

The Anti-Didactic Hypothesis

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Abstract

The teaching of Creative Writing often includes encouraging students to think about the premise of the work, which badly translated can mean "what is your work saying." Recent statements by the playwright and theorist Howard Barker might offer new routes for Creative Writing teaching and, more broadly, thinking about how the creative process works. Barker disavows rational knowledge of his work (though not skill in its construction) – rather positing that it is his job as a writer to use imagination in order to speculate around a hypothesis.

Barker distrusts Brecht and the notion that writers have anything to teach an audience. Using approaches gleaned from Barker's own writing and interviews on his own practice, new approaches to stimulating student's imaginative writing might arise. This is especially important to emerging writers, for whom being told to write what they know and have something to say might not be the best method, given they know little and so it might be presumptuous if they were writing works designed to instruct.

(Abstract – 168 words)

Introduction

A perennial challenge around the presence of creative writing within an academic context is the tension between producing what we might generally call Imaginative Writing and thinking about such writing rationally. We expect both writers working within the universities and students studying forms of Creative Writing to produce work which is meaningful, original and imaginative. The Creative Writing programme at Middlesex, where I teach, calls for the best work at Level 6 to be “Original” and to have an “Individual style” (Middlesex University, 2005). The academic environment also asks for Critical Writing about Creative Writing, which often consists of accounting for and explaining the processes through which Creative Writing comes about, as well as elucidating why a piece of writing takes the form it finally does.

This demand for a rational discourse around the production of Creative Writing runs through all stages of the development of such writing - from initial introductions to the subject and exercises aimed at first year undergraduates through the critical and reflective essays students are asked to write alongside their creative submissions all the way to the commentaries post-graduate researchers and creative writing academics are asked to produce to support their work as awardable and REF-able research. As a practitioner who also teaches and writes about his own work within this environment, I am aware of a nagging feeling that there is a basic incompatibility between what I do when I sit down and write a play - even when I sit and think about writing a play - and when I sit down and am forced to write about it. I would wager that everyone from first year undergraduates also feels an amount of this tension. If the enthusiasm with which the students approach the critical side to their work is anything to go by, many of them feel this tension so keenly that it might be properly described as a painful.

The tension I am identifying here is a between the creative process and our attempts to rationalise it. The requirement to think and talk about a piece of imaginative writing, even in its first developmental stages is an odd one. Does a writer sit down rationally and write from their imagination?

These always already *niggling* thoughts are brought to the fore of my mind every time I listen to or read an interview with or an article by the British playwright, poet and theorist of theatre Howard Barker. Barker is a polemical advocate for what we might call the primacy of the imagination in works of creativity, in his case theatre plays. He boldly states that he does no formal research for his plays, he states that “I never write from clarity, I have none, nor do I ever know the structure or narrative form, let alone the content, of any play I am writing” (Brown 2011, 68). He says that he “cannot pretend to fully understand” a play of his, adding “perhaps I never shall” (Ibid.) I wonders what an academic environment would make of this kind of statement from a nascent writer on a creative writing programme. Yet here is one of the most widely respected and influential writers in European theatre making statements which I think, at the very least, challenge practices which have become established in creative writing within the academy.

It might be worth saying a few words about who Howard Barker is and how he came to take the positions on art and creativity which he holds today. Barker began his career, as did many writer of his generation, at the Royal Court Theatre and his first stage plays, *Cheek* and *No One Was Saved*, were performed there in 1970. His early work was satirical and political, rather cartoonish - a 1972 play *Edward The Final Days* deals with the failures of the Heath government. Critics assumed that he was yet one more of the growing plethora of Brecht-inspired left-wing dramatists popular at new

writing institutions of the time – Hayman (1979) classified him in with his fellow Howard, Brenton, as well as Edward Bond and David Hare in a chapter entitled ‘The Politics of Hatred’. Barker openly positioned himself on the left - Itzen (1980, 250) presents a Barker who, in a 1975 interview with *Plays and Players*, regards himself as “unquestionably a socialist writer. I’ve always been a socialist, and have actually been on the Stalinist wing of socialism.” Yet even then he is described as someone “increasingly interested in the aesthetics of playwriting” for whom, in Barker’s own words, the “first instinct is not to write a political play in the sense that its didactic purpose is paramount, but to write a play in which politics happen to be the arena for the action. Classical aesthetic values - style, language, character - are primary over the political ends of the play.”

During the 1980s, Barker’s work became more obviously metaphorical and less easy to politically position. He stated that he “regarded political and social satire as the essence of redundancy.” (Barker 1998, 216) He began writing what he came to describe as the “theatre of catastrophe” - a form of metaphorical, tragic theatre in which characters live “beyond the point where death is preferable to continued existence” (Brown 2011, 55) in which the action does not resolve – “For me, the catastrophic play doesn’t resolve, because there is, to me, no reconciliation, no resolution.” (Brown 2011, 117) His theatre became increasingly poetic and opaque, leading him to make many statements in interviews disavowing a rational notion that he understands the plays he writes. Despite this, he has published two books on theatre aesthetics (Barker 1998, 2004) in which he sets out his vision and defends his work.

He has felt this response necessary due to critical attacks on first productions of his plays in the UK throughout the 1980s and the expulsion of his work from the National stages - the Royal Court and the Royal Shakespeare Company, both of whom

produced him in the 1970s and 80s, closed their doors to him and the National Theatre notoriously didn't perform Barker until 2012. At the same time, his work became increasingly visible and influential throughout mainland Europe and in the United States as well as attracting considerable attention from academics.

For the present purpose, his importance lies in his position that imaginative writing is something other than description and rational argument, his avowal that the creative process is mysterious and his ability to be able to articulate these positions in interviews and in his theoretical writing. In this, he is as a crucial inspiration if we are to look for a defence of the special and essentially mysterious nature of creative writing within an academy which demands that writers articulate, explain and rationalise imaginative work.

The Irrational

Barker's accounts of his creative process and his statements that he does not understand his plays should make anyone involved in the teaching or, indeed, composition of Creative Writing in an academic setting take stock. How can we give accounts of our own processes or ask students to do so if rational understanding is antithetical to the very process we are trying to facilitate?

On a few occasions, Barker does give an account of his process when sitting down to write - but in such a way as to problematize the act of writing from a rational point of view. Here is Barker talking about the composition of a recent play entitled *Blok/ Eko*:

I knew that I was coming towards the end of it; like a breath, it was running out, of its own accord. For some reason, I flew in a tree over a dead man. I didn't know why, I just thought, 'I'll have a tree fly in'. And I wrote on without thinking too much about it. Then the heroine, Nausicaa, enters holding a chair, and she doesn't know why she's holding a chair (and I don't either). She talks to her lover, and I just knew I needed this moment of redundancy. And then I had this rope ladder

falling out of the tree, with no one on it. The main character, the poet, is filled with dread at the sight of the ladder. They then see feet coming down the ladder, which, when they get to the bottom rung, cannot proceed, because the ladder is not long enough. The woman now understands why she carries the chair. The poet tries to stop her, telling her that if she enables the stranger to descend, it will be the end of him, obliging her to choose between him and her inclination to help strangers. She goes then to the ladder, places the chair so the man can get off the ladder, onto the chair, then onto the ground. I didn't know who it was. And then I deduced it was the character whom we had seen ever so briefly in the beginning of the play, a gun-hirer who comes back to deliver the gun with which the poet can kill himself. I don't plan such things: it appears arbitrary. It's almost uncanny, the way something like that works. On the last play, I was struggling with a difficult scene, but it was coffee time, and I was desperate for coffee, and so I thought, 'Oh, I'll just have somebody come in'. And so I typed, "A man enters, holding a spade". I went down to make myself some coffee, and while the water was boiling, I thought, 'The postman has probably arrived'. And as I opened the door to get my mail, a man walked past with a spade on his shoulder. I am not trying to mystify my life, but only saying this also describes the way things happen in the plays. (Brown 2011, 170-171)

Many writers will recognise these kinds of moments of inspiration, in which all forms of planning become either unnecessary and or an irrelevance and the moment of Inspiration arrives. Barker is describing an almost magical process here - one carried out as an act of faith, for who knows whether the moment of inspiration will arrive? Writers simply have to trust that it will. Yet much of the teaching of creative writing, and certainly a lot of the 'How to' books, suggest that planning is paramount. We might ask students for synopses and treatments at the outset of the work and sometimes modules are built around assessment goalposts which demand the delivery of such preparatory material at a certain stage. But what if such materials are antithetical to some writer's processes? What if they need to write without knowing what is coming next, without joining any dots which have been previously planned? What if, in doing without pre-planning, the most innovative and original work comes about?

It is important to emphasise here that not every creative writer will want to work in the way Barker appears to set out here. Yet even in writing initial treatments and synopses, a writer needs to trust that inspiration will appear and the next words, the next events, the next block of action will appear on the page. I wonder if we need to spend more time engaging students with their imaginations, unhampered by structure and the need to write to and from a pre-conceived form - which is what many 'How to' books will suggest. It is very easy to teach the structures which other writers have used in the past. It is much more difficult to encourage writers towards finding their own ways of writing, unhampered by any expectation that their work will look like something that we have seen before.

To do this, we might need to step aside from the idea that we can explain how someone comes to write something, how we ourselves come to write. Many creative writing programmes of study, from undergraduate to doctorate level, ask writers to produce critical commentary on their creative work. This often includes an account of why a writer has made a decision. Yet would Barker's account of the writing of *Blok/ Eko* be acceptable from a student or Creative Writing academic? It is descriptive of what he does but hardly analytical. It defies the very notion of analysis and by the end winks at us with the suggestion of a magical, pre-Enlightenment world view. Barker appears to me to imply that he knows he was right to type the entrance of a man with a spade because he happened a few moments later to see a man with a spade in the street. I know what he means but what might fellow academics in fields such as science and technology think of such claims to creative serendipity?

The Meaning

Equally problematic in terms of talking about a piece of writing's development is Barker's stance on the meaning of his works. He does not deny that the work has

meanings; he writes of his 1988 play *The Bite of the Night*, “It is without a message. (Who trusts the message-giver any more?) But not without meaning.” (Barker 1998, 38). But he also, as we have seen, affirms that he does fully know what that the meaning is himself.

In the development of new work, the criticism that it is not about anything or is banal is often heard - and these things are rightly picked up on in feedback. But we have to be careful here that this does not translate into an easily digestible question as to what the work is saying. Barker writes that the “question ‘what is he saying’ cannot be applied to [his] theatre.” (Barker, 1998, 79) His move away from what is generally called political theatre - theatre with an ideological purpose - was motivated by the observation that “three decades of political theatre have produced an intellectual servility in audiences. The servility is expressed in the desperate ache for the message, which denigrates the experience of art.” (Ibid.)

Barker’s thoughts here are worth putting in the context of conversations tutors might often have with student writers, who have been encouraged - either in classes or in “how to” books - to have some kind of premise behind their works. They often translate this already reductionist idea into a question of what they are trying to show or teach the audience. In theatre especially, this tendency has its roots in the influence of the German Marxist playwright Bertolt Brecht, whose plays affect didacticism and whose theory encourages a theatre designed to teach the audience how to see the world from the right perspective, i.e. the Marxist one. Barker is openly anti-Brechtian and expounds some of his most vituperative invective for Brecht. The tendency towards didacticism in art has inspired by the theory and practice of Brecht (but often without even the backbone of his Marxism) has led many of the more earnest young writers I have encountered to presume that they have something to teach the audience, some

moral or ethical point - often quite banal - and the play's the thing that will capture the conscience of the audience on their chosen hobby-horse. Recently I supervised a student who set out to write a feature film script about two young women in a flat-share, one of whom has alcohol addiction problems. The proposal for the script solemnly informed the reader that the story was designed to illustrate the dangers of drinking to excess and act as a warning for her peers against the temptations of excess. This raises many questions. Do people go to art to be taught a moral or ethical lesson? If they want a moral or ethical lesson, why should they go to a work of art to learn it? Why should the artist be the one to teach them? What special knowledge is the artist in possession of which gives him or her the right to instruct or teach or show other adults anything?

One of Barker's characters says "I write from ignorance. I don't know what I want to say, and I don't care if you listen or not" (Costa 2012) and this is Barker's own position. We might remind our students and ourselves that their fellow adults do not require that writers have to have some kind of moral precept at hand or special knowledge to impart in order to sit down and write a piece of imaginative fiction. Barker says that he does not "posture with 'truth', which it is my 'duty' to impart" nor "assume a higher status than the audience." (Brown 2011, 88-89) What is he doing then? What is the writer doing if he or she is not regurgitating research in dramatic form, teaching a moral lesson, making a political point or constructing an argument with a clear conclusion at the end of which an audience or reader can come away with a readily digestible soundbite? If an artist cannot say "my book is about the way in which..." or "my play is about the conditions in which..." or "I intend to draw people's attention to..." or anything along the lines of "what I am saying is..." then what can the author say about the work? What *is* the work?

Barker often uses the word “speculation.” He speaks about his plays having a hypothesis. The writer might ask him or her self “what would happen if...” and so the play becomes just that, a piece of play, a game of consequences in which the characters act, interact and react within given situations with no presumption on the author’s part that he or she knows how things will turn out, and no intention on the author’s part that the actions of the characters illustrate anything pre-conceived.

Implication

Barker’s emphatic position against messages, understanding and special knowledge in the hands of the author, as well as his position for the primacy of imagination and speculation over journalism and representation has implications for writers, students of writing and educators in the area of creative writer. Or rather, it might offer us a way out of the impasse I identified at the beginning of this talk - the impossible tension between writing creatively and communicating that process rationally.

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