

## The Spoken Body and the Utopian Regard

*Howard Barker*

Let us invoke the secret, and the greatest form of the secret, which is the art of tragedy. Let us identify the enemy of the secret as it manifests itself in the Utopian society, the cult of the communication and the treacherous ethic of democratic transparency. Further, let us admit at the outset not only the darkness and the opacity of tragedy, but also its euphoric repudiation of the law. Above all, let us luxuriate in its capacity to *utter* and its incapacity to *speak*, for what is revealed in tragedy is revealed inadvertently, sublimely annihilating the conscience of its makers, and whereas all text is inherently unstable, a substance only fractionally communicative, the tragic text—by virtue of its collusion with the fugitive art of poetry—is a broken pavement.

Let us now address the subject of the body, once a secret and no longer one. Let us observe the process of the decay of the body in Utopian society, its disappearance through the process of revelation, and remark the paradox that the unrelenting gaze results in the decomposition of the subject, and let us admit this process is paradigmatical for all that is hidden in Utopia, a despotism which, because it is humanist, exercises its violence in the name of liberty and love. Let us assert without fear of contradiction, that the body has forfeited its authority on-stage and off, and that the spiritual *injury of nakedness* can be restored by one thing only—the quality of the spoken word applied to it, for a public immune now even to the most exotic manifestations of the flesh can be lent the privilege of anxiety only by an attitude to nakedness and not nakedness itself.

How should the thing be said that the body itself can no longer say or utter? For we have seen and heard named all that pertains to the body in the documentary manner, and even witnessed the perverse relief so characteristic of Utopia that the body is not only comic and grotesque, but transparent and comprehensible, even *subject to modification* by democratic intervention, namely, prosthetic surgery.

Firstly we confirm that the restoration of nakedness—its recuperation from the withering Utopian gaze—is possible only through description, that what is *said of it* is crucially more affective than the *sight of it* alone, no matter how violated, dismembered, or flayed. We luxuriate in the paradox that the exhaustion of *visibility* implores the word to restore *perception*. On the other hand, we do not fail to identify the decay of language into banality, both technical and naturalistic, a banality we sense to be politically contrived. Consequently, it is necessary to discriminate between the verbal discourses of theatre and—whilst admitting the tactical success of Utopia in besmirching the complexity of tragic speech with the calumny that it is the property of an elite—to affirm tragedy's oscillating form as an utterance uncontaminated by the cult of clarity, thereby simultaneously confessing and applauding its secret and criminal character.

Secondly, in order to seize back the injury of nakedness from the benign and supervisory Utopian regard, we recognize the body must be mediated through the distinctly theatrical mechanism of characterization. The anxiety created by the actor *naked*—in contradistinction to the bathos of the actor *undressed*—is substantially the creation of text delivered by performers with whom she shares the stage, a condition shaped by longing, contempt, the entire repertoire of erotic disorder, a condition which serves to disobjectify the flesh such that beauty or its converse is ascribable from the application of speech to the surface of the body and not discernible in the body itself. The Utopian gaze, annihilating *from principle* the possibility of shame, renders flesh transparent, a hygienic substance, neither hierarchical nor individualized, in essence no more than a mobile *accumulation of the facts*. The tragic text restores to its public the privilege of suffering the opacity of the flesh, its impenetrability, the focus of an ecstatic ignorance. The war fought over the meaning 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—without straining the paradox remarked upon above—only the word can shield our gaze from Utopia's dazzling and obliterating light.