

Laura-Monica Rădulescu*

***THE TRUTH WILL SET YOU FREE:
THE INESCAPABLE
REALITY OF TRAUMA IN
DAVID HARROWER'S BLACKBIRD***

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Abstract: *In Blackbird, David Harrower's unconventional play which displays a battle of minds and emotions, traumatic memories begin to surface as the characters delve into a painful dissection of the events that left them mentally scarred. This paper analyses the traumatic situation seen from a shifting point of view, as traumatic memories are not rendered in a unilinear fashion and there is a constant alternation between the present and the past, so as to examine the way it is communicated and the impact it has on the individual identity. The play dramatizes Una's journey of self-discovery, as she struggles to find out the truth about the traumatic experience she underwent during childhood. I argue that trauma produces profound alterations in the self and relationships and the resultant neurosis is externalized as an interpersonal conflict. Therefore, the traumatized individual battles with issues of self-regulation and the fixation on the trauma produces an alienating sense of inadequacy.*

The aim of this paper is to explore the experience of the victim and to inquire into the long lasting, damaging consequences of trauma and the disturbing process of disclosing the truth. Time and space acquire new meanings for the victim. Oppressed by the reality of the traumatic events she endeavours to come to terms with, Una is haunted by disturbing flashbacks which intersperse also her monologues. Moreover, not knowing the truth about what happened fifteen years ago leaves her emotionally stunted, unable to form a stable relationship with a man. In this absorbing drama of the power of the past we have at the centre a recognition plot and the readers or audience, together with Una, get involved in a tense pursuit of the truth which will lead to the uncovering of the past events the protagonists had struggled to leave behind. In this sense, we shall refer to the cynegetic model, recognition plot and the way Una oscillates between ignorance and knowledge. Moreover, we shall try and fathom the way the play conveys the overpowering reality of trauma, an experience which triggers gnawing psychic wounds. In order to examine the vehicles of truth and the ambiguity and vagueness of the events portrayed in the play, we shall refer to Jean-Paul Sartre, Martin Heidegger, Friedrich Nietzsche, among others.

The play displays minimalism in terms of both setting and dialogue: short, truncated lines which nevertheless convey powerful feelings. This absorbing psychodrama interrogates the reliability of memory, the continuity of self and

* University of Bucharest; Romania.

describes in detail the way trauma sabotages attachment relations. The flashbacks indicate a wish to lay bare, to search the truth, as readers and spectators witness the characters' extended recall. The hovering between past and present reveals the distortion and refashioning of memory so as to affirm or contest what happened and is basically employed in order to fit each character's purpose. Truth is relative. Una embarks on an Odyssean quest for the truth of the past but what is revealed to her is the truth of the present because we can never be certain of what happened in the past. As Jean-Paul Sartre emphasizes:

Obviously error is necessary to truth because it makes truth *possible*. Without the possibility of error, truth would be necessary. But then it would no longer be truth, because it implies a freely constructed vision by means of an anticipating behavior. The possibility of error makes truth a possibility. Error comes from outside of human-reality as a consequence of a decision to stop the process of verification or to not start it again. But it is fitting that human-reality not halt the verifying process. In this case the false anticipations will not appear as errors but as simple attempts which cancel themselves out and are necessary conditions for the construction of the vision (26).

Blackbird reveals to us the illicit relation between an adult man and a girl, but this is a relation which resists categorization. The play explores the thin line between love and abnormal obsession, between puerile infatuation and deviance. The protagonists strive to discern between these dualities, caught as they are in a frantic search for truth, but their convictions are shattered by the unknown information that they find out from each other. What is certain is the fact that the play moves beyond simplistic black and white investigations, as for instance we seem to have a combination of love and hate that seems to linger in what concerns Una and Ray is also tormented by the memory of the love-obsession dichotomy as it is not clear for him which of them prevailed. As Nietzsche observes in *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*:

So it is that men flee not so much from being cheated as from being harmed by cheating. Even on this level, it is at bottom not deception they hate but the dire, inimical consequences of certain kinds of deception. So, too, only to a limited extent does man want truth. He desires the pleasant, life-preserving consequences of truth; to pure knowledge without consequences he is indifferent, to potentially harmful and destructive truths he is even hostile (...). Only through forgetfulness can man ever come to imagine that he possesses truth to that degree. If he does not wish to rest content with truth in the form of a tautology, that is, with empty husks, he will forever be passing illusions off as truths (23-4).

Stuck in the past, Una continually obsesses about him, maybe as a result of the fact that their story never had a proper closure and now it is a chance for her to let go of the painful memories and also to deal with the present which is likewise turbulent. She also seems to desire the "pleasant consequences of truth" and not the harmful ones so looking for Ray is, in a way, her attempt to demonstrate to herself that her suffering was not in vain, as we shall argue later on. Moreover, he is seen as

the only person in whom she can really confide as she was not able to tell the truth to her boyfriend or her family.

Another aspect that the play enquires into is the way the past influences who we are and the fact that we are the constructs of our past experiences. What is of paramount importance is the way each of the characters remembers the past, as memories are often confounding or contradictory, and the things they never found out or they found out too late, have affected the course of their lives. The play starts long after the events have occurred. It is not accidental the fact that Una came back to search him after fifteen years, because they have now reached an age at which their relation would be acceptable in the eyes of society. The characters are having a conversation in the present, that is the real time of the spectators. Una and Ray find out what happened in the past at the same pace as the audience. The protagonists do not have a complete image of the facts as they unfolded fifteen years ago. For Una, finding out the truth also constitutes a desperate attempt to assuage the devastating power the reality of trauma had over her. The characters find out different details at the same time as the audience does. In a way, it is as if we as readers or spectators are witnessing the writing process. The past and the present blend unfathomably, as the author writes about the past from the present of the characters. During this process, memory acquires a major importance. As it also holds true for Harold Pinter's *Old Times*, for instance, who we are in the present is heavily influenced by the way we remember the past and how we were then. Consequently, we are what we are, not only as a result of what our memory enables us to remember, but foremost as a result of the way we remember and feel that events have unfolded. That is why, for the protagonists, discerning the truth of the past is of paramount importance. Understanding what happened in the past, might help Una recover agency and maybe regain control of her emotional life which had been darkened by the long shadow of trauma. Truth, in the form of *anagnorisis*, illumination takes special relevance here:

The *peripeteia*, in short, is the working in blindness to one's own defeat: the *anagnorisis* is the realization of the truth, the opening of the eyes, the sudden lightning-flash in the darkness... This flash of revelation may appear, as Aristotle points out, either before it is too late, or after... (F. L. Lucas: 113-4).

At the beginning of the play, they maintain an aggressive attitude, as he feels that she is not the girl that he used to know and the person who stands before him is a stranger. She attacks him and accuses him of having destroyed her life. He is reluctant at first to confess the fact that he also had to endure hardships and to wrestle with the guilty conscience. It seems that they first test the ground before disclosing anything. Consequently, at first, they talk about banal things and he constantly reminds her that he does not have much time at his disposal and that he "will be needed back" and that he is not obliged to talk to her. That is why, he feels uncomfortable and rubs his eyes and she asks him if he is "allergic" to her. Notwithstanding, as their conversation unfolds, she seems to gather the strength to reveal her feelings.

First of all, she tells him about the traumatic therapy she had to go through, as she was forced to write hundreds of letters in which to express her fury and afterwards to write about hope and bright, future perspectives. It is immediately apparent that the therapy did not have the expected cathartic effect of the release of negative feelings, partly because she was not fully convinced of his guilt. Moreover, she feels that the others were the ones who talked about the idea of abuse. At one moment in the play she even asks him twice: "I don't know anything about you except that you abused me. Didn't you? Didn't you?" (33). It is as if she needs to hear it from himself, although she has been told that by others so many times. Martin Heidegger discusses about the difficulty of distinguishing between the true from the untrue:

Let us not seek the essence of truth in general, but instead let us grasp what is true, the true that is the sole law and support for our Dasein here and now. This *true*—how is it recognizable so that we can set it apart immediately and certainly from the untrue? This true—how is it certified *as* the true? Who or what can vouch that this true is not a great, singular error? Can we achieve and hold firm to the true without being sure that we are actually falling victim to the untrue? (Heidegger 68).

In this context, the search for truth becomes her life-long struggle as the incertitude as to whether he really intended to harm her, continued to haunt her. The strong contrast between the mental image she entertained of him and the picture that the therapist, the lawyers and her parents presented of him, made it harder for her to discern the truth. Lost in a wasteland of crushed hopes, desolation and misery, Una cannot resume a harmonious emotional life as her self-determination is subverted.

Incapable of channelling the unacceptable feelings, Una falls prey to primitive anxieties. Frustrated of what she has become because of him and the scandal that followed, and especially because of her unmet needs, Una gets involved in interpersonal conflicts and a promiscuous lifestyle, which are all deficient attempts to master the trauma and to build a new identity. A compelling aspect of the dialogues is the minute variation in tone, because after the initial tirade of accusations that she launches and his initial rejection, they start to reminiscence. Nevertheless, what lies at the dead-end road of reminiscence is the hard truth of the persistence of trauma in her mental life, becoming the agent of destruction of subjectivity. Una turns into a prisoner of the past. Consequently, what stands out from their dialogues is the way the present transfigures the memory of the past. This is because the past assumes a double nature:

On the one hand, unfulfilled promises concerning abandoned life plans or the enigmatic messages of the other (Laplanche, 1992) attest to the autonomous hermeneutic status of the past; on the other hand, traumatic memories can exercise a distressing power and intrude violently into the present life context without being transmitted with it. Trauma is a brute fact that cannot be integrated into a context of meaning at the time it is experienced because it tears the fabric of the psyche. This creates special conditions for its remembrance and retroactive integration into present experience (Bohleber 109).

This may explain in part why Una seems so intent on discovering the truth. Burdened by the traumatic memories and the fact that she cannot assign meaning to them, she constantly has to face the destructive reality of trauma in her life, which determines her estrangement from others. She does not seem to view the facts from a mature point of view. On the contrary, in reliving the trauma, she reverts to a child-like condition, helpless and in dire need of attention. Because trauma cannot be integrated into a coherent cognitive schema, it continues to “intrude” in the present. Carrying the weight of those “unfulfilled promises”, Una tells Ray the fact that she never succeeded in transcending the status of a victim. She does not seem to be very sure why she came to see him—to seek revenge, to reignite an old flame, to settle things once and for all. Her confessions point toward the way trauma destabilizes self-control and any notion of coordinated selfhood:

I did the sentence.
 I did your sentence.
 For fifteen years.
 I lost everything.
 I lost more than you ever did.
 I lost
 Because I never had
 Had time to begin.
 We never moved.
 That house in the street.
 I was talked about, pointed at, stared at.
 I lost all my friends.
 I
 I kept my name.
 I had to keep my name.
 Yes.
 I re-live it every day (28).

If he managed to get over it, to take a new name, to have a job, a girlfriend, that is a new life, she had to stay in the same city, facing the disgrace and shaming, becoming ostracized in her own community. She also became an outcast, living at the margins of existence because for her the possibility of a new beginning had been denied and what remained for her was to “re-live it every day”. In her case therefore, the remembrance process is a never ending struggle, just like the bound Prometheus whose liver was eaten by birds but grew again during the night. For Una, the mechanisms of forgetting do not function in the normal way and instead each day is a painful reminder that she is the same person, carrying the stigma of shame and guilt. Our names are a fundamental element of our identity. By taking a new name, and moreover an aristocratic one as Una sarcastically notices, Ray refashions his identity, becoming a new man, at least in the eyes of the society, of his new colleagues, who do not know anything about his disgraceful past. Una, on the other hand, lost everything, especially the right to start over and if he did his sentence and seems satisfied with it as it has cleared his conscience, Una is still a prisoner of the past. From this there is only one way out that Una envisages, and that is why she is keen on reckoning with the past. Having lost everything, Una is intent on regaining

her autonomy, as she feels entitled to feel like a complete woman and not a little girl that had been robbed of the most precious thing, her freedom. If he lost his freedom of movement and went to prison, she had been in a worse position, imprisoned by the trauma which came to direct all her thoughts and actions.

Another concern of the play is the peculiar way the truth stands out even if it jeopardizes the self. Ray urges her to stop dwelling on those events and to move on, but she confesses that she is powerless because: "I don't have to think about it/It's there" (28). Therefore, the stain remains there and she wears it in a way akin to Hester Prynne who had to wear publicly the badge of shame- the scarlet letter A on her dress. She as well is alienated from her community and if she had struggled to repress the memory of the abuse, others had forced her to testify to it:

They asked me what you'd done to me.
Then told me what you'd done to me when
I wouldn't.
You were only after one thing.
That's why you disappeared.
You'd got what you wanted.
My my mother screaming at me.
She
The police, the
A woman psychiatrist who spoke
Always spoke so quietly (58).

After she was found, Una underwent a traumatic police investigation. Truth is often painful and sometimes more unbearable is confessing it. At that time Una was a girl who did not know that what he did to her was wrong and so she was drugged and submitted to tests. The aftermath of the abuse therefore was also a traumatic experience as the psychiatric treatment she received proved to do more harm than good. The truth is not always easy to take in so Una has to face the reality and cannot repress the memories. The psychiatrist tells her that the world is a malignant place and a friendly face can hide dark intentions:

Adults lie.
They want things from people and they lie to get
them and, and don't
they don't even know they're lying.
They do not know themselves (58).

This duality, lies-truth, comes to haunt her entire existence. As she was a child, she had confidence in humanity and the goodness of people. She will lose it and as a result the world turns into a dangerous place as even the people who cared for her, her parents do not show sympathy and she becomes a target of disgrace from their part as well. As she loses from an early age the ideal image that she formed of her primary caregivers, this will inevitably affect the possibility of intersubjectivity. The ruinous potential of trauma does not diminish over time. On the contrary, it becomes central to her selfhood. As Herman indicates:

Truth(s) and Alternative Facts

Atrocities, however, refuse to be buried. Equally powerful as the desire to deny atrocities is the conviction that denial does not work. Folk wisdom is filled with ghosts who refuse to rest in their graves until their stories are told. Murder will out (1992: 1).

Violence, in Herman's opinion, cannot be concealed and its effects will always come back to haunt the victim. Even if Una would have tried to suppress it, truth always finds a way. The consequences of the abuse cannot be banished from consciousness; on the contrary they are forever grafted on. Una seems now intent to find out the truth from him, his truth indeed, as what the psychiatrist, the lawyers, the judge or even her parents told her were very difficult to accept and deep down she seems to hope that they were lies. This dissimulation of reality acts as a protective cocoon for her feeble self-esteem. It also acts as a mechanism of defense meant to save whatever faint trace of faith she still had in humanity. Moreover, she finds it difficult to let go of the infantile image she had formed of him as she realizes the fact that he had damaged her life but cannot let go of him altogether as her memories of him point out:

I took a Polaroid photo of you and
with my friend
we kissed it
we
put it on my pillow and slept besides it (42).

On the other hand, she does not seem to be very committed to finding out the truth, as the lies are more comforting and retreating into self-delusion is more manageable. That is why, even after he sees the little girl of his girlfriend, who seems to be very fond of him, she is not repelled by him and in fact they kiss. In the end, consequently, the process of reconstructing the past shows us that in fact the only truth to be fathomed is that Una is a vulnerable individual who does not seek retaliation but to reconfirm her convictions as in her cognitive schema trauma is the ultimate reality. The setting of the play is fundamental in this regard, mirroring their mental claustrophobia, hers into the state of a victim, his into that of an abuser who is unwilling to admit his gruesome acts and instead projects the blame. Trauma eludes coherent representation and when it comes down to the nitty-gritty, one has to endeavour to look into the void that it leaves behind and:

if we now want to grasp the essence of truth, that is, work it out, then this means that, through our acting, we must experience and demonstrate how much truth we can endure and withstand. This is the measure by which truth displays itself to us on each occasion, namely, as that which makes our Dasein sure, bright, and strong in its Being (Heidegger 71).

Their memories of the past do not help much in this regard as each seems to remember those events differently, in accordance to their motivations and Una accepts the truth only in so far as it does not harm her. The truth evinces as a series of undiscovered lies. Ray tries to counteract Una's version of the events in a way

that puts him in a positive position and she seems willing to believe him at times. She had also lied to the police that he only gave her a lift and had done everything in her power during the trial to protect him. Now she is intent on finding out if he deserved such loyalty. Ray, on the other hand, maintains that he came back for her, that he searched for her. The reader may fall into the same trap as Una, but the final tableau overturns our expectations. Filled with suspense, this engrossing drama in fact thwarts our expectations from the beginning as the confrontation between victim and abuser takes a nostalgic turn at times.

Una tastes from the Tree of Knowledge but what she discovers is bitter. In this recognition plot, displaying a “cynetic model” (266) as Terence Cave calls it, Una is involved in an anxious search for answers to the questions that churned her mind. The plot is full of intimations, false trails, and the dramatis personae seem caught in a game of chess, each waiting for the other to make the wrong move. In the end, it is the reader who is held in checkmate, as Una does not seem ready to face the truth about Ray. Una’s intense desire for knowledge drives her to search for Ray with only a photo torn from a magazine but her quest for definitive answers remains without an object as the end reveals to us the fact that deep down all she wants is to believe him. “*Anagnorisis* links the recovery of knowledge with a disquieting sense, when the trap is sprung, that the commonly accepted co-ordinates of knowledge have gone awry” (Cave 2). The final recognition scene indeed involves a shock as Cave points out because Ray’s arguments become suddenly questionable. Una’s *hamartia*, that is her ignorance, constitutes here the “necessary precondition for *anagnorisis*” (Cave 37). What Una recognizes is what she feared the most- Ray was and may still be an abuser. The end of the play therefore does not bring forward closure but more questions. The state of tension, which lingers throughout the play, is not dispelled. As Frye points out, *anagnorisis* is assigned to us, the readers or spectators: “we recognize the unifying shape or design¹” (Cave 194). This is indeed the case in this play as well. The onus is on us to draw conclusions as the playwright does not pass any judgement on the events and for Una tarrying under the tree of knowledge does not bring the much sought relief.

In this absorbing drama, Una’s relentless struggle to alter her life involves a painful search for truth in order to efface the mystery which shrouded the events that took place fifteen years ago. Driven by her strong will to uncover the truth about her abuse, Una retraces, together with Ray, the events that led to their running away. The focus is on the past and memory and what stands out is the long lasting power of trauma that destroys subjectivity and the chance of intersubjectivity. Una gropes for a truth that does not set her free. On the contrary, she remains under the bondage of trauma. Another aspect that the play explores is the progressive reconstruction of the past. When they reach this point, it seems that the clash of wills diminishes, the tension apparently defuses as they reminisce about the three months that their

¹ “*Anagnorisis* is the clarification for the audience of the sequence of cause and effect which determines the outcome; it is an epistemological event, but one which includes moral and metaphysical considerations (...). The reader’s recognition, then, is not the perception of pure structure in order to yield a thematic or interpretive coherence: the first element is subordinated to the second as means is subordinated to end” (Cave 195).

relationship lasted. Memories are reshaped and they remember the same event in different ways. As a result of the trauma and frustrations that have gathered over the years, she had developed a deviant behaviour and her arrested emotional development led to her inability to maintain healthy relations with men. In the end, with the explosive climax, we are left with more questions than answers and this is one of the greatest achievements of the play- the fact that it makes us ponder and, as a result, each of us in a way participates at the reconstruction of the past events.

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