

After Words: Shapes in the Darkness

by
David Ian Rabey

George Hunka's skills and experiences as a dramatist and director are manifested, refracted, in one of the most memorable, haunting and artful performances over which he has presided, this aptly and beautifully titled volume, *Word Made Flesh*. Here we encounter Hunka's notated performance of the evolution of himself, man and artist, through proposition, interrogation, digression, impatience, righteous anger and a sensual delectation in thought and language. His focus is a theatre which does not seek to reproduce or represent life; but to *re-present* life, and the possibilities of the self in the world, in enliveningly surprising ways.

And, having completed my first reading of Hunka's text, I see myself differently, as my own conclusions are challenged, my intuitions encouraged, my refusal of compromise vindicated; in short, this is a purposeful book, which makes me feel ever more purposeful in response. There are moments when I do not feel I have fathomed the full resonances of Hunka's propositions, but I am also reminded that further cogitation and contemplation of his considered statements and dialogue about them (with myself, and my associates) is part of the process: art plays a long game (and is characterized by so doing), not so much "swimming against the tide" as insisting on its own distinctive rhythms of ebb and flow. There are moments when I want to argue with

Hunka (for example, while I work out my remaining years as a teacher, I have to believe that the term “education” is not confined to instrumentalizing instruction, but may extend to a creative bewildering, and further artistic exploration of the unknown—but I probably would not have fashioned that statement if he had not provoked me to do so); and this is also part of the process, because who reads and engages with others in search of mere fawning lionization? (Answer: the despot, whose fixed meanings betray a significant insecurity, as they survey and discredit those who will not justify his or her actions in linear rational terms¹) (a valued teacher of my own, Stephen Booth, taught me always to answer rhetorical questions, including my own; a helpful lesson for a dramatist.) And I find myself contradicting myself.

Hunka is saliently, specifically purposeful in his anti-despotic defiance of linear rational terms, the deathly logic of mere existence expressed (and bureaucratically and politically organized) through obedient passive consumption. Hunka insists on the right to be creative, in thought and his art; and he demands respect for those artists who *imagine bravely*, beyond all forms and (sometimes appealing) manifestations of “boxes,” and who will not settle for less than everything they can imagine, and the time in which to imagine it, and a fertile wilderness in which to do it.

I use “wilderness” in a particular sense. This relates to how Hunka’s argument takes its cue from Schopenhauer’s and Malta’s propositions that our (perhaps intrinsically tragic) sense of the world is based on the sense of the will operating through the body. Jay Griffiths has noted the root presence of the word “wild” in “wilderness,” originally suggesting the self-willed, willful or uncontrollable (but subsequently and externally reapplied to carry the reduced and dismissive sense of lost, unruly, disordered or

confused); so, Griffiths deduces, “a wilderness is a self-willed land”: “what is wild is not tilled”; “Self-willed land does what it likes, untilled, untold, while tilled land is told what to do.”² In this sense, the theatre which Hunka and his fellow artists imagine is a wilderness, which you approach and project from the scaffolding of practical discipline (but which you do not, cannot, contain or limit: “the creation of an impossible structure,” in deed).

In his “Preface to the Reader,” Hunka describes his work as “notes” (perhaps evoking both transcribed insights and musicality) “in the spirit of Adorno.” What might this mean? It means that Hunka, like Adorno, offers a counterpoint to, and critique of, an ideologically distorted and distorting notion of “reality,” which seeks to legitimize its edicts through appeals to progress and enlightenment, but which actually refines and underpins an authoritarian and totalitarian set of terms as to what this “reality” might include, and exclude. This “reality” is cemented explicitly through the allocation of practical (fiscal) resources, and more implicitly through appeal to and invocation of (significantly elastic) abstract values. It may claim to promise the foreseeable security of a given society (in terms of the greatest good for the greatest number—of those who can afford to live within the walls of the state-supported and/or semi-privatized security complex). However, it by-passes appeals to more complex and wider senses of justice and freedom, and shrinks from engagement with terms of *otherness*; and hence, in its insistent myopia, it may be identified as (less obviously but demonstrably) *irrational* in its processes and consequences—even tyrannously so.

Karoline Gritzner’s summary of aspects of Adorno’s philosophical work is pertinent here: she notes how Adorno perceives a possible resistance to “this ideologically distorted reality, in

which culture is constructed as a façade" that conceals an "accumulated, speechless pain" which is significantly excluded from its frames of reference and value; he proposes:

... an art that wears the color black. The relation of authentic ("true") artworks to reality is twofold: on the one hand their task is to become equal to the "darkness" of the world; on the other hand they must point beyond this state of affairs, "for only what does not fit into this world is true."³

This, I think, brings us close to what Adorno glimpses, and Hunka strives to identify and to find a way to create, in tragic theatre and art.

It is significantly "traditional" (that is, fundamentally unquestioned) that many terms for beginning to think and talk about both theatre and civil life are based on Plato and Aristotle's repressions of irrationality: the terms which have steered us, as Hunka notes, "deeper into industry, administration, puritanism and materialism," towards shinier new catastrophes. Griffiths, again, reminds us that progress is crucially "pictured as a march on the road to the future from the past, as a walking away from somewhere," "for the abstract idea of progress depends, and has always depended, on first, the rejection and then, the destruction of place"⁴—and I remind myself that theatre is a place, as well as a form; a place, or space, that often re-members the destruction of people and places, and so questions terms of "progress." Joe Kelleher has observed how theatre continually "pulls focus" between one space and another: "For example, between the 'given' space of the theatrical stage and the imagined space of the outside world"⁵; and this is part of theatre's distinctively political dynamic as an art form, which includes "its liveness and

sociality, the simple fact that it happens *now* and that it gathers people, who may well be strangers to each other, around issues of disagreement but also of common concern"; also "theatre's capacity to pretend, to say and show things that are not so and hence to propose alternative realities to how things are at present."⁶ And if those involved in questioning "progress," and its associations of optimistic mobility, are dismissed as ridiculous, unrealistic, reactionary (or "backward"), this might not be sufficient deterrent from asking exactly whose interests destructive ideologies primarily serve (Kelleher notes how, whilst more conventional and anodyne forms of theatre may offer terms of representation that tend to "fix" the relations between things, other forms of theatre seek to "divide and set the social against itself."⁷ This latter form might be closer to what Hunka conceives of as the tragic (or, following Barker, "the art of theatre"), which involves dividing and setting *the individual* against herself, and her context. As Gritzner has observed, "to argue for a recovery of the tragic in our age does not necessarily involve an anti-revolutionary acceptance of the status quo"⁸; rather its "suspension of the rational principle" lends a "paradoxical power to negate the irrationality of the world."⁹

Crucially, Hunka identifies how "some dramatists have begun to create a philosophical theatre once again, a theatre that is rooted in the metaphysics of tragedy" (Gritzner: "In tragedy, the claims of the individual subject become general ethical claims in a universe of contradiction and injustice"¹⁰). Moreover, these contemporary tragedians "link ecstatic sexuality to a knowledge of death," alternative terms on which to glimpse or achieve "a form of freedom." These impulses may to some degree be identified with the spirit of Melancholia (which I have characterized

elsewhere as the sensed inevitability of irrevocable loss) which is denied (or else medically marginalized) by both commercial and cultural industries (which promise boundless potential gain, though John Gray has pithily expounded on how progress and mass murder conspicuously “run in tandem,” through technological advance¹¹, as well as similarly noting how we have been “reared on religions and philosophies that deny the experience of tragedy”¹²).

Hunka suggests that an image for the proceedings of, and fleeting (even coded) communications between, such tragic artistic initiatives might be that of the monastery: essentially disconnective from the paradigms of the commercial and cultural industries. This image of a secretive, anti-totalitarian, self-willed sanctuary and sacred space may well sustain itself more convincingly than that of a “modern” university (when I gained a permanent contract at a university, a friend congratulated me by writing, in 1985, “These are safe houses, like old monasteries, where not only cant but also a few truths may lurk”; now I am more convinced by the analysis of Alphonso Lingis, that universities “represent themselves as the institutions in which the criteria for common truth is established” when “in fact they submit their projects and curricula to parliaments” which “function as board-rooms where the interests of the most powerful institutions of the disciplinary archipelago are coordinated and transcendentalized as law.”¹³ Perhaps, on second thoughts, I am spiritually closer to Hunka in his identification, deployment and infusion of the term “education” than I previously thought).

Indeed, this sense of disconnection (from what is prevalent, *dominant*) may, paradoxically, be a means to art, to engaging with others on unforeseen and unforeseeable terms: Hunka sug-

gests that, at least potentially, the “self-defined, self-aware exile has a special access to the sense of the uncanny that produces art”—“uncanny” in the German sense of *das Unheimliche*, the “un-home-ly.” A theatre which incorporates this *unheimliche* refusal of familiar terms of recognition and reconciliation thus “investigates and demonstrates the decay of reason and understanding.” I particularly admire and enjoy Hunka’s conceptual flourishing of “the spectral”: “both a fertile investigation of the spectrum of sound (what it hides among its physiological effects) and a yearning to the condition of the ghost, the spirit.” This reminds me of the sense I have experienced after the most resonant artistic experiences, that we have a wider spectrum of human possibilities on which we can draw, and which we can manifest, than those which we habitually choose to select and present (in internalized deference to the dominant restrictions of the day): the immanence of the rainbow of desire, to use Augusto Boal’s phrase. Also, if “spectral” suggests an ectoplasmic residue, it also conjures forth for me the French sense of the *revenant*, that which comes back, haunting, persistent, suggestive, unbidden (totalitarian regimes are characteristically resistant to the portrayals of ghosts on stage, because they re-present that past’s capacity to bring the present to account).

Hunka sets the stakes of theatrical and philosophical enquiry properly high. “To what extent do we allow the language of the state to create our bodies? To create each other? To create ourselves? What language do we absorb, do we allow to play or define?” His objective is crucially anti-deterministic (and so avoids the facility of nihilistic pessimism): “The truly revolutionary act is to reappropriate language and the body.” Here he is closest to Barker, who has recently claimed “The war fought over the mean-

ing of the body in contemporary theatre is no less desperate than the battles waged in Homer over the hero's corpse"; "Dead or alive, the body drives us mad, and ... only the word can shield our gaze from Utopia's dazzling and obliterating light."¹⁴ I have earlier linked this idea of erotic "madness," a vivifying dislocation from conventional priorities, with what Lingis calls "catastrophic time,"¹⁵ in which ordinary time limits are transcended: what Griffiths alternatively calls "wild time," sometimes manifested in "a resurgence of sexual energy even or especially at the point of death."¹⁶

This brings us to the role of Eros, its intimacy and intricacy, in Hunka's aphoristic theatre. This seems to me the heart of the book (and of much more), and suggests a possible understanding of the movement from the *phenomenal* to the *noumenal* which might otherwise tend to elude me. Hunka finally discusses the theatre as "the ideal arena for the public expression and investigation of erotic love." Anne Carson, in her book *Eros the Bittersweet*, approaches the concept of erotic possibility, and its circulation, without any sustained consideration of theatrical forms: her (brilliant) investigation is focused on classical philosophy and literature. But I think her ideas may prove pertinent to Hunka's vision of, and for, the theatre. Carson suggests that Eros acts like a verb, it bespeaks the action of an imaginative reaching: when one lover beholds another, his/her vision reconceives them both, in a dual way—in terms of their present *actuality* and their implicit *possibilities*; this "stereoscopic" vision (which holds a "split reference" to more than perspective)

defines the edge between two images that cannot merge in a single focus because they do not derive from the same level of

reality—one is actual, one is possible. To know both, keeping the difference visible, is the subterfuge called eros.¹⁷

In this process of imagining, one “reaches for something else than the facts,”¹⁸ across the space between known and unknown, drawing things together whilst being mindful of their difference; and this space becomes “an erotic space”¹⁹ which permits this reach for the difference between the actual and the possible, “the play of imagination called forth in the space between you and your object of knowledge.”²⁰ As an artful and incarnated place/time/occasion/tension of bodies, saying the unsaid and showing the invisible, theatre might thus indeed be termed an “erotic space,” an amplification of one of the most distinctively wild (and willed) initiatives of the human consciousness/soul, which proposes alternative realities to how things are at present, offers “a narrative texture of sustained incongruence, emotional and cognitive”²¹ more thoroughly and (manifestly, bodily) intrinsically than other art forms. It is a communally willed metaphor:

A virtuoso act of the imagination brings the two things together, sees their incongruence, then sees also a new congruence, meanwhile continuing to recognize the previous incongruence through the new congruence. Both the ordinary, literal [descriptive] sense and the novel sense are present ... held in tension ... of an acute and unresolvable kind.²²

Significantly, Carson also suggests that “Eros is the ground where *logos* takes root between two people”²³ and “something moves in the space between,”²⁴ between what is and what could be visible—and finds words, form, wings (Brendan Kennelly’s poem “The Third Force” offers a further graceful image for this²⁵). If Hunca’s epigram “Ultimately family is a blindfold for the origi-

nal sin, as Sophocles, Shakespeare and Beckett had it, of having been born" seems relentlessly unforgiving (not least on the self), his Epilogue gives a glimpse of how even family, like theatre and erotic love, is, with persistence, capable of being remade on our own terms.

This brings me to my other favorite turning in Hunka's labyrinth (in a maze, you become lost; in a labyrinth, you find yourself, surprisingly) in the concept of "dreamwork": "Theatre allows us to enter the structure of our dreams, points out perspective, what lies behind the word, how it changes"; "Spectator and artist become one in the recognition and exploration of the unconscious"; yet "the dream is two-way, paradoxically it reaches a hand outward to touch the world in its conscious expression"; so private feelings can have public consequences, and *vice versa*. I am reminded of David Rudkin's suggestion that the dramatist must be "at the same time asleep and awake, asleep to see, awake to show"; and of Jan Svankmajer's re-cognition of dreams as "those parts of our lives where neither natural nor social laws have any power over us," and are therefore often contemptuously dismissed or rationalized to function within scientifically controlled systems; though they may place us "at the mercy of our own laws" in dramatizing "a repression which we chase ourselves"; hence "it could come in useful if we reversed dreams into reality ... as a certain model for prevention against real repression."²⁶ This links with Hunka's sense of the "willed nightmare": for what is a nightmare but a drama of how we have lost control over the figments of our imaginations?

If, as Hunka suggests, "Tragedy in America has yet to be invented," this book suggests some starting points, with valuable eloquence. Hunka evidently takes courage from the initiatives of

the American artists O'Neill and Rothko, finding indicative shapes in their darkneses. Grateful for their reach and provocations, I will personally further associate his written explorations, in this book, with those of two other properly ambitious American writers: with Anne Bogart's purposeful drive to articulate and extol the power, potential and value of theatrical art and the thoroughness of work (and play) it properly demands; with Alphonso Lingis's energizingly profound fascinations with surfaces and depths, the visceralities of love and horror, the terms of life and death, of affirmation and denial. But I think I will keep it on the shelf where I keep Howard Barker's prose works (*Arguments for a Theatre; Death, The One and the Art of Theatre; A Style and its Origins*), because I turn to them most often to challenge determinisms and to confirm persistence. We need to know where to find such things, readily.

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Endnotes

- 1 On the malignity and ludicrousness of this figure, see Alphonso Lingis, *Dangerous Emotions*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000, pp. 43-48.
- 2 Jay Griffiths, *Wild*. London: Penguin, 2006, pp. 49-50.
- 3 Karoline Gritzner, "Adorno on Tragedy: Reading Catastrophe in Late Capitalist Culture." *Critical Engagements* 1.2 (Autumn/Winter 2007), pp. 25-52(32).
- 4 Jay Griffiths, *Pip Pip: A Sideways Look at Time*. London: Flamingo, 1999, p. 185.
- 5 Joe Kelleher, *Theatre and Politics*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009, p. 3.
- 6 *Ibid*, p. 10.
- 7 *Ibid*, p. 11.
- 8 Gritzner, *op. cit.*, p. 34.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 33.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- 11 John Gray, *Straw Dogs*. London: Granta, 2003, p. 96.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 194.
- 13 Alphonso Lingis, *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994, pp. 143-4.

- 14 Howard Barker, "The Spoken Body and the Utopian Regard." *Gamma/Γραμμα*, "The Text Strikes Back: The Dynamics of Performativity." Volume 17, 2009, pp. 15-16 (16).
- 15 See Rabey, Howard Barker: *Ecstasy and Death*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009, particularly pp. 15-17.
- 16 Griffiths, Pip Pip, p. 265.
- 17 Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*. Champaign: Dalkey Archive, 1998, p. 69. Thanks to Karoline Gritzner for the gift of this book.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 173.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 171.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 109.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p.85.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 73.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 145.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p.67.
- 25 Brendan Kennelly, *Familiar Strangers: New and Selected Poems* (Bloodaxe, Tarsset, 2004), pp. 229-230.
- 26 Both quotations, from Rudkin and Svankmajer, from D. I. Rabey, David Rudkin: *Sacred Disobedience* (Harwood/Routledge, Amsterdam, 1997), p. 9.