are subsequently pushed into a more female position. I have shown already how the liminal space of tragedy has clear parallels with the middle stage of

the ritual process. Where ritual allows a temporary inversion of order as a means to magnify difference before reaggregation, tragedy is not always so definitive in its closure (for example in Euripides' *Medea*, *Orestes* and *Herakles*). Tragedy as a ritual process that has drastically failed is a crucial element of Barker's tragedy, and one that he seeks to further intensify. Barker's increase in the use of sexual ecstasy in tragedy heightens the power of the female within the Dionysian. In Barker's drama we see both the appropriation of classical tragedy combined with an injection of the twentieth century preoccupation with sexual desire and political radicalism. The result is a tragedy that emphasises aspects of the Dionysian tragic field, aspects that are still observable in extant Attic tragedy.

The destruction of domestic order

I shrink from the domestic in my theatre, in any form.

(Barker in Milling 2011, p. 220)

In a collection of essays entitled *Masks of Dionysus* (1993) two of the contributors make a related case for the maenad being a pervading image and therefore definition of the female in tragedy. They show how the term is used as a metaphor or description for female characters in many of the extant plays of Greek tragedy. Renate Schlesier in the first of the two essays examines the maenadic traits of Clytemnestra, Deianira and Phaedra (Schlesier 1993, p. 103-114) and Seaford looks at Antigone, Evadne, Iole and

Cassandra (Seaford 1993, p.119-128). Seaford presents a particularly careful argument in his essay 'Destroyer of the Household' and shows how the maenad in myth contrasts with and threatens the idea of the 'yoked' or domesticated female in Greek society. Where the premarital ritual involves the female temporarily escaping into nature before she is then brought back to civilisation and then married and integrated into society, the mythic or imagined maenad, including married women, abandons society for the raw immersion in nature and dissolution of self and therefore civilisation that defines the Dionysian ecstatic state. This rejection of domesticity and marriage is particularly emphasised by the murder of their own children and Seaford uses the example of Agave in *Bacchae* to illustrate this when he writes: 'the maenad's sacrifice of her offspring renders the disruption of her household irreversible. It expresses and confirms the permanence of her departure from it' (Seaford 1993, p. 124). Seaford, however, goes on to argue that at the moment the murder is realised – the moment the mother returns to a rational state – is the moment they are also excluded from the pre-civilised realm of the Dionysian thiasos, and therefore detached from both previous communities: 'Between the conflicting collectivities of thiasos on the one hand and Thebes on the other she is finally isolated' (Seaford 1993, p. 124).

For Barker, the theme of infanticide or serious rejection and neglect of offspring (for example in *The Ecstatic Bible*, *The Bite of the Night* and *The Castle*) has a similar purpose in signifying serious and in the case of murder irreversible rejection of the household. This is consistent with Barker's radical challenge to normativity and he seems to be maintaining tragedy's maenadic

destruction of order – the female as violent subverter of marriage and the family, a microcosm of the wider social order – as an instrument to dismantle contemporary ideologies. The use of a female ‘other’ as this instrument allows for sexual desire to operate significantly unfettered in this vacuum (as discussed elsewhere in the study). This same sexual fascination with a female character who has positioned herself beyond society’s moral and political boundaries, is the sexual fascination the legalist Pentheus has for the maenads he strives so hard to control.

The rejection of domesticity is a common starting point in Barker’s drama, and expressed in texts close to the emergence of the theatre of catastrophe. We have already seen (in Chapter 2) how Savage in *The Bite of Night* (1985) rejects his family as a necessary step towards truth and before initiating this separation he shows his contempt for the domestic life:

SAVAGE: I woke in the night. I woke in the night and the sky was purple with the bruise of cities. I thought of avenues where they sleep the sleep of family love, the pillowcase, the nightdress, the twitching of the poodle. **You call that life?**

(Barker 1998, p. 14)

Seaford argues that the maenadic ecstasy both initiates and is created by murder in Greek myth and literature: ‘Bacchic frenzy may be imagined either as a cause or as a result of slaughter’ (Seaford 1993, p. 131). In Barker’s

theatre the ecstatic female can also generate acts of murder and destruction that destroys domestic and political order. This makes them the focus of both intense resentment and intense desire, as is the case with Helen of Troy in *The Bite of the Night* and in Gertrude in *Gertrude – The Cry*.

The Maenad in *Hamlet: Gertrude – The Cry*

In *Gertrude – The Cry* (2000), Barker's portrayal of Gertrude surpasses the immorality of all the tragic antagonists before her in her relentless drive for an ecstasy that is fuelled by a betrayal and murder of husband(s) and her own children. She therefore incorporates and concentrates the darkest elements of Clytemnestra, Lady Macbeth, Medea and, of course, Shakespeare's Gertrude. Barker's own enthusiasm for this play may well lie in the fact that it is one of his clearest and most concentrated attempts to explore sexual ecstasy beyond and generated by the violent transgression of core elements of social morality. Gertrude's cry is the wild cry of the maenad in a sexual ecstasy that is utterly and terribly free from civilising constraints. However, unlike the de-individuated maenad, Gertrude is able to express her experiences with Apollonian precision, a clear example of Barker's tragic and Nietzschean fusion of the Dionysian and the Apollonian. In her analysis of sexual ecstasy in Barker's plays, Karoline Gritzner, who uses Gertrude as a key example, makes an observation that shows this distinction from full Dionysian de-individuating ecstasy:

A conventional idea about sexuality – the idea of the annihilation of consciousness in the sexual act – is overturned and the characters engage in erotic games of seduction in which the reaching of sexual climax is no longer the exclusive aim.

(Gritzner 2005, p. 103)

Rabey's analysis of Gertrude also identifies the significant individuating drive in Gertrude, defining her as a female expression of Nietzsche's Übermensch:

Gertrude depicts the mature woman as a sexual existentialist heroine, in the Nietzschean sense of possessing the will to overcome her surroundings and her self – a woman who says 'yes' to everything questionable and terrible, defiant of a resentful majority who prefer to be only half-alive and who sneer at those who choose you live dangerously, conducting experiments in living beyond the usual obligations (of family, class, nation and gender).

(Rabey 2009, p. 171)

Although I would agree with this assessment I would also add that female spirituality and ecstasy are not part of Nietzsche's male centred perspective, a limitation of his assessment of Attic tragedy, and therefore aspects of Gertrude's spirituality may reside in mythic areas that Nietzsche overlooked. I would, therefore, emphasise the classical and tragic conception of the

maenad as the origin for the frenzied and sexual aspect of Gertrude's character, with the ancient tragic protagonist (who is related to the maenad) providing the precursor for her Apollonian individuation. Therefore, significant religious and theatrical strands expressed in Gertrude's character originate in Attic tragedy, in addition to Nietzsche's formulations and influence. Elizabeth Sakellaridou's reflects on the influence of archaic and pagan divinity on Barker's drama, singling out *Gertrude – The Cry* as a clear example, where 'references to an untraceable divinity and to ancient cries and griefs from a dark beyond become remarkably dense and ominous' (Sakellaridou 2006, p. 169), which in my reading of the spirituality expressed in this text would be maenadism. This can be seen in the parallels with this play and the *Bacchae*, the quintessential tragedy that most clearly presents Dionysian and maenadic spirituality.

In *Gertrude – The Cry* there is a shift from the archetypal Barkerian female from the antagonist position to that of protagonist, with others shifted into the antagonist role. Central among the antagonists is her son Hamlet who as with Shakespeare's original is presented as an adolescent struggling with the passage to adulthood. His father's death has initiated this process of transformation which he recognises can only result in a new self: 'My father is to blame / Tomorrow / A different man me' (Barker 2006, p. 90). His antagonistic role is clearly expressed in his rejection of the Barkerian search for a religion of sexuality, 'If God meant cunt to be a religion I think He would not have situated it between a woman's legs would He?' (Barker 2006, p. 145). However, like Shakespeare's Hamlet and Pentheus he seems to be

both revolted and fascinated by sexual desire, including that of his mother. This is most clearly visible, as with Pentheus, shortly before his own death, as the erotic and thanatic converge as they so often do in Barker's work. Hamlet is fixated on his mother in her high heels:

HAMLET: [...] (*He passes around GERTRUDE, studying.*)

By this perverse and extreme elevation of the heel your posture is so tilted by the shift of gravity a stranger unacquainted with our habits would howl with ridicule [...] Be barefoot now

[...]

(*GERTRUDE is defiant. With a gesture of self-assertion she slips the gown from her shoulders and lets it fall to the floor. She is naked before HAMLET. His gaze does not falter.*)

The world is full of things I do not understand

Hamlet's line about not understanding the world, which is repeated at other times in the play, emphasises the limits of his moral and rational worldview to comprehend the irrational forces of ecstasy. A similar limitation expressed by Euripides' through Pentheus. Where the fatal encounter of mother and son diverges from *Bacchae* is that Agave's ecstatic murder of her son is in a delusional trance where she is fully outside of herself, believing her son to have been a lion cub, whereas Gertrude maintains full awareness of the reality of her son dying from poison before her, despite her terrible complicity in this murder and the terrible cry it exerts from her. This conscious awareness around the extremity of the cry supports Gritzner's observation

about Barker's avoidance of a focus purely on the annihilation of consciousness in ecstasy.

Barker's own inspiration for this play stems from his childhood experience of listening to his mother's sexual cry in the next room and being pained by the distress she seemed to be under:

As a child he heard sexual cries through the cardboard wall... his bed lay against it and in the darkness he fretted that she was ill or dreaming terrible dreams... why did his father not comfort her...? Always the contradiction wounded him... later the woman's cry became for him a thing of infinite significance as it is for all men more or less... and the philosophical basis for his greatest play...

(Barker 2007, p. 19)

The haunting and mysterious nature of the female ecstatic cry from this early childhood experience seems to find its way into the play, with the true origins of the terrible exclamation painfully difficult to fathom for her lover Claudius, who is desperate to unlock its secrets so he can reproduce it in Gertrude. Claudius's fascination with the cry is also shown to stem from childhood and for him expresses a Dionysian oneness with nature in terms strikingly similar to the Priest's description of Gollancz's godlike influence on the world in *The Ecstatic Bible*:

CLAUDIUS: I REQUIRE THE REAL CRY CASCAN ALL MY LIFE I SOUGHT
IT SINCE I WAS A BOY AND PRIOR YES PRIOR TO
BOYHOOD IT IS THE CRY OF ALL AND EVERY MOVING
THING AND ALL THAT DOES NOT MOVE BONE BLOOD AND
MINERAL

(Barker 2006b, p. 107, emphasis his)

However, its infinitely attractive quality, like the song of the sirens, in fact pulls the victim towards their doom.¹⁶⁴ Gertrude warns Albert, the young Duke of Mecklenburg who is captivated by her, 'Oh idiot I am your death' (Barker 2006b, p. 137), and Claudius finally dies from his encounter with Gertrude and the cry. He has learnt that the cry stems from terrible transgression itself and so eventually all will be its victim: 'The cry's betrayal Claudius [...] and it comes from nowhere else' (Barker 2006b, p. 121).

The opening of the play offers a concentration of the dominant ideas that inform Barker's spiritual aesthetic, as outlined in various parts of this study. The setting is the moment of Hamlet's father's murder, and as in Shakespeare's it takes place in the Orchard. The focus here, however, is immediately on Gertrude's sexuality where she copulates with Claudius in view of the dying king. As he dies and they climax their cries mingle, offering a

¹⁶⁴ The ghost of the child Astyanax in Barker's *N/A Sad Kissing* reflects on the ecstatic cry of his mother Andromache, expressing a similar mix of fascination and dread: 'A woman's cry is not one thing is it it is not one alone many think it is many do not care to know the forms and contours of a woman's cry if only to spare themselves the pain and bitterness that would surely flow from knowledge of its orders yes you are so horrified to know this even in this there is both high and low [...] It could poison your existence' (Barker 2002c, p. 53).

powerful visual and aural expression of intense and terrible emotions that presents in non-verbal form a fusion of death and sexual ecstasy: '*CLAUDIUS and GERTRUDE couple above the dying man. All three utter, a music of extremes*' (Barker 2006, p.84). This extreme sexual desire enacted at a moment of terrible transgression makes the orchard setting a potential reference to Eden and the removal of fruit from the tree of knowledge, an act by Adam and Eve that initiates humanity's relationship with death. This, therefore, frames the event with a subtle suggestion of biblical transgression: Gertrude, like Eve, has begun a violent and defiant renunciation of the established political and moral order by not only murdering her own husband who is also the king, like Clytemnestra, but using the event to reach a profound sexual climax.

Immediately following this terrible encounter, Cascan, Gertrude's servant, enters and offers a reflection on her most recent ecstatic cry, confirming its profundity and how its unique intensity suggests that death is inevitably near. Cascan observes how ecstasy requires ever new limits to be transgressed in order to reach its next expression, 'All ecstasy makes ecstasy go running to a further place' and how this results in an actual or metaphorical end 'Eventually I can't help thinking eventually it lures us over a cliff' (Barker 2006, p. 84). We are reminded here of tragic hubris and its inevitable journey towards self-destruction. This also echoes the maenadic ecstasy that will eventually overrun and destroy social order via the destruction of its fundamental building block, marriage. Gertrude's proximity to the tragic maenad is powerfully clear at the very start of the play in this image of marriage's violent

and sexually transgressive destruction. The ecstasy of this moment, the cry, is then reflected on as something that requires ever more terrible transgressions in order to exist again. In his autobiography Barker singles out this theatrical moment as unique in its effectiveness:

‘[A]s the poisoned king awakes from his sleep – an awakening to death – he sees before his eyes the preposterous act of sex performed by his murderers and emits a final appalling howl which coincides with their desperate love... a cacophony of human extremity that surely must be judged the pinnacle of Barker’s stagecraft...’

(Barker 2007, p. 66)

This powerful non-verbal fusion of ecstasy and death not only echoes and reawakens in concentrated form the irrational force of the maenadic cry, but it is also viewed as a particularly significant achievement by the playwright himself, suggesting his own personal proximity to this aspect of the ancient tragic spirit.

Helen of Troy: the phantom of the ideal female

Although referred to in a number of tragedies, Helen appears as an actual character in three extant plays by Euripides. The image of Helen as dangerously seductive, immoral and manipulative is expressed in Euripides’ *Trojan Women* where she cunningly persuades Menelaus to not kill her

immediately but take her home with him. Hecuba's warning to Menelaus' expresses her dangerous mix of seduction and immorality:

I applaud you, Menelaus, if you kill your wife;
But avoid seeing her, or she will take prisoner
Your tender heart. She captures men's eyes, destroys cities,
Burns houses to the ground, so potent are her spells.
I know her, so do you, and all who have suffered know.

(Euripides 1972, p. 119)

The level of her seduction and subsequent destruction is so powerful it is assumed that magic must be used. We have already seen how the equation of the powerful and immoral female (protagonist) with magical forces is a common trope of Greek tragedy and myth. This negative portrayal of Helen in *The Trojan Women* is clearly in line with the influential tradition of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* where the chorus proclaim:

A woman did all this. One woman.
They called her Helen – that was a prophecy.
Helen the Destroyer.
Not a name but a title.
The bride of the spear's broad blade.
Helen the homicidal.
Epidemic fury

That would possess nations.
Not a face or name but a poison.
To send whole fleets to perdition
As if their captains were madmen –
Chewing and spitting her name –
Helen. The name Helen
Not so much a name as an earthquake
To bounce a city to burning rubble
Not a name but a plague
Spreading scream by scream from city to city,
As houses become tombs.

(Aeschylus 1999, p. 35)

In the *Oresteia*, the extremity of the chorus's attack on Helen helps to set up a fear and hostility towards women – seeing women as Pandora like vessels for evil – that is strengthened and confirmed by the terrible acts of Clytemnestra when she murders her husband later in this play. We have also already seen that Clytemnestra is, like her sister Helen, subtly equated with magic.

However, although Euripides seems in agreement with Aeschylus in his portrayal of Helen in the *Trojan Women*, in his other two extant plays that include Helen as a character, this idea is completely subverted. In Euripides' play *Helen*, we are presented with a completely different version of the myth, or rather we are offered a version that suggests that the Helen in the *Trojan*

Women is in fact a phantom rather than the actual Helen. The play is set in Egypt where Helen has been residing throughout the course of the Trojan War (which has now ended). She explains the situation herself in the prologue. Having narrated the well-known contest of the three goddesses where she is promised to Paris, prince of Troy, by Aphrodite, Helen then sets out how events then differ from what many believe to be the case:¹⁶⁵

But Hera, baulked of her victory over the other goddesses, in her resentment turned the substance of Aphrodite's promise into air. She gave the royal son of Priam for his bride – not me, but a living image compounded of the ether in my likeness. Paris believes that he possesses me: what he holds is nothing but an airy delusion. [...]

The Helen who went to Phrygia as a prize for Troy to defend and the Greeks to fight for – that Helen was not I, only my name. [...] Many souls of men perished for my sake by the river Scamander; and I, the centre of these tragic events, am named with curses, as the betrayer of my husband, who brought upon Greece the pestilence of war.

(Euripides 1972, p. 136)

By Euripides replacing the Trojan Helen with a phantom, he shifts the focus from the cause of war and death from a dangerously seductive actual female who causes terrible grief in man (the Pandora model as it were) to a phantom. This phantom can then be seen as no more than a projection of male desire

¹⁶⁵ The other two contestants in the divine beauty competition were Hera and Athena.

and fears. The source of evil is therefore shifted away from the female and onto the male, with male desire itself appearing as something that needs only a phantom to initiate its terrible drives and desires. In Barker's *The Bite of the Night*, Helen of Troy is also ultimately suggested to be no more than a phantom projection of human subjectivity:

HELEN No Helen but what other people made of her.

(Barker 1998, p. 115)

Clytemnestra – Helen's sister

Clytemnestra differs from Helen in her apparent desire for political control rather than just sexual freedom and immorality: 'The portrait of Clytemnestra in the *Agamemnon* specifically links her independence of thought and action with a desire to rule' (Zeitlin 1978, p. 153). Her proactive ability to kill to attain such a state is also different from Helen, who lets death occur as a result of her actions but does not actively murder. The brutality of Clytemnestra can be seen in Barker's reworking of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, where the passive Gertrude of the original is transformed into the instigator of the murder of her husband (Barker 2006, p. 83) and later collaborates with Claudius in the murder of her own son Hamlet (Barker 2006, p. 158). She is closer to Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth than his Gertrude (who sacrifices herself to try and save Hamlet from being poisoned) although unlike Lady Macbeth she does not fail to murder when the moment arises and does not suffer

nightmares or similar suggestions of guilt and doubt at her actions. Therefore, in some respects Barker's reimagining of Shakespeare's Gertrude bears significant resemblance to Aeschylus's archetypal forming female antagonist Clytemnestra, and the Freudian emotional and moral confusion of the mother and son conflict and anxiety following the father's death reverberates through all three Oedipal dramas. This emotional and sexual complexity is observable in Agamemnon's *Choephoroi* shortly before Orestes murders his mother and thus initiates a process of repression (in Freudian terms) in order to restore the order of the father:

The confrontation between Clytemnestra and Orestes is remarkable for the queen's mingled appeal of maternity and sexual seductiveness; the breast she bares to him (*Cho.* 894-98) has both erotic and nurturant significance. The gesture that momentarily stops him in his tracks is the source of her power over him, the source of all female power. It is the emblem of the basic dilemma posed by the female – the indispensable role of women in fertility for the community of the group by reason of her mysterious sexuality and the potential disruption of that group by its exercise.

(Zeitlin 1978, p. 158)

Clytemnestra's rejection of the mother/son bond conforms to the maenadic behaviour discussed above and Barker's female antagonists, like Clytemnestra, often trouble the social dependency of the female's fertility by

conclusively choosing sexual independence over motherhood. Examples include Gollancz's continual abandonment of her offspring in *The Ecstatic Bible*, Helen murdering her baby because it threatens to interfere with the love for the father (Barker 1998, p. 68) and Gertrude's complicity in the murder of her son Hamlet. Where Barker detracts from the Greek meanadic schema is that it is for a total focus on sexual ecstasy that the Barkerian antagonist rejects her children and conventional social norms rather than communion with the god Dionysus. This parallels Barker's appropriation of Eckhartian mystical theology in that in both instances the obsessive focus on the divine other of the original (Christian God/Dionysus) is transposed to a human sexual partner due to the atheistic worldview of Barker's theatre.

Barker's Helen of Troy and the formation of 'the one'

Barker's *The Bite of the Night* takes as its primary objective the search for Helen of Troy, the female icon of supreme desire and beauty. The epic nature of the play, its exploration of an archetypal female from classical Greek culture, and its significant date before the emergence of the theatre of catastrophe (1986) make the play the obvious choice to examine when considering Barker's tragic theatre's relationship to conceptions of the female in Greek tragedy. Barker's protagonist, Savage, is an academic and a doctor, connecting his search with the legendary Dr Faustus who also conjured Helen from classical antiquity. Faustus's search for Helen provides a significant element in both Marlowe's and Goethe's plays about Faust and Barker is aware of these predecessors. He writes, '*The Bite of the Night*, was not the

first attempt to resuscitate Helen for a modern audience – she appears both in Marlowe and Goethe' (Barker 1997, p. 177). Like Faustus, Savage transgresses normative moral and ideological limitations in a relentless search beyond conventional experience.

The action of the play opens in the ruins of Troy with the wife of Savage using the chaos all around her as an opportunity to flee her domestic commitments in order to find a new life. Savage's wife is Creusa, sharing her name with the wife of Aeneas who, in Virgil's epic, failed to escape the burning city alive. Her ghost warned Aeneas not to search for her but to instead escape with his son (Virgil 2007, p. 53). This opening monologue by Creusa shows Barker's interest in marginalised female characters in myth and history, offering an alternative version of the myth, with Creusa instead of perishing choosing to use the war as a cover for leaving her husband. The name of Savage's wife relates the twentieth century doctor to Aeneas and like Aeneas he also finds himself with father and son in the ruins of Troy. Whereas Aeneas's journey takes him away from Troy to where he will eventually found Rome, Savage decides to remain within the ruins in search of Helen and truth. For Savage his journey, appropriately for the academic, is an internal one. This studies' previous consideration of tragedy as a place in which the dead are resurrected is also pertinent here in that the voice of Creusa's ghost in the *Aeniad* lives again in the theatrical space and shares her terrible experiences of the chaos of this foundational conflict that reverberates through history. A female ghost from the Trojan War is re-imagined so that rather than dying she discovers in the chaos and the ruins an unexpected opportunity for new life in

catastrophe. Her monologue reflects on the terrible and unchecked sexual desire that the war has unlocked in the dissolution of peacetime moral codes:

CREAUSA: Lost in Troy. (Pause.) Listen, getting lost. (Pause.) I walked behind. Wife bearing the food. The flask. The diapers. Wife under the bundle. The clock. The colander. The old man's vests. Through flaming alleys by clots of rapists whose glistening arses caught the light. The chess set and the fruit cake. Wives under soldiers. The flannel and the toothbrushes (Pause.)

Turks in Smyrna

Romans in Carthage

Scots in Calais

Swedes in Dresden

Goths in Buda

Japs in Nanking

Russians in Brandenburg

Unbelted and unbuttoned they thrust their arms into the well of skirt.

I did prefer

I did

To continuing this marriage in another place

Prefer to get lost

The gutters bubbling with semen notwithstanding

The spontaneous stabbings of intoxicated looters

Notwithstanding

I slipped down Trader's Avenue and hid

[...]

Widowhood is grief but also chance

And falls of cities both finishes and starts

(Barker 1998, p. 11-12)

The explosion of sexual desire in chaos, expressed through the image of gutters filled with semen, announces a powerful dimension of Barker's theatre: the emergence of intense sexual desire in a space cleansed of ideology by war and destruction. Creusa, weighted down both literally and metaphorically by the trappings of domesticity in a bundle, finds in this collapsing world her own new desire to flee her life, an expression of unfettered desire that seems to be awakened from her experience of the spontaneous eruption of the violence and the violent sexual acts that surround her. The final line expresses in concentrated form one of the few optimistic elements of Barker's bleak and tragic aesthetic: that tragedy and death open the door to new possibilities.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁶ We are reminded again of the process of (Dionysian) dissolution in Greek mystery cult where terrifying experiences cleanse the initiand of their previous self so that they can enter a new identity. Creusa's rejection of domesticity relates to the meanadic rejection of normal married life.

As well as Creusa there are two other dominant female characters: Helen of Troy and her daughter Gay. I have already suggested how Helen, along with Beatrice in Barker's *Rome*, offers a prototype for the idea of 'the one,' which Barker expounds in *Death, the one and the art of theatre* in 2005. In the earlier text of *The Bite of the Night*, where ideology and subjectivity are foregrounded to an even greater extent than in *Rome*, it could be argued that through Helen we see the first complete emergence and formation of the Barkerian 'the one': the idea of the female personifying a fusion of desire and the absence of ideology and morality. In Nietzschean terms a personification of the Dionysian. In this meditation on one of the most famous mythic women in Western culture, Barker can be seen to forge an archetype that will then recur in his drama in subsequent plays. Here Helen's archetypal and symbolic nature is particularly visible due to the play's concentrated focus on symbolism and ideas over theatre's traditional gravitational pull towards a sense of real time and place and also the use of such a powerful pre-existing and culturally foundational character as the point of exploration. This Barkerian archetype can be seen as the blue print for a number of Barkerian females that fuse amorality with intense beauty, or, rather than external beauty the ideologically transcendent amorality is the cause of the intense attraction they cause in the protagonist and others. In fact this blue print superimposed on a number of characters from myth and history is one of the main activating principals of his re-imagining of these females. Helen's royal status, which as previously noted is, according to Aristotle, a key trait of the tragic protagonist, becomes the model for a number of queens in Barker's theatre.

Near the start of the play Savage puts forward his perspective on the importance of Helen of Troy in a seminar in the ruins of the university with his one remaining student, Hogbin. This seminar seems to initiate the discovery and exploration of the many Troys built on Troy's ruins that comprise the action of the play and as the play develops we see that this fascination and focus on Helen may well be the source of Savage's own spiritual and intellectual odyssey (or at least it is what his odyssey becomes preoccupied with). Savage summarises the cause of the siege of Troy: 'The Trojan War occurred because a married woman lent her body to a stranger. (*Pause.*) That's all for today.' (1998, p. 14). Hogbin objects to this interpretation that reduces such an enormous event as the Trojan War to sexual transgression and instead puts forward a more detailed socio-economic argument that begins: 'The seduction of Helen is a metaphor for the commercial success of the tribes of Asia Minor and the subsequent collapse of the Peloponnesian carrying trade' (Barker 1998, p. 15). Savage's response powerfully expresses his (and Barker's) determination to look beyond the privileging of economics to discover the role of deep sexual longing as a force in human culture and behaviour.¹⁶⁷

SAVAGE: No, it was cunt.

HOGBIN: Cunts the metaphor, trade's the –

SAVAGE: **Helen's cunt.** (*Pause.*)

¹⁶⁷ The character of Hogbin will later become an accountant when his humanist sensibilities make him unable to cope with the darker elements of life in Troy. Barker's hostility towards the power of accountants in the mid 1980s, the middle of Margaret Thatcher's reign, is clear from his 49 Asides for a Tragic Theatre (also written in 1986): 'The accountant is the new censor' (Barker 1989, p. 11).

(Barker 1998, p. 15)

For Barker the use of this word in drama is of particular importance: 'the word 'cunt' operates both as the most extreme notation of abuse and also the furthest reach of desire [...] nothing can stand in for it' (Barker 1989, p. 27). The explosive emotional charge of this word triggers a journey to the beginnings of Western culture (in Homer) in search of intense sexual desire as the force that gives birth to war and ideology.

This idea of Helen as desire as the birth of Western culture is also expressed in the play's Second Interlude, located just before the start of Act 3, where the archaeologist Schliemann, another academic who is in search of Troy and Helen, explains the reasons for his search. Schliemann's summary of his own intentions and discoveries offer a view of Western culture's emergence that can also serve as a model for the play's perspective and discoveries:

SCHLIEMANN: I came in search of Troy. I came in search of Helen's bed. Why? Because I am a European. And Europe begins in Helen's bed. But could I find Troy? I found Troy upon Troy upon Troy.
[...]
The Asiatics took Helen into Asia. The Europeans took Helen back again. At that moment they became a culture!

Set out here is the idea that European culture is intrinsically bound up with the possession (or the repossession) of Helen. We are therefore offered an Eve like model of how female transgression (*she lent* her body) initiates human culture. As with the Pandora myth, it is the actions of a dangerously seductive female releasing chaos that leads to a new era, in this case birthing European civilisation.

In an essay on the value of the 'antique text', Barker further explains his interest in Helen that informs this play: 'there lies at the heart of the Trojan War the appalling secret of the erotic ... for it is Helen alone that accounts for the destruction of so many cities, and Helen alone who drives the Trojans to a collective suicide' (Barker 1997, p. 177). In *The Bite of the Night*, the establishment and fall of the different Troys (ideologies) on the ruins of the original Troy operate in dialectic with the Dionysian force of Helen, who stands for forbidden and terrible desires. The attribution of deception and amorality onto a female of high status as a symbol of terrible desire is a trope that Barker acquires from Classical Greece and then engages deeply with in *The Bite of Night*.

Helen's opening speech in the play (p. 21) describes the plight of academic documents in the siege and therefore suggests the transience, frailty and even irrelevance of intellectual pursuits, that is particularly emphasised when a civilisation is in a state of war, 'Fevered note-takers and every scrap was burned by troops, every leaf!' Helen positions herself at a polar opposite to these academics, 'I am philistine and loveless ...' perhaps meaning that her

deep and relentless cynicism towards culture and ideology makes her impossible to be viewed affectionately by others.

These views are expressed to the leader of the Greek army, Fladder (Menelaus in the original myth), and during the speech she invites him to hit her in order to silence her: 'Do hit me if you want to, others did' and then later in the speech, 'Burst my face or I shall go on talking' (p. 21). Therefore, Helen is presented in her first appearance as someone who continually reveals unwanted truths. The invitation to her husband, a political leader, to silence her as others have, draws attention to a dynamic that operates throughout the play, where order is unravelled and challenged by her existence and as a result this order responds using violent suppression.

Fladder's indirect response to her speech is to emphasise the depravity Helen inspired in the imagination of the common soldier and how he too was drawn to this powerful and sordid imaginative conjecture:

Helen fucks the wounded in the wards, they said. (*Pause.*) Which aroused me. Shamefully. (*Pause.*) Or dogs, some ventured to suggest. Which aroused me. Shamefully. (*Pause.*) The filthy infantry. The long lick of their dreams. (*Pause.*) I crept to the canvas in the dew, sodden and erect. To eavesdrop what malpractice their knotted maleness would inflict on you. (*Pause.*) Our suffering. Our ecstasy.

(Barker 1998, p. 21)

Fladder, her husband and the political leader, is drawn into the sordid fantasies of the soldiers, fantasies of unfettered desire and imagination that challenge and excite the imagination of Fladder. His attempt to express the complex emotions Helen inspires suggests a confusing mixture of emotions created by Helen and the subsequent war. They are described as being in a state of intense feelings that is perhaps both suffering and ecstasy. This heightened condition of powerful emotions, suffering blurred with desire, seems to be his summary of the heightened state experienced by those in the war: amongst so much loss of life because of Helen and subsequent hate directed at her, there is also the eruption of transgressive erotic fantasies about her. She is both intensely hated and desired. Fladder is still very much affected by Helen and in the ruins of the city she is an even more visible beacon that attracts hate and desire in all.

We have already seen how the idea of Helen remaining a terrible object of desire for Fladder/Menelaus, even after the war, is expressed in Euripides' *Trojan Women*, where Hecuba warns Menelaus not to take her on his ship: 'She captures men's eyes, destroys cities [...] and all who have suffered know' (Euripides 1954, p. 119). Barker's version of Helen seems to suggest that the suffering, hate and lust are somehow connected in their intensity, possibly symbiotic in the production of the ecstasy she generates. When Fladder asks Savage to 'Spell agony' and he responds 'H – E – L – E' he echoes the chorus in Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* by associating the very name of Helen with misery and suffering. Agony is Helen and this encompasses the

suffering felt due to the desire for her and the pain of loss due to the destruction and death she generates.

In this initial encounter with Helen, Barker also references the myth strand utilised by Euripides in some of his portrayals of Helen that the Helen taken to Troy was only a phantom and the real Helen was transported by the gods to Egypt.¹⁶⁸ Helen as ethereal and an illusion is also the Helen encountered in Marlowe's *Faust*, a conjuration by the underworld that shows Faustus and the other scholars what they most desire to see: the epitome of female beauty:

FIRST SCHOLAR: Master Doctor Faustus, since our conference about fair ladies - which was the beautifullest in all the world - we have determined with ourselves that Helen of Greece was the admirablest lady that ever lived. Therefore, Master Doctor, if you will do us that favour, as to let us see that peerless dame of Greece whom all the world admires for majesty, we should think ourselves much beholding unto you.

(Marlowe V.i 1276-1282)¹⁶⁹

The idea of Helen as a phantom projection conjured by supernatural forces (Zeus and Lucifer) with the intention of deceiving man with an illusion of what they desire, is a narrative that implies a high level of deception in desire in that the ultimate idea of desire is in fact an empty illusion. Sexual desire is

¹⁶⁸ Egypt and this version of the myth is the setting and narrative background for Euripides' *Helen*.

¹⁶⁹ *Doctor Faustus* A-text (1604)

therefore portrayed as being informed by deception or self-deception. It is a particularly shocking idea in Euripides' version of the Trojan War in that everyone died for a lie. The unhappiness caused by the highly desirable female that is a deception, also relates to the Greek myth of the first woman where Pandora's *raison d'être* is to punish man through her creation of painful desire *within* them. Fladder, in *The Bite of the Night*, shows his awareness of this perspective in his rejection of a cold materialist focus on Helen:

But who'd want knowledge if knowledge meant I could simply look at
her, and looking see only a hundred pounds of flesh, which by virtue of
its shape defines her beautiful?

(Barker 1998, p. 28)

Prompted by Fladder, Savage begins to search within himself for the source of Helen's power. His conclusion is that 'She's all that's unforgivable!' This conclusion has a level of coherence with the other ideas of Helen we have considered from Greek literature and Marlowe that Helen exists outside the parameters of social conformity and is a terrible threat to this order. In Homer and Greek Tragedy she (or her phantom) is the force that drives two powerful civilisations into a terrible conflict with each other resulting in Troy being destroyed completely. In Marlowe she is what Faustus requests in order to maintain his alignment with Lucifer: 'That I might have unto my paramour / That heavenly Helen which I saw of late, / Whose sweet embracings may extinguish clean / Those thoughts that do dissuade me from my vow, / And

keep mine oath I made to Lucifer' (Marlowe V.i 1351-1354)).¹⁷⁰ David Wootton examines the complex moment when Faust kisses Helen in Marlowe's play:

It is Marlowe's choice to have sex mark the dramatic crisis of the play, and Marlowe's choice to leave us profoundly unclear as how we are to understand the sex between Faustus and Helen. All we seem to be able to conclude is that there is something enormously powerful, demonic, deadly and divine about sex itself. Christian faith, if it involves forswearing sexual passion, would seem to involve a terrible sacrifice'

(Wootton 2005, p. xviii)

We can see in what Wootton describes as 'the last play on the English stage to deal directly with religion' (Wootton 2005, p. xiv) the use of Helen of Troy to express intense sexual desire as an alternative and forbidden form of spiritual ecstasy to Christian faith. Helen's position outside the system she threatens becomes a defining feature in Barker, and like the witch in Medieval and Renaissance Europe she is the outsider that cannot be appropriated – forgiven – within the system. She is what cannot be contained by the prevailing hegemony.

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Where Barker diverges from earlier portrayals is in his cooption of Helen as a force outside social order specifically as a means to unravel this order. This is due to the anti-ideological and anti-moral intentions of his work. The idea of Helen as deception and warning in previous versions becomes a useful source of political and ideological subversion in *The Bite of the Night*, as will subsequent Helen like characters in Barker's Theatre of Catastrophe. The definition of Helen as 'all that's unforgivable' genders the concept in a similar way that 'atrocious' is gendered female (though in an even more abstract way) in Barker's opera *Terrible Mouth* (see Chapter 3). However, where *The Bite of the Night's* very non-naturalistic and non-dramatic structure allows Helen to remain partially in the realm of symbolic representation, an idea rather than an individual, in Barker's later dramas this archetype continues to exist within his drama (and arguably defined as 'the one' in 2005) but is placed within far more concrete dramatic worlds. This may explain the otherworldly dimension of many of Barker's female antagonists and also helps to explain why they are so often consistently detached and amoral to a high degree. Of course Barker is not attempting to create realistic characters in a naturalistic sense in his Theatre of Catastrophe. However, the female antagonists, when contrasted with Barker's male protagonists and other characters, are presented as significantly heightened and mysterious in their level of detachment and self-control. Elisabeth Angel-Perez identifies an affinity with the female Barker characters I would define as 'the one': 'Gertrude is kin to the Queen of *Knowledge and A Girl*, or to Judith or to Algeria' (Angel-Perez 2013, p. 43). She observes how in the case of Gertrude and the Queen from Snow White, this 'paradigmatic' characterisation is employed to alter the focus of the

narratives away from their original protagonist (Hamlet and Snow White): 'catastrophic disorientation proceeds by moving the margins into the centre, and conversely the centre out to the margins, in order to promote the tragic where one does not expect it' (Angel-Perez 2013, p. 43). The similarity of these characters to each other across a number of plays, compounded by the fact that the same actress, Victoria Wicks, has performed a number of these related characters in The Wrestling School productions, enhances their aura of otherness and status as a Barkerian archetype.¹⁷¹ Rabey refers to the clear influence Wicks has on the characterisation of what he refers to as the 'mature woman as a sexual existential heroine' (Rabey 2009, p. 171) and how 'the female lead role seems conceived for, and/or inspired by, the distinctive performative powers of Victoria Wicks (Rabey 2009, p. 276). Barker himself describes Wicks' performance style in his autobiography, offering a useful insight into not only her performance but also the supremely detached nature of the roles she plays:

He warned her – unnecessarily because she knew it by intuition – that in playing his roles she would never be loved by a public, because the public could never pity her, and in any case tragedy dispensed with pity and achieved its effects by other means. No audience would ever identify with the roles played by Victoria Wicks, but identification was a blind alley, and her admirers talked instead of her inspiration, itself an

¹⁷¹ Wicks joined The Wrestling School to play Helena in Barker's (*Uncle*) *Vanya* in 1996. She played Placida (A Perfect Liar) in *Ursula* (1998), Gollancz in *The Ecstatic Bible* (2000), [Queen] Turner in *He Stumbled* (2000), [Queen] Gertrude in *Gertrude – The Cry* (2002), [Queen] Algeria in *The Fence in Its Thousands Year* (2005). She also played The Queen in *Knowledge and A Girl: The Snow White Case* (2000) for BBC Radio 4, directed by Howard Barker. Note that in four of these seven plays Wicks plays a queen, adding to the continuity of the archetype she exemplifies.

element of bravery. She abolished sentimentality from her performance, she coaxed nothing from her public but dared it to admire her through the outrage it felt at what she said ... the ecstasy she carried in her performance was entirely appropriate to the content of Barker's speeches... she perhaps played defiance and sexuality in combination more powerfully than any actress of the time.

(Barker 2007, p. 52)

Although in general Barker's characters resist easy identification, Barker seems to be suggesting here that the roles played specifically by Wicks, combined with her powerful performance style, exemplified the Barkerian antagonist, the archetype primarily forged in the character of Helen in *The Bite of the Night*. Like Helen, the characters played by Wicks and the way she played them concentrated together defiance and sexuality in a characterisation deliberately distancing (in terms of empathy) for the audience.¹⁷²

Helen's challenge to the system is in how she chooses to live rather than in attempting to change the political system. She does not herself propose a new model for Troy. This is due to her purist position against the limiting nature of any ideology, a position Barker announces for his theatre two years after this play was written (Barker in Marks, 1988). Even when she appears to

¹⁷² In the RSC production in 1988 Helen of Troy was played by Diane Fletcher. Two reviewers commented on the detached nature of her performance: 'Diane Fletcher as the dismembered Helen watching her limbs gradually disappear with stoic grace' (Billington 1988, p. 1194); 'Diane Fletcher plays Helen with a power and magnificence that relates the role directly [...] to classical notions of stoical endurance' (Coveney 1988, p. 1227).

conform to the latest dictates, the other characters are able to perceive in her a deep-seated non-conformity that appears to be grounded in a relentlessly nihilistic worldview. This occurs during her clash with Creusa who is the initiator of the recently founded Mum's Troy (Barker 1998, p. 59), the most female focused of the twelve Troys that form on the ruins of the original city. Her attack on Helen is born out of a frustration at Helen's undermining of the new ideologies. Mum's Troy holds up the apparent purity, simplicity, innocence and pre-rationality of the baby as a model for social order and asserts the importance of all human life as the primary concern: 'Innocence is not without authority! Nor does purity go unarmed! The meaningless violence of Old Troys is replaced by the liberating force of pre-articulacy' (Barker 1998, p. 67). Mum's Troy can be connected with humanist and democratic notions of equality and the right to life. Helen's challenge to Mum's Troy takes the disturbing form of murdering her own child with her breast: a terrible act that contradicts the very basis of the new political order. In her explanation for her actions, Helen's murder of her child challenges the democratic belief that all life should be preserved and she also challenges the liberal humanist position that in their initial or natural state the human being (as baby) is essentially good: 'They hate [...] hate wordlessly' (Barker 1998, p. 69). Helen's acidic Dionysian character, that continually and relentlessly unravels Apollonian order and meaning, is clearly expressed in this clash with the maternal ideology of Mum's Troy. After having her legs removed as a punishment for her actions, Helen apparently conforms to the tenets of Mum's Troy, but Creusa, the founder of the system, still doubts her obedience and sees in Helen a threat to all order:

CREUSA: I think even as you say a thing you know it to be false. You know it, and yet you say it. I think you are the enemy of all Troys no matter whose. I think you believe nothing and therefore ought to suffer everything imagination might conceive. **I am a better person than you.**

(Barker 1998, p. 74)

However, immediately after this attack in which Helen responds with full agreement, Creusa shows how despite her anger Helen is of irresistible attraction to her. What is more, the desire for Helen even causes Creusa to lose all emotions for her son and therefore her attraction to Helen undermines the basis of the very political system she has established:

CREUSA: I cannot resist you. I, the better person, cannot resist you, why? [...] I long for you, and my son is earth, is pebble.

(Barker 1998, p. 74)

Thus, the Dionysian force of Helen is clearly shown as the gravitational centre of the play, a black hole that other characters try and evade through establishing ideologies but which they are ultimately drawn towards. Helen's terrible defiance of the mother/child bond through murdering her baby recalls the Maenadic women of Greek tragedy and myth whose divinely inspired

ecstasy places them momentarily beyond this bond and allows them to murder their own children, as Agave kills Pentheus in *The Bacchae*. Although Savage defines Helen as 'all that's unforgivable' it is the erotic power of these continual transgressions that further define Helen. Therefore, Helen is a symbol of not transgression *per se* but a fusion of transgression and eroticism. This can be seen when Helen, echoing Savage's early analysis of the cause of the Trojan War, argues for sexual desire as the clearest *raison d'être* for death in war.

HELEN: But if they died for Eros, where's the tragedy in that? In other wars they'll scream for flags, sometimes for banks, or even books, I've heard. No, cunt's a worthy cause as slaughters go.

(Barker 1998, p, 103)

We can see in this speech an expression of what will be increasingly a defining feature of Barker's then emerging Theatre of Catastrophe: that Eros is the force that should be embraced over others. In the theatre of catastrophe, belief systems centred on national identity, economics and religious, philosophical and political texts will be shown to be negatively coercive forces that are best unravelled and discarded in order to allow erotic desire to dominate an individual's spiritual life.

Helen's daughter and the formation of ideology

In *The Bite of the Night* a child is born of the two main characters and Gay can be seen, in this symbolic play, as presenting a political and ideological response to the nihilism and amorality of her mother Helen. Unlike Helen, Gay does not respond to the trials of existence in a detached and resigned manner but in contrast is determined to assert a significant level of control over existence and others. This need for control stems from her horror at the very indifference of nature:

GAY: Because I know, and always knew that, to be born was absurd. So absurd that to be angry was equally absurd. And just as being angry was absurd, so caring was absurd. Which left me only – ecstasy. Not my mother's ecstasy, not the fucking out of consciousness – but the different ecstasy of perpetuating absurdity because what else can you do when you are the victim of a joke but participate in the joke and so outjoke the joker? [...] I applauded all the blind and inexorable circumstances that brought life into this sticky planet. More life! And more life yet!

[...]

If only it were malice! The surge of mud that – the earthquakes that – the flood that suffocates the infant and the murderer. If only it were malice ... but it isn't ... how intolerable ... How impossible to assimilate ...

(Barker 1998, p. 77)

In contrast to her mother's use of sexual ecstasy as a response to the meaninglessness of existence, Gay counters with a determined and creative challenge to the absurdity of nature that emerges later in the play in the form of political systems. She has dispensed with anger and compassion so views other human life from this detached perspective, as merely pawns in her political schemes. Gay is not attracted by the response of sexual ecstasy, presumably a reaction against her mother's actions, and so she embraces a mission to produce more life but one that is not tied to any ethical controls. Like nature's drive towards life she refuses to be restricted by morality and so her actions are ruthlessly based on her own control and goals. The ecstasy of creating and enforcing an ideology can be seen on the psychic level as the formation of some form of order that allows for sanity amid the chaos of existence. This is suggested by Gay's determination to remain sane despite encountering horror:

GAY: The amount of killing I have seen! [...] I have seen the lot, I can assure you, and I thought myself, Gay, they want you to go **insane**. So I decided there and then I would not. **I declined to go insane.**

(Barker 1998, p. 28)

The name Gay suggests a positive and upbeat personality and this seems to be her determined response despite or because of her encounter with

horror.¹⁷³ The determined nature of her positivity and the contrasting brutal acts she employs when she deems necessary, present an uncomfortable disparity between actions and persona. The fact that she is a political leader suggests this disparity is a political comment, the implication being that 1) systems and values that appear to be positive are coercive and repressive and 2) these systems are a response to a horror that they attempt to shield. Barker notes how the ruined city of Troy is pertinent to a modern audience when he insists, ‘for a twentieth-century chronicler, living in the aftermath of the destruction of Dresden, Warsaw or Berlin, the layering of cultures has a keen resonance’ (Barker 1997, p. 178), and perhaps the character of Gay presents a political tendency to veil over the horror of history so that new systems can be fully embraced with potential doubt reduced. Her hostility for all that her mother represents is expressed in an outburst:

HOMER: If I had not made Helen, Helen would not have been disfigured
 ... (*Pause.*) But Helen had to be made ...

GAY: **She did not have to be made!** (*She claps her hands to her mouth.*) Oh, I – [...] Really, that was so – Outburst in defiance of all – All right now – (*She is straight and still.*) Still as, and level

¹⁷³ The meaning of the name Gay, ‘characterised by cheerfulness or pleasure’ (*The Concise Oxford Dictionary* 1990, p. 488) bears a relationship to the meaning of the name of Helen’s mythic male offspring, Euphorion ‘the abundant’, who was conceived with Achilles after they had both entered the immortal realm (Luke 2008, p. xli). Euphorion also appears as the son of Helen in Goethe’s play, but this time the father is Faust. Barker is probably conscious of this tradition when naming the offspring of Helen and the Faustian Doctor Savage. The connection is further strengthened by Gay’s description of herself at one point as ‘Euphoric Gay!’ (Barker 1998, p. 49) Both the names Gay and Euphorion suggest hope and wellbeing, but for Barker this name is ironic because Gay in fact represents a dystopian vision of repressive and coercive ideologies that only appear optimistic on the surface. For Goethe Euphorion was the ‘personification of poetry’ (Goethe in Luke 2008, p. xlvi).

as, the strand of sand when tides have all receded ... there ...
(*She smiles, coolly.*) Euphoric Gay.

(Barker 1998, p. 49)

Whereas from the point of view of the poet (i.e. Barker's position), Helen – 'all that's unforgivable' – had to be expressed; for Gay, Helen's existence is only problematic and it would be better if she were expunged. Gay immediately checks herself because her response reveals the level of control she requires. Although she ends with an almost tautological expression of wellbeing - 'Euphoric Gay' - the repression this is founded on has been revealed.

In *The Bite of the Night* it is Gay and her father Savage who generate the policies and regulations of the various political systems. However, the difference is that Savage engages with this process for knowledge as part of his quest for truth and a deeper understanding of the self (as explored in Chapter 2) whereas Gay seems driven by the need to control. Although Gay recognises the absurdity of all human projects she is also hostile towards those who remind her of the transience of her own political systems. In an Interlude to the main action of the play we are shown an encounter between Gay and two enemy Muslim administrators. The scene shows Gay to be a brutal and ruthless leader. One of the administrators is a mapmaker and he explains his perspective on his task:

ASAFIR And even as I draw the line I think, this line can't last.
Sometimes we draw the line down the middle of a church, and
sometimes through a mosque. A dozing drunkard with a reed
could mark the frontiers just as well.

GAY: Then why –

ASAFIR: It brings me near the essence of all life. (*Pause. She looks at
him for a long time. Then extends the knife to another.*)

GAY: Execute him. Because what he tells me I don't wish to know.

(Barker 1998, p. 53)

Whereas Asafir, like Helen, embraces the instability and transience of life, Gay, an ideologist, cannot bear to have her commitment to structure questioned. The extremity of Gay's determination is best illustrated when she sets out the 20 truths of Fragrant Troy. Fragrant Troy aims to cleanse the unsavoury aspects out of consciousness for the sake of political stability 'To suffer is to be without soap!' (Barker 1998, p.95.) The truths are announced despite continual challenges from Fladder, whose extreme love for Helen places him in opposition to their drive towards sanitisation and passivity. The truths discourage dissension: 'Two! The question only leads to the next question. [...] Nine! The greatest joy is to concede' (Barker 1998, p. 95). The final truth is Orwellian and totalitarian in its desire for complete control of history: 'The Past never occurred!' (p. 96). Having announced these truths Gay again shows her awareness of truths instability but also her iron determination to exert control over existence: 'What does it matter if you

thought these things or not? [...] Clean Troy is not about truth. It's about me.' Here Barker seems to suggest that ideology and its apparent objectivity emerges in fact from a suffering and repressive subjectivity, which then results in the repression of others via the formulated system. Following these announcements Gay is disconcerted to discover that Fladder is still in love with Helen. Like Creusa earlier, Gay then shows her awareness of her limited perspective when set against the more encompassing, nihilistic and detached position of Helen:

GAY: I once put corpses in her bed. Arms and things. By this I meant to say, this wrist, this bowel, you caused to howl, you caused to whither. But she was only irritated by the smell. Is that the reason for her power?

(Barker 1998, p. 96)

We therefore have in *The Bite of the Night* the gendered characterisation of nihilistic, transgressive desire and the emergence of totalitarian ideology as a mother daughter relationship. Although the epic style of the piece allows a divergence of perspectives to emerge, the primary subject position is the male academic Doctor Savage, as is the case in Marlowe's and Goethe's *Faust*. He remains the protagonist to these two antagonists and at the close of the play moves beyond them both. He symbolically buries Helen and then strangles Gay (well kissing her). In the final moments of the play the somewhat

Mephistophelean Macluby observes the absence of both truth and desire in
Doctor Savage:

MACLUBY: You murdered everything and long for nothing. Aren't you
already dead?

SAVAGE: That's knowledge, then ...

(Barker 1998, p. 116)

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This final chapter presents important conclusions drawn from a consideration of the key discoveries from across the study, looking for connections with the early chapters on monotheism and Christian mysticism and the pagan tragic spirituality of the second phase of the study.

A useful starting point is the appropriation of the liminal phase of tragedy in the twentieth century as a goal in itself, rather than being the middle stage before ritual closure and reaggregation. This helps to explain Barker's shift away from the narrative and ideological closure of the ritual form of Attic tragedy. The text and idea of *Sacred Theatre* is clear example of this trend, where the use of the sacred state (voiding of thought) should not end in the closure of a particular 'monotheological' system, and therefore a useful approach in explaining Barker's related idea of the sacred in drama. In the same way that post-structural theory has the same desire to dismantle normative ideology (for example Derrida's deconstruction) as its socialist Critical Theory predecessors (for example Adorno and Horkheimer), Barker's tragic theatre can be defined as post-Marxist: it is still rapacious in its drive to dismantle normative ideology but defiantly anti-Marxist, not only in its assault on the problematic social utopian ideal, but in the dismantling of the core tenets of all political positions. This is perhaps why Barker can only make the tentative comment about his theatre in *Death, The One and the Art of Theatre*: 'Is this political?' (Barker 2005, p. 8) as it is unclear where this

approach to theatre fits within the scheme of political and non-political drama. Its radical assault on core principals seems political in intent but resists any form of political position. This shift away from a political ideology I have suggested occurs in Barker's *The Bite of the Night*, the most thoroughly examined text in this study because of its pivotal position in the move from a socialist aesthetic to an anti-ideological and spiritual tragic theatre. In contrast to *The Bite of the Night*, the utopian world described by the witch Skinner in *The Castle* is not itself challenged as a positive *ideal* in the course of the play. *The Castle* is possibly the last expression of the deep-rooted desire for Marxism in Barker, at least as a direction to head towards. Barker offers an indication that his Marxism is wavering around this time in his 1984 poem *Don't Exaggerate*, that reveals a shift towards hope in the socialist ideal rather than a full embrace of the argument: 'Not Marxism / Not the argument / The feeling / Not the analysis / The hope / COMMUNISM' (Barker 1985, p. 7).

Perhaps then Barker's claim (or at least implication) that he is expressing a truer form of tragedy is masking the fact that this is in fact a post-Marxist form of tragedy: a tragedy where the anger at the world and refusal to stop the radical challenge to ideology is a continuation of the deconstructive process of socialist politics. However, it is a political approach that has now recognised its own utopian delusions but cannot accept or return to the normative or traditional belief systems it has rejected. It therefore remains in a space of darkness, pursuing sexual ecstasy in the absence of meaning. The Classical Greek tragic theatre, as explored in Chapter 3 and 4, had terrible death balanced by the powerful sunlight (that the characters refer to in a number of

plays), together with the visual backdrop of nature beyond the city. This presented the audience with forces of life that juxtapose the reported deaths and tableaux of dead characters on the stage. Both the Greek tragic chorus and the audience visible to each other, rather than hidden in the darkness of the auditorium, emphasise the community who live on even though the protagonist perishes. These are small consolations to some of the very bleak and disturbing experiences in Greek tragedy, but they offer some degree of balance to the invocation of Hades and the cruelty and unknowability of fate (or will of Zeus). Chapter 4 also noted how darkness and performance were part of Dionysian spirituality in Greek mystery cults. Again, it seems that death and the underworld were evoked to void thought and emphasise ecstatic emotional states. However, the final moments seem to be positive, in line with the closure and new sense of identity offered by the ritual process, and after such disorientation a tranquil state is experienced, again with light as a counter balance to terror.

The relationship of the audience's experience to the experience of the tragic protagonist was a particular focus of Chapter 4, where encounters with the dead, *Nekyia* and *Katabasis*, for the characters provide an imaginative mediation on death for the audience. With this in mind it is worth comparing two Barker quotations from a similar date but from different sections of this study. The first considers the audience experience:

This solitude [...] doesn't seem to me to be loss but a triumph – the ability to exist alone. That these people suffer to the extent they do,

gives an audience a sense of human potential beyond the norm. And I do think that's why tragedy is a necessary art form. It doesn't make you feel good - or anything like that [...] it is purely the fact that its extremity, however painful, lends the audience power.

(Barker in Lamb 2005, p. 205-6)

This contrasts with the definition of the tragic protagonist in 2005 where the instinct towards self-knowledge is motivated by a desire for death:

I am unforgivable, and if the consequences of my act had not been death I should never have undertaken it ...' [...] 'I did it to be revealed to myself ...' [...] 'If you gave me more life I should throw it back in your face. Do you think I did this to be forgiven?

(Barker 2005a, p. 77-78).

Although unrelenting in their desire for death the tragic protagonist is not of course identical to the author and as *Death, The One* continually reminds us, 'All I describe is theatre even where theatre is not the subject' (Barker 2005, p. 2). Therefore, although the tragic protagonist is uncompromising in these two aims (death and self-knowledge) the audience may experience forms of spiritual fulfilment as part of the journey but without the need for the final step over the edge - the protagonist has done this for them. In fact, this formation of the tragic protagonist can be seen as a *personification* of the post-Marxist

instinct to dismantle (ideological) truths: the process of destruction of selves/identities can only lead to their own death (of self) and to stop short of the final annihilation would compromise its *raison d'être*: ideological destruction.¹⁷⁴ Once it is noted that the tragic protagonist requires this uncompromising view to be true to the aesthetic they personify, what then is the spiritual experience or model an audience member may exit from the theatre with? This relates to the second chapter and the influence of Eckhartian mysticism. The audience are encouraged by the revelations, to shed themselves of the pressure for political or moral engagement and decisions and instead focus on their own sexual and irrational desires as a starting point for approaching existence and human interaction. However, the ultimate realm of purity that offers sanctuary from the trials of existence is in detachment, which for Barker following Eckhart is where divinity lies. For Eckhart detachment was greater even than love and in Barker the great importance of ecstasy, particularly sexual ecstasy, is transcended by this: the ability to detach and reflect on even the most extreme experiences. As noted in Chapter 3, it is the second stage in the hierarchy, the 'heroic criminal' rather than the 'tragic protagonist,' who is in pursuit of ecstasy for its own sake. So elevation to a god-like perspective where human beliefs, firstly, are seen as illusion, and then human emotion is reflected on with supreme detachment, is the religious and spiritual realm that the Theatre of Catastrophe moves towards.

¹⁷⁴ In the formative example of Doctor Savage in *The Bite of the Night* at the end of the play it is a symbolic death he has experienced following his relentless search for truth rather than an actual death. As with the archetype of 'the one' in Helen of Troy, this play being more visibly about symbols and ideas shows us the blueprint beneath the later tragic plays of the Theatre of Catastrophe.

However, to leave it at that, would not give due to consideration to the role of gender in Barker's work. Barker's radical rejection of all ideology combined with the inherent need for meaning in the human being (Althusser's notion of man as an ideological animal) results in a theatre where ideology can become deeply hidden and therefore vulnerable to the reassertion of traditional views. These views enter via the form and structure, and favoured narratives and subject matter of classical Greek tragic theatre. This is most apparent in the female protagonist/antagonist in Attic theatre where the label 'female' allows the expression of negative or anti-orthodox thoughts and actions to be expressed and explored at a safe distance for the primarily male audience. As shown in Chapter 5, Barker continues with many of the strands of female types and behaviours in Greek tragedy but his radical post-Marxist sensibility means that this tragic female antagonist is now, for him, a positive force. However, they are still often a force that is clearly Other to the audience position (I would suggest for both male and female audience members) due to the extremity of their embrace of immorality and opposition (or detachment) from normative morality and ethics; and also in the sense of mystery surrounding their presentation in both play-text and performance (as discussed in relation to Wicks' performance style in Chapter 5). This fusion of post-Marxist radicalism; death and the sacred space of tragedy; Barker's interest in sexuality as ecstasy; the archetypes of female Greek tragic protagonists; and finally Eckhartian mysticism's focus on negative theology and detachment, are all aspects of the Barkerian female antagonist. For Barker this characterisation is a powerful and positive force, in many ways a personification of his tragic theatre. However, it also paradoxically and

simultaneously presents many traditional and patriarchal appropriations of the female. For example, sexual immorality and a strong association with sin (e.g. Eve, Pandora and the witch) and the idea of the female as object to be presented/looked at enhanced by the presentation of her subjectivity as mysterious and Other. The complex set of ingredients that inform Barker's theatre, place it in a liminal space between the radical political dramas of the twentieth century and the tragic dramas of classical Greece.

The two historical spiritual contexts from which concepts are considered in this study, Classical Greece and Medieval Christianity, are separated by hundreds of years. However, Barker's interest in both Eckhartian mysticism and tragedy as a religious form, a form stemming from a pagan context, generates the tantalising question about their relationship in the evolution of spiritual ideas. This study has noted similarities in the negative theological approach to established meanings that both tragedy and *apophatic* mysticism generate. Tragedy's relationship to mystery cult, mystery cult as the spiritual context for the writings of Plato, and the strong influence of Pseudo-Dionysus' neoplatonic negative theology on Eckhart, may explain the through line in this spiritual kinship. To argue this conclusively would be an undertaking far beyond the scope of this study. However, Michael L. Morgan's analysis of 'Plato and Greek Religion' suggests, for me, a pagan mysticism that converges in places with Eckhart's desire for the soul's search for its divine aspect through a process of detachment:

Underlying the world of polis religion, then, was this theological attitude of separation between the divine and the human, of discontinuity, of human limits and hence of the temptation to illicit self-esteem and pride (*hubris*). I call it the Delphic theology.

Contrasted to this posture was the attitude of those committed to the alternative religious styles that involved ecstatic rites and salvation-orientated cults. Unlike traditional Athenian piety, this attitude assumed that there was continuity between the human and the divine [...]. In short, the Orphic-Bacchic-Pythagorean-Eleusinian world assumes that relief from our physical world and its distress could be achieved by human beings becoming as completely divine as they could possibly be. There is an element in human life, the soul or *psyche*, that has a quasi-divine nature, it is immortal. And that element, through ecstatic practice, could grow stronger and aid in the attainment of salvation.

(Morgan 1992, p. 231)

Morgan goes on to observe Plato's replacement of 'the emotional character of the ritual process with cognitive content' (Morgan 1992, p. 232), a rational knowledge based approach rather than experiential and emotional. Although Plato shifted away from emotional ecstasy, reflected in his concerns about tragedy generating strong emotions, the ecstatic returns to the concept of the One with Plotinus. Eckhart will again create distance from Plotinus's position in favour of detachment from emotion. What we have then in Barker's theatre

is both the ecstatic (pagan) and non-ecstatic (Eckhartian) strands of the neoplatonic One that originates in the pagan spirituality that also expressed itself in the religious form of Attic tragedy (ecstatic) and Plato's philosophy (non-ecstatic). The mystical *via negativa* of the One allows for both an intense embrace of ecstatic (sexual) experience but also a drive beyond all forms to a place of detachment. A detachment, as in Eckhart's detachment, that moves even beyond love to a state that is proximate to or is divine; a psychological state where a number of Barkerian female characters are located (e.g. Beatrice and Sopron). Pure ecstasy and complete detachment from human ideas that offer meaning to existence is an almost impossible state of mind for the human animal, that is by nature ideological, to sustain. For this reason they are presented as a mysterious female theatrical character, a divine detached ideal, whose perspective is one of pure ideological negation. Words of course become redundant in fully expressing this position, a position that is therefore probably then most clearly and powerfully presented in the ecstatic maenadic cry of Barker's Gertrude.

Appendix

The Wrestling School Interviews

Jane Bertish and Gerrard McArthur directed final year BA Performing Arts students in an abridged version of Howard Barker's *The Ecstatic Bible*.¹⁷⁵ It was performed in the Melton Theatre, Brooksby Melton College on 17 and 25 January 2013. After the completion of the project, they both kindly agreed to answer interview questions relating to both the project and my PhD thesis.

Interview with Gerrard McArthur

Received via email on 26 February 2013.

Question 1

Do you find performing Barker's plays a unique experience or do you feel there are connections with other dramatists or styles of theatre?

Unique, for me, because the deliberative aesthetic intention is singular.

In that Barker has increasingly sought to test and rupture persona on the stage, so he has created aesthetic landscapes that create dislocation. The present project is titled 'The Ecstatic Bible'; the experience of the ecstatic, linguistically, is to be outside of oneself. Howard's theatre is now a continuous

¹⁷⁵ The cast were De Montfort University and The University of Bolton students who were studying for their Performing Arts honours degree at Brooksby Melton College. I had set up this project with The Wrestling School and also cast the production.

experiment with the self, to break a predicted narrative of the self, and test selfhood, for reasons of a wider aesthetic. Enlightenment has brought aloneness, and abruptness, and art has pursued the consequent disruption of surfaces, and pressures on systems, and subsequent pressures on how the persona defines itself by systems, or norms. The catastrophic landscape allows for the disruption of surface of persona, and the rupture of surface of the comforting tools of naturalistic representation, or the comfortable confirmations of there being a meaning. It is an experience of an experiencing aesthetic.

This experience of speaking Howard's words, of creating a Barkerian 'character' leads one to an area of rich instability. This is one reason actors have an instinctive finding of such deep satisfaction in Howard's texts because, as a byproduct, they understand and rehearse the innate instability of the actor's psyche, in its search for persona. I have previously written about this sense of 'indeterminacy':

Indeterminacy is an obvious paradigm for the 'chemical' activity innate to the actor and his processes, and indeterminacy is the motor of compulsion in Barker. In this sense, the modernity of Barker's texts is that the surface is the depth. Great texts are concerned with the poetic exploration of psyche, and the explication of such in the body of the language. Like Shakespeare, Barker brings this explication to the open surface, where the characters are both the experience of the language and the objects of that experience, consciously, at one and the same

time. This is the drama of the psyche defining itself in language, in a recurring sequence of continuous self-discovery and self-immolation, under extremes of circumstance and pressure - like a verbal and dramatic exposition of continual 'Big Bang' theory in the self-defining psyche. This is not an attempted description of theory; this is how it feels to play it.

(McArthur in Rabey, *Ecstasy and Death*, 2009, p. 257)

What is astonishing is the sense of energy and sinew in the cadence structure of the language itself. This is the self ruptured to the surface, and the sense of the visceral and physical is in the language itself. It is a witness to an experiential drama, that dramatizes itself, and so is direct experience and metatextual at the same time. The 'over-articulacy' that disturbs the sensibilities of the predominant theatre culture is serving an aesthetic that develops from the historical roots of theatre, drawing strength from a knowledge of its many avenues, and which regards naturalism as an inert and theatrically tepid cul de sac.

So, as the experiencing can traverse a wide range, so has the delivery system of the experiencing, the actor, to be open to the widest range of aesthetic delivery, through any and all theatrical form. For this reason alone I believe the performing of Barker is unique, as it has the potential within it to traverse the history of acting style, as it is conscious of, and open to, all delivery mechanisms, and the blend of these has been Barker's pursuit of 'style'. The

sensation of a unique and rupturing mind is riven in every sentence. Nothing is contemplative, or resting, the mind is an action.

Question 2

Barker describes his plays in religious and spiritual terms: 'the art of theatre has many of the characteristics of religion. [...] Its methods are akin to prayer' (Barker 2005, p. 2); 'He had a vision of acting as a form of religious practice' (Barker 2007, p. 28).¹⁷⁶

When working on Barker's plays as either performers or directors, do you feel that a spiritual or religious idea of theatre and acting informs the creative process?

Howard has more than once said to me that he senses in my performing of his work, which he regards as important to it, is the religious sensibility; what he will straightforwardly describe as an understanding of pain, most especially within the context of my being brought up within the Catholic construct. A childhood bathing in the religious and, I think, the rituals and devices of guilt, submission and service, do provide a preparation for an understanding of a mental landscape that is predicated on its absence, and its rejection. How do you play an absence, or celebrate it, if you haven't known its presence?

Naturally, theatre is an organisation of symbols, that systemizes, embodies and is a conduit for, in its most serious disposition, the most personal and

¹⁷⁶ The full context of these quotations was provided at the end of the list of questions. See below.

deepest of human experiences; in that, it is not a simulacrum of the religious ceremony, it is a 'secular' experience of the same thing. In the absence of God, or with a knowledge of its roots and an acceptance of the absence of God, it has the brute spirit of a travesty, in which the travesty is the purer experience, and closer to man. That is the only, very, very careful way, in which I would employ travesty as a description, but within this context alone, it's use is helpful, I think, in moving us to appreciate how the persona's rage for being is expressed in Howard's writing with the force of a great deal of humour and wit; humour is context, and context is what his characters are continually experiencing- and the actors playing the characters are experiencing- the godless context, as we all do, and the fallout from (or, religiously, the fall) of the enlightenment, which is the world we now live in. This, it seems to me, explains how it is an essential component of the religious sense, and the sense and sensation of his whole body of work, that the masks of tragedy and comedy are crushed together in his work. The context is the presence of the spirit, and the absence of God. It is angry, curious, intelligent and liberated laughter.

Because this is a given, we tend not to have discussions of this kind in the rehearsal room. Occasionally, outside of it, more, in conversations I have had with him. Howard may speak splinters of it as brief clues to an actor, to light up a track, but even then quite rarely. People are often very disappointed to hear that, but then, I doubt that The Wooster Group talk about post-modernism very much when they're working.

Question 3

In your time working with The Wrestling School, have there been any noticeable changes in the approach to rehearsals and in the staging of Barker's plays?

Jane's a good one to ask about that, as she was there from the first, before The Wrestling School, then through all of Kenny Ireland's time, followed by Howard himself, and then being directed by me.

The investigation of style, arising from the implications of language, has produced design that has provided a structure that has in turn reinforced style. Everything comes from the language, but this, naturally, comes from a mind that is writing in the pictures of language. The stage has become more of an object under Howard's eye. The stages have become a mechanical function, the beauty is in the spare operation of function. An insistence on the texture of functional, real materials; wood, metal, glass, cottons. Barely any intrusion of modern media. (for example video, or digital). The making of pristine, iconic spaces. Spaces that are their own space, without reference to naturalism. They have some of the brutal comfort of real materials as found in the work of Joseph Beuys. They have the sense of the torn earth and psyche of Anselm Kiefer.

Question 4

As a director, how similar is your approach to Barker's?

I simply try to follow the crushing but enlivening logic of events within 'Barkerworld' as it's delineated here a little in other answers. I don't set out to make a preformulated 'Barkerworld', but by following the trail in purity, that's what arises. As an actor, I try to be in a play, as a director, it's the same. I'm simply absorbing the soundscape, particularly, of the play and allowing it to make pictures.

The structure of the play, the way it works, of course must be the way you work on it. With Barker's work, in that instance, I think the function of the director is guided by the implication of his title 'The Brilliance of the Servant'.

Barker followers have sometimes fallen between two camps - between pofaced religiosity, and a second group, dealing with the implications of the character's knowing self-consciousness and articulacy, the metatextual, the implications of the post-modern, and in seeking to place this humour, they can end up in a place that seems not to take what the characters are experiencing as serious, that somehow if they see the humour in their own pain, then it can't be pain. This is a great confusion about something central, as I hope I've explained above, but both groups are in error. But in a sense, both are making a secular mistake.

Question 5

I was fascinated by Barker's comment about Gollancz that 'she could be God'.

What is your opinion about this statement and do you feel that there are other similar (godlike) characters in Barker's work?¹⁷⁷

From *The Death of Character* by Elinor Fuchs

I've found this work, which I know you'll be aware of, to be very enlightening to me as crystallising my own mélange of instincts about Howard's work.

Some quotes:

'Well before German Romantic critics announced the new Shakespearean synthesis, however, eighteenth-century critics like Luigi Riccaboni, Marmontel, and Lessing began to link character, actor, and spectator in a mutual play of subjectivity (intended here in its allied senses of consciousness of self and of spiritual inwardness).'

(Fuchs 1996, p. 25)

In 1886, Gustave Khan, editor of French journal *La Vogue*, wrote 'The essential aim of our art [symbolism] is to objectivise the subjective (the exteriorisation of the idea) instead of subjectivizing the objective (nature seen through an individual's temperament).'

(Khan in Fuchs 1996, p. 29)

¹⁷⁷ Barker made this observation when introducing the play to the students at the start of the project on 6 October 2012.

'Albert Mockel [Belgian poet and critic] stated that "*la drame idéal*" should have two planes of significance, a plane of reality and a plane of irreality [...] its characters should have two selves, one accessible, the other distant'

(Fuchs 1996, p. 29).

Mutability of the self: (Brecht) challenges 'continuous character'. 'In *Die Massnahme*, the autonomous self is not merely a bourgeois illusion, but has the moral weight of a crime' [...] 'Brecht's analytic dramaturgy is a direct challenge to psychological acting techniques and their essentialist appeals to transcendent human nature.'

(Fuchs 1996, p. 33)

Nietzsche: 'Among the most damning charges Nietzsche can level against the post-mythic drama produced by "theoretical culture" is "character representation". Character is above all the fatal flaw of the "death leap into the bourgeois drama"

(Fuchs 1996, p. 28).

My sense drawn from the practise of it, in the performing and directing of it, is that Barker's catastrophic landscape is a challenge, certainly, to psychological acting techniques, but while challenging 'continuous character', keeps at its centre the mutable self, with it's emphasis on mutability, and an embrace of the arbitrary. There is certainly an ambiguous sense of 'self' and 'character' in

place both in the experience of watching, and of performing. Is it an important achievement that he is creating theatrical circumstances in which the histories of theatrical aesthetic experiments (in which the presentation and issues of character are pivotal) are successfully compressed and combined in a way that no other writer, perhaps, has tackled- certainly not in this way, or been able to achieve? The history of these fundamental theatrical histories of style, which reflect raging disputes about the functions of theatre, and of art, have been embodied into a unique theatrical aesthetic.

Other theatrical paths can be said to have splintered into different experiments and practises, while Barker seems to have found a way to combine and embody. If this is so, then the complete lack of general critical understanding of what Howard has been doing since he so deliberately, and with such unique focus, left the theatrical strategies of *Scenes from an Execution*, or *Victory*, is a remarkable comment on theatrical culture, and its practical lack of understanding of its own history, apart from treating it like a post-modern shopping bag. When Galactia says 'Yes', at the end of *Scenes*, Howard is saying 'No', and his entire subsequent history is the journey of that 'No'.

This ought to seem a remarkable achievement, yet the general critic falls at the first hurdle, not least with Barker's 'over-articulate' and 'hyper-aware' 'characters'. That he spans such a history of aesthetic experiment while achieving personas that leave such a searing, memorable, yet ambiguous impression, might be recognised as an impressive achievement.

The Priest's difficulties rest in his belief in pattern and reason; Gollancz's equilibrium and strength rest in her embrace of the arbitrary. If there is a God, our experiential knowledge of him in so far as we can have knowledge of Him, is that he is defined by the arbitrary, and it is faith only that constructs a different conclusion. Gollancz's approach puts her at the nexus of 'God's' lack of overt method.

Your raising of what Howard's said about Gollancz made me think of the discussion of Keat's famous reference to his idea of what he termed 'negative capability'. You'll know this very well, of course, so I just want to say that I think so much of the discussion around this seems so directly resonant to what she embodies, and of Howard's comment. These following quotes seem very relevant:

Negative capability describes the capacity of human beings to transcend and revise their contexts. The term has been used by poets and philosophers to describe the ability of the individual to perceive, think, and operate beyond any presupposition of a predetermined capacity of the human being. It further captures the rejection of the constraints of any context, and the ability to experience phenomenon free from epistemological bounds, as well as to assert one's own will and individuality upon their activity. The term was first used by the Romantic poet John Keats to critique those who sought to categorize all experience and phenomena and turn them into a theory of

knowledge. It has recently been appropriated by philosopher and social theorist Roberto Mangabeira Unger to comment on human nature and to explain how human beings innovate and resist within confining social contexts. The concept has also inspired psychoanalytic practices and twentieth-century art and literary criticism.

(Wikipedia 2014)

The Priest, of course, represents a stubborn adherence to 'theories of knowledge', while it is the very definition of Gollancz as someone with 'the ability to experience phenomenon free from epistemological bounds'.

John Keats used the term negative capability to describe the artist's receptiveness to the world and its natural marvel, and to reject those who tried to formulate theories or categorical knowledge. In this concept, Keats posited the world and the human to be of infinite depth. Such a position put Keats at the forefront of the Romantic movement, and even at the cusp of modernism, according to some commentators.

(Wikipedia 2014)

Gollancz is the cause of so much creation in the narrative. Indeed, she is the creator of the entire narrative, and almost of the world itself, it could be said, as she peoples the world with most of its significant protagonists. She is the Artist, as God has been said to be. I think the last comment above, which

would put her 'at the cusp of modernism', is particularly apt.

In a letter to his brothers, George and Thomas Keats, on December 21, 1817, Keats used the phrase negative capability for the first and only time. He did so in criticism of Coleridge, who he thought sought knowledge over beauty.

(Wikipedia 2014)

Knowledge/Priest, Gollancz/Beauty

Keat's letter further says:

...and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously - I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason

(Wikipedia 2014)

This is not only a description of Gollancz, it is description of how Howard is inviting the audience to experience his work. The dismal history of the Priest, is the history of the audience. It criticizes accepted ways of viewing. Their identification with his travails and his methodology has a startling double-edge.

As for Gollancz, she could be described by a later phrase in the letter, approvingly written of the artist's search, as a 'thoroughfare for all thoughts'. Well, in that she gives no sense of great thinking and absolutely refutes choice, it is a Barkerian irony that she provokes so much thought and choice in the world around her. This effect connects to a further matter, raised by the following:

Negative capability has been seen as feeding into the displaced subject of modernism - as contributing to what Baudelaire described as 'an ego athirst for the non-ego.

(Wikipedia 2014)

This not only describes Priest and Gollancz, but describes the entire practise of Gollancz's effect in 'The Bible', and thrusts her forward as a modernist figure, and force. Moreover, it places her, perhaps, at the centre of Barker's aesthetic manoeuvres of the last 30 years. Which is 'Godlike' enough.

Interview with Jane Bertish

Received via email on 27 January 2013.¹⁷⁸

Question 1

Do you find performing Barker's plays a unique experience or do you feel there are connections with other dramatists or styles of theatre?

It is. It is a unique experience to work on a modern text that is so 'classical' in feel. You need the same tools in order to perform it. In that sense it is similar to performing Shakespeare or Jacobean texts. Like Shakespeare it is also very much about the sounds you need to create in order to experience the emotion required. Like any good writing it is like a piece of music.

Question 2

When working on Barker's plays as either performers or directors, do you feel that a spiritual or religious idea of theatre and acting informs the creative process?

Not at all. It is inherent in the work and not something that is ever discussed. It does not really apply to the performing of his work. It is an academic approach which is not really useful in the realising of the text.

¹⁷⁸ Jane opted not to respond to Question 5, noting 'I don't really think about Howard's work in these terms. Gerrard I am sure can fill you in on this in detail.'

Question 3

In your time working with The Wrestling School, have there been any noticeable changes in the approach to rehearsals and in the staging of Barker's plays?

I have been with the wrestling school since the beginning and yes there is a different aesthetic between Kenny Ireland and Howard Barker like there would be with any two directors, but I have to say that I approached Prudentia in exactly the same way that I approached Isola or the Servant in Judith or indeed any of the 8 or 9 barker plays that I have done. Both are quite conventional directors - I suppose you could say that Howard is moving further away from the naturalistic whereas Kenny was very much concerned with accessibility of the text. But both would require an emotional truth because otherwise you cannot connect to the characters you are watching. Howard does not always know what he has written, sometimes you have to find it together. Sometimes he has a very clear idea but for example the long Isola speech where she describes the killing of Cascan had us both perplexed for a while. I started along the lines of those Greek characters like Theramenes who describes the death of Hyppolitus and in the performing of those it is more effective to sit on the very huge emotion, letting it show maybe once.¹⁷⁹ They do not work if they are over experienced but this just was not working for me but Howard could not really help. It was only when I realised that the way he had laid out the verse in the middle of the page pointed to a completely different dynamic and this was because she has just

¹⁷⁹ Characters in *Phèdre* (1677) by Jean Racine.

seen the horror of the act and has not had months to process the experience as in Phaedra. So actually she was re experiencing it in the telling. It is written like a steam train of thought.

Question 4

As a director, how similar is your approach to Barker's?

Everyone is different. I come at it purely from an acting perspective but I also have a sense of style which I am sure is similar to Howard but my emphasis has and always will be in the truth of the performing.

The context for the quotations in Question 2:

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

(Barker, Howard, (2005) *Death, the One, and the Art of Theatre*, p. 2)

'He had a vision of acting as a form of religious practice, which in its most spiritual manifestations became an ecstasy, an ecstasy in which the actor would not know himself. In this condition of ecstasy the audience would be delivered from the requirement to criticise, it would in effect be seduced into a condition of receptivity which abolished values, politics, morality from the stage and enabled it to enter the realm of authentic tragedy.'

(Barker, Howard, (2007) *A Style and Its Origins*, p. 28)

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