

Bataillean catastrophe in Howard Barker's *Judith*

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Georges Bataille belongs to those twentieth century thinkers whose fiction and theoretical oeuvre explore in the most radical way fundamental notions, such as being and death, and their relation to representation. From his early involvement with the surrealist movement and his encounter with Hegelian philosophy, to his later studies on excess and eroticism, Bataille has always been preoccupied with extremes. In this context, what he terms 'catastrophe' denotes a state where being and dying coexist, a state of revolt and violent change, which is central to his aim of transgressing any confining law. Howard Barker's 'theatre of catastrophe' on the other hand, alluding to a kinship with Antonin Artaud's 'theatre of cruelty', revolves around the infliction of violence on the human body, and focuses on the relation between the suffering body and what he designates as restoration of language on stage. Published in 1990 and first performed in London in January 1995, Howard Barker's play *Judith* stages Bataillean catastrophe exploiting, thus, its potential for transgression of the human body and language in performance.¹

Addressing the fundamental problems of being and death, Bataille's notion of catastrophe seems to offer profound insight into his theory. Catastrophe rests upon a distinction made between what he terms as *me*, and being.² In his essay titled "Sacrifices", Bataille refers to *me* as imperative existence, what responds to the extreme demands of life as illusion, an impasse outside "that which exists" (Bataille 130-1). What seems to define the *me* as such and, therefore, differentiate it from being, is a state of exigency, explicated by Bataille's conception that the *me* exists suspended in a realised void, where,

if the tiniest difference had occurred in the course of the successive events of which I am the result, in the place of this *me*, [...], there would have been 'an *other*'. (130)

Hence, the *me* is circumscribed in Bataille by the “infinite improbability of its coming into the world”, or, in other words, delimited by the dread of *otherness*.

As opposed to being, that abstract *me* is discovered and neutralised through logical investigation, which seems to be accepting “illusory appearance” as adequate description for the nature of being. What Bataille’s theory of catastrophe propounds, however, is “an active reflection against all opposing limits” on “that which exists”, which rejects the *me* as arbitrary and seeks profound existence in “the *me* in the coming of death” (132).

In Bataille, being and death are kept in an unresolved tension. Death is not rendered as the summit of an imperative avidity for life, which, according to him, is what philosophy, discarding any possible mysticism, studies (133). Instead, asserting that death cannot be *experienced* as such, Bataille seeks to chart, according to Steven Shaviro, the *limit-experience* of the ‘*me* that dies’ which, defying illusion, reveals the nature of the *me* (Shaviro 85).³ Clarifying that this disclosure is not made each time “simple death” is feared, Bataille claims that the ‘*me* that dies’ appears as “the heroic form” of the abstract *me*, which accedes to its specificity only in the coming of death (Bataille 132).

Catastrophe in Bataille, therefore, is the state where, on the verge of death, profound existence is revealed, or, if we wish to be faithful to his imagery, pours “with the magnitude of a cataract” (134). In *Madame Edwarda*, he refers to the interplay between being and dying:

Being is given to us in an *intolerable surpassing* of being, not less intolerable than death [...] we have to find it in the feeling of dying, in those intolerable moments when it seems that we are dying, because being in us is only there by excess. (cited in Dragon 35; my italics)

Catastrophe, thus, entails an excessive discharge of being, its expenditure, as the *me*, transgressing the trauma of the “infinite improbability of its coming into the world”, reveals the true nature of existence. Bataille refers to this state as a “vertiginous fall”, a rupture, which can only be experienced violently and intolerably:

it is only at the boundary of death that laceration, which constitutes the very nature of the immensely free *me*, transcending “that which exists”, is revealed with violence. (Bataille 132)

Bataille declares catastrophe as the most profound revolution, where time and all existence are released from their bonds, “surging forth from unreal regions of the infinite, sinking into them in a movement of inconceivable force” (134). Revolt in Bataille, however, does not imply the overthrowing of an existing order so as to enforce another. Nor is vision of catastrophe one of evaluating and, eventually, negating restrictive limits, bonds or imperatives. Catastrophe is transgression in Bataille, yet, defying Hegelian dialectics, it does not transgress the limit in order to negate it, thus aspiring to an *other* totality. Catastrophe does

not revolt against the Law, reinstating an 'opposing' power, shunning in this way the questions posed by transgression. In his theory, as he says,

a dialectical construction of contradictory answers is set aside insofar as it is a prejudice that would evade the rending implications of any problem. (135)

Michel Foucault shares his point of view in "A Preface to Transgression", deposing dialectics as "substituting for the questioning of being and limits the play of contradiction and totality" (Foucault 76).⁴ Bataille's theory involves what are traditionally regarded as contraries, keeping them in a state of tension, the limit between them being not annulled, but transgressed in catastrophe.

In Bataillean catastrophe, the suspended *me*, in the form of the '*me* that dies', transgresses the limit-law of the "infinite improbability of its coming into the world". The transgression of the limit presupposes its existence, just as the limit presupposes the dread of its violation. According to Foucault, in such a system of mutual dependency the limit is forced open to what it excludes, is carried away by the excessive limitlessness that invades its core (73). Thereby, transgression negates nothing; instead, its nature is utterly affirmative, ratifying both limited being and what was radically out of reach. In Maurice Blanchot's words, "transgression does not transgress the law, but carries the law away with it" (cited in Shaviro 81).

The limit-experience of catastrophe, where the law is at once transgressed and affirmed, is a state of constant change. Bataille's catastrophic 'vision of excess' involves a state of *end-less* transgression. Dimitris Dimitriadis cites catastrophe as "the highest transgression of [man's] limits, [...] the incessant, perpetual and tenacious violation of interdictions and laws" (Dimitriadis 10; my translation). According to Bataille in *Inner Experience*, in such a state of continual metamorphosis "false pretences of knowledge" are denounced and "everything is returned to the obscurity of the unknown" (cited in Shaviro 105). As one *experiences* the limit, the outpouring of excess in catastrophe affects everything that was previously recognizable and 'known', without providing, on the other hand, the gratification of attaining a goal. Bataille refers to the continual subversion of knowledge, alluding to its affirmative nature:

NON-KNOWLEDGE LAYS BARE.

This proposition is the summit, but must be understood in this way: lays bare, therefore I see what knowledge was hiding up to that point, but if I see, *I know*. Indeed, I know, but non-knowledge again lays bare what I have known. (cited in Boldt-Irons 103-4)⁵

It is in this context of unfailing slippage that Bataille defies Hegelian 'absolute knowledge', pointing out that the extreme point of illumination always involves blindness (Bataille 57-8).⁶

In catastrophe, there is no achievement or profit. Everything enters a state of constant, excessive flux, where nothing is gained or lost, *ac-knowledged* or negated. What is always involved is the *limit-experience* that evokes transgression, and, as Allan Stoekl puts it, “a *rupture* to let out the ‘excess’ of an unmaintainable and thus delusive unity” (Stoekl xxi; my italics). For Bataille, catastrophe affects all existence. In his play *Judith*, Howard Barker seems to locate that rupture in the body and language on stage.

In his thirty-year career as a playwright and director, Barker has moved from the tradition of realism and that of the British political drama of the '70s, to his own theorization on performance, presenting his questioning of the role of the theatre in modern society. Incited by the Artaudian ‘theatre of cruelty’, Barker’s outlook focuses on pain and its relation to the primary components of performance, that is, to the body and language on stage. Barker is heavily indebted to the Artaudian proposition of “moving hieroglyphs” made of suffering bodies, which engage in “inflammatory images thrust into [...] abruptly wakened heads” (Artaud 27). Moreover, he seems to share Artaud’s faith in the reformatory power of theatre. Nevertheless, their treatment of language in performance seems to differ, Barker’s focus being on the restoration of language, as opposed to the Artaudian manifesto for the abolition of the ascendancy of language in performance.

Barker’s play is based on the biblical myth of a Jewish widow, Judith, who visits the general of her country’s enemy forces, Holofernes, in his tent to seduce and, eventually, murder him. Barker has expanded in his play the role of the third person present at the scene of the crime, a servant, whom he names “an ideologist”. The playwright readily admits his particular attraction to the original story, whose aftermath he dealt with in “The Unforeseen Consequences of Patriotic Act”, published in 1988 in *Possibilities* (Barker 1997: 174).⁷ In his elaboration of the biblical myth, Barker focuses on the meeting of the couple, in an interplay of death and eroticism, which is *catastrophically* carried to the limit both physically and linguistically.

As Alan Thomas mentions, what seems to characterise Barker’s plays is the “extremism of situation”, as they often portray “disastrous extremes of experience” (Thomas 434). Barker often resorts to historical material, and carefully selected moments of crisis and transformation, in order to stage extremity. He sanctions this in proclaiming that his theatre “insists on the limits of tolerance as its territory” (Barker 1997: 52). In *Judith* the territory of the *limit-experience* stretches between death and eroticism, allowing room for catastrophe to make its way on stage.

Death seems to form a context for all action and language in *Judith*. The scene is set from the first line of the play, when Holofernes persistently announces his wish to talk about death (Barker 1990: 49). His “terrible infatuation” with dying is amply expressed, and reverberates in the lines of the other two characters, even after his actual murder (49). What is, however, important in Barker’s re-working of the original myth is Holofernes’s own experience of

the limit of death, which is projected against the description of images of bodies massacred in the next day's battle.

Barker constructs the limit-experience of Bataillean catastrophe in the light of Holofernes "courting his own extinction" by Judith, just as he claims he does on the battlefield (56). The 'me that dies', thereafter, is entangled in an erotic game of disguise and seduction leading to Holofernes's murder, a game which, according to Judith's words, "has been a battle for him" (59):

HOLOFERNES: Do you think I can't see you? [...] Your mask. Your fog. Do you think I can't see you? The way in which it asserts itself is as follows. Frequently I expose myself to the greatest danger. I court my own extinction. (56; Barker's emphasis)

Clad in dead men's clothes, and speaking from "Death's perspective" – the only perspective he acknowledges – Holofernes ventures his dying, standing, thus, at the boundary of death (55). The limit-experience culminates in the dialogue that precedes his execution, where he watches Judith's sword over his head without fleeing:

(JUDITH *raises the weapon over HOLOFERNES.*)

HOLOFERNES (*without moving*): I'm not asleep. I'm only pretending. [...]

JUDITH: Why? [...]

HOLOFERNES: Because I must win everything. (60)

The limit-experience in the play is also established by the erotic game between the two protagonists. Eroticism, thus, works its way through lying and obscurity, and is eventually carried to the limit of death, in the manner in which Bataille has defined the relation between eroticism and catastrophe. As Dimitriadis mentions, for Bataille eroticism involves "confrontation of the extreme, that is, death [...] leading to unconditional surrender [...] to catastrophe" (Dimitriadis 15; my translation). In the play, the couple's sexual encounter and the dread of death are intertwined, rendered indecipherable at times, just as when a kiss tastes of death:

HOLOFERNES: Your mouth smothers mine, as if it were a hunger. But it might also be – a violence. (Barker 1990: 59)

As in Bataille's catastrophic vision, eroticism in the play is not confined to "hedonism, merry, shallow and easy" (Dimitriadis 15; my translation). Instead, to use Bataille's words, eroticism is "the approbation of life to the point of death" or even in death (cited in Shaviro 32). The distinction is evident, not only as Holofernes succumbs motionless to Judith's blow while whispering words of affection, but also when Judith makes her final attempt to claim the dead body of Holofernes as her lover. What is at stake here is the 'intolerable surpassing' of

being in catastrophe.

Just as Bataille has purported in his theory, the limit-experience of death and eroticism in *Judith* is one that entails the transgression of delusive unity and law at different levels. Thus, staging Bataillean catastrophe involves staging excessive being and “laceration [that] is revealed with violence” (Bataille 132). In *Judith* the “rupture to let out the excess” is traced in the mutilation of the human body on stage, as well as in Barker’s language of transgression.

Avidly approaching its own annihilation, the body in Bataillean catastrophe is eventually transgressed, “consuming the existence with great screams” (134). Thus, what participates in such a state of constant metamorphosis is “a body that [...] suffers and is torn to pieces, naked and defenceless” (Dimitriadis 17; my translation). Having exhibited his interest in the spectacle of pain in many of his plays, Barker stages the human body in *Judith* nearly strangled to death, repeatedly stripped, and, eventually, mutilated.

In the light of Bataille’s theory, the mutilation of the body of Holofernes asserts the affirmative nature of transgression of limits in catastrophe. Staged almost as a sacrificial rite due to the ‘slogans’ that the Servant employs, the decapitation of Holofernes’s body is one of the most riveting scenes in the play:

THE SERVANT: Oh, the barbaric and inferior vile inhuman bestial and bloodsoaked monster of depravity!

HOLOFERNES: Judith...!

JUDITH: Oh, the barbaric and inferior – (*Seeing JUDITH is stuck between slogan and action, the SERVANT swiftly resorts to a stratagem, and [...] enrages JUDITH with a lie*)

THE SERVANT: He is smiling! He is smiling! (*With a cry, JUDITH brings down the sword.*) Goddess! (*JUDITH staggers back [...] The SERVANT [...] saws energetically.*) (Barker 1990: 61; Barker’s emphasis)

Barker does not stage the rupture inflicted upon the ‘delusive unity’ of the human body as the climax of Judith’s mission to kill Holofernes, or of her game of seduction. Instead, Holofernes’s mutilation is felt as the intolerable affirmation of *his* excessive being in catastrophe. In the process of his “courting with extinction” and Judith, Holofernes sets out to “win everything”, thus violently experiencing, not ‘destruction’, but the transgression of limit. Thereafter, his beheading proves his power over Judith and her ‘mission’. As David Ian Rabey maintains, many Barker characters suffering pain, reveal “through ostensible disempowerment, a paradoxical power” (Rabey 31). Bataille has often commented upon this violated set of seeming contraries, referring to decapitation as a form of ‘potency’ and alluding, thus, to the affirmative nature of transgression of limits in his theory.⁸

Catastrophe in *Judith* is not located solely in the domain of the suffering body. The staging of transgression of limit in the play also guides language into *catastrophic excess*, as expounded by Bataille. Thus, what is traced in the lan-

guage Barker employs for his staging of the biblical myth is a rupture that endorses his proposition for the restoration of language in theatre.

Holofernes's experience of the limit of death and the prevalent eroticism in the play evoke a catastrophic state of tenacious obscurity. Engaging in a game of lying and 'truthfulness', the language in the play follows Barker's doctrine in questioning "clarity, meaning, logic and consistency" (Barker 1997: 43). Thus, the distinctive limit between falsity and truth is incessantly transgressed, yielding to 'non-knowledge':

JUDITH: [...] Lie, do lie! (*Pause*)
 HOLOFERNES: I know why you're here. [...]
 JUDITH: I know why I came.
 HOLOFERNES: I know what you intended.
 JUDITH: I know what I intended
 HOLOFERNES: I know it all.
 JUDITH: I knew it all. [...] And now I know nothing. (Barker 1990: 58)

The rupture in the language of catastrophe, hence, is located in an *end-less* slippage from knowledge to non-knowledge, or, to use Bataille's schema, from nonsense to sense and "nonsense once again (without possible end)" (cited in Boldt-Irons 104). Barker's language seems to trace at times the entire cycle, playfully commenting on the struggle for "persistent meaning":

JUDITH: [...] I intend to kill you, how is that for a lie? And that must mean I love you! Or doesn't it? Anything is possible! (Barker 1997: 82; Barker 1990: 58)

For Barker, obscurity is part of his attempt to restore the magnetising power of language in the theatre, employing the poetic medium of "contrived [...], dislocated, sometimes lyrical, often coarse [...] flood of verbals" (Barker 1997: 81). Thus, what Barker opts for is a surge of *excess* to be revealed in language, which is particularly evident in the long speeches of his characters in terms of defying and transgressing familiarity:

HOLOFERNES: [...] When a woman loves a man [...] it is the pity he enables her to feel, by showing through the slightest aperture, his loneliness. No matter what his brass, no matter what his savage, it creeps, like blood under the door... (Barker 1990: 53)

It is on the same grounds with Barker that Bataille refers to poetry as "the power words have to evoke effusion, the unlimited" expenditure of excess in language (cited in Boldt-Irons 94). In the case of *Judith*, thus, poetic language is privileged as the expenditure of excess revealed in the limit-experience of death.

Lurking in the borderline between being and dying, rupture and excess,

Bataille's catastrophe seems to suspend all contraries in its vision of unlimited transgression. Inhabiting the same territory, Barker's theatre seems to break the limits between obscurity and lucidity, poetry and drama, excess and access. In both cases the borderline can be experienced as nothing less than the 'vertiginous fall' of profound existence on the verge of death, the outcome being not an *end*, but a process of *end-less* metamorphosis of abstract existence at the boundary of death. As Bataille puts it:

The death that delivers me from the world that kills me *has* enclosed this real world in the unreality of the *me* that dies. (Bataille 136)

Notes

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1. The term 'catastrophe' is predominant in Barker's theory. In truth, all of his arguments concerning the main theoretical issues in drama theory converge on his 'theatre of catastrophe' and the ways in which it is juxtaposed to 'humanist theatre'. Undoubtedly, an affinity between the way the term is used by Bataille and by Barker can be established and traced back to Friedrich Nietzsche's influence on both men's work, as well as to a mutual special interest in the genre of tragedy. This essay, however, does not discuss this affinity but focuses on a reading of catastrophe as designated by Bataille, and its implications in Barker's *Judith*.
2. According to the translators of "Sacrifices" in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, 'le moi', which is usually translated as 'the I', 'the Self', or 'the ego', was in this case translated as 'me' in order to remain faithful to Bataille's syntax (Bataille 136).
3. Death in Bataille can neither be experienced as such, nor can it be known. As Ronald Schleifer mentions, in exploring the limit-experience of the *me that dies* "Bataille is in no way concerned with comprehending death" (319). Death, therefore, is not the object of study in catastrophe, otherwise, as Bataille himself claims in "Hegel, death, and sacrifice", "death itself would have to be consciousness (of itself) at the very moment that it destroys conscious being" (cited in Boldt-Irons 96).
4. In this essay, Michel Foucault traces the history of the concept of transgression in Western philosophy. He tracks the origin of philosophy's departing from questioning the limits in the "confused sleep of dialectics and of anthropology" after Kant's articulation of "metaphysical discourse and reflection on the limits of our reason" (Foucault 76). It is in this context of investigating transgression that Foucault welcomes the Nietzschean predicament of the 'death of God', constantly resurgent in Bataille's discussion of sacrifice.
5. According to Michael Richardson, Bataille's reading of 'non-knowledge' was influenced by the Russian emigré philosopher Leon Chestov. Chestov proclaimed that it was knowledge which had corrupted Western man. As Richardson states, "Bataille reacted against the conclusive nature of Chestov's condemnation, but he retained the actual framework established by Chestov and worked through it" (Richardson 39).
6. Bataille's critique of Hegelian philosophy springs from his theory of *heterogeneity*. For Bataille, total illumination entails a homogenising system that cannot integrate or state the element equivalent to its own blindness, thus hiding heterogeneous material base-

- ness, the obscurity of madness and non-knowledge. Pertinent to his viewpoint is the distinction he makes in "The Pineal Eye" between the horizontal axis of heterogeneity, baseness and eroticism, on the one hand, and the vertical axis of the transcendental element of illumination, of Law and homogeneity, on the other (Bataille 79-90).
7. In this play, *Judith* is about to give birth to the child of Holofernes, whom she has murdered. *Judith* has lost the power of speech, but she regains it after cutting off the hand of the representative of the state who has accused her of committing a crime by sleeping with the enemy. According to Charles Lamb, the play focuses on the point "where personal morality [...] is violated in the interests of the political", which is definitely one of the overtones in *Judith* as well (Lamb 63).
 8. Bataille explored the political, sociological and philosophical connotations of headlessness as potency when he founded the secret society of the *Acéphale*, along with Roger Caillois. As Michèle Richman mentions, the group often engaged in staging and re-enacting famous crimes of the time, showing particular interest in dramatisation, and even in resuscitation of the spirit of tragedy. Bataille's conception of the 'acéphale' as an affirmative gesture is largely indebted to the Nietzschean doctrine of the death of God, and, therefore, distinct from the psychoanalytic notion of castration as that was expounded by both Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan.

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Η έννοια της καταστροφής κατά τον Georges Bataille στο έργο του Howard Barker *Judith*

Δέσποινα - Αλεξάνδρα Κωνσταντινίδου

Στο άρθρο αυτό διερευνάται η έννοια της *καταστροφής* ως ένα κομβικό σημείο της θεωρίας της υπερβολής του Georges Bataille. Ο όρος καταστροφή περιγράφεται από το Γάλλο δημιουργό ως μια κατάσταση, όπου η βαθύτερη ύπαρξη αναδύεται όταν το *είναι* αγγίζει τα όρια του θανάτου. Έτσι, η καταστροφή αποδεσμεύεται από την έννοια της άρνησης και φανερώνεται ως μια κατάσταση α-τελούς και ατελείωτης αλλαγής, όπου τα όρια παραβιάζονται, χωρίς όμως να καταλύονται. Στο έργο του *Judith*, ο Howard Barker δραματοποιεί την κατά Bataille καταστροφή, ως παρα-βία-ση πάνω στη σκηνή των ορίων και περιορισμών που δυναστεύουν το ανθρώπινο σώμα και τη γλώσσα, μέσα στα πλαίσια της θεατρικής ανα-βίωσης που υπηρετεί ο ίδιος ως συγγραφέας και θεωρητικός.