

ON THE POETICS OF FIRE BETWEEN BACHELARD AND THE IMAGE OF *BURNING* *THE HOUSE* BY BARBA

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Dans le règne de la connaissance elle-même, il y a ainsi une faute originelle, c'est d'avoir une origine; c'est de faillir à la gloire d'être intemporel; c'est de ne pas s'éveiller soi-même pour rester soi-même, mais d'attendre du monde obscur la leçon de lumière.

G. Bachelard

AN IMAGE OF A SPECIAL KIND

Burning the House is the title of a book written by theatre director Eugenio Barba, published in Italian in 2009¹. The English edition changes the original subtitle ‘the origins of a director’, which resembles a biographical essay, to ‘on directing and dramaturgy’, as a more direct reference to the scientific content of the book. It is a fact that this book interweaves both subtitles in a quite complex way; i.e. on one hand, the book is the author’s biography and on the other, it is about the results of Barba’s work and research on composition of a performance and an actor’s training. It is impossible to determine which of the two lines is most prevailing and it is just in such undecided territory that the definition of the expression ‘Burning the house’ can be found.

The image of ‘Burning the house’ is born from poetry and Barba borrows this expression from the poem *Dziecię Europy* (‘Child of Europe’)

¹ E. Barba, *Bruciare la casa, le origini di un regista*, Milano 2009; English translation: idem, *Burning the House. On Directing and Dramaturgy*, transl. J. Barba, London – New York 2010.

by Czesław Miłosz² and the poem *The Seventh* by Attila József³. Barba chooses it to metaphorically represent the sense of theatre and performance creation. In this chapter, we are attempting to determine if this imagery is effective.

The quality of this image is peculiar: it possesses a hieroglyphic character. Denis Diderot defined the form of the hieroglyph as the simultaneous expression of what is uttered and enacted. The hieroglyph is so emblematic that, while presenting simultaneously the thought and the expression, it also shows the coincidence between word and event⁴. In this sense, the image of 'Burning the house' is like 'a hieroglyph in which can be read at a single glance (at one grasp, if we think in terms of theatre and cinema) the present, the past and the future; that is the historical meaning of the represented action'⁵. The hieroglyph corresponds to the poetic unity of a 'crucial instant, totally concrete and totally abstract'⁶, which consists of opening to the historical sense of the action, happening at a moment.

The image of 'Burning the house' has a very strong poetic character that escapes the linear thinking of the philological analysis. Only a *rêverie* about it can properly disclose its meaning. The French Philosopher Gaston Bachelard called *rêverie* the specific way of indulging the reason into the poetic

² 'Learn to predict a fire with unerring prediction / then burn the house down to fulfill the prediction'. This poem is ending with the prediction of 'the era of the unchained fire'. Barba places these verses as epigraph to the book *Burning the House*.

³ The poem is entirely quoted by Barba. The first stanza says: 'If you dwell in this world / your mother will give birth / to you seven times. / Once in a burning house, / once under icy waters, / once in a sea of wheat, / once in an echoing monastery, / once among sows in a yard. / Six times you will scream, / but what can you do? / You will be the seventh'. E. Barba, *Burning the House*, op. cit., s. 131.

⁴ D. Diderot, *Lettre sur les sourds et muets, à l'usage de ce qui entendent et parlent* (1751), <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b86262546/f1.image> [accessed: 20.09.2019].

⁵ R. Barthes, *Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein*, [in:] idem, *Image, music, text*, transl. S. Heath, New York 1988, p. 73.

⁶ Ibidem.

imagination⁷. Bachelard's phenomenology of the material imagination can act as a lens through which it is possible to look at the image of 'Burning the house' from the point of view of the element of fire and its poetic and symbolic meaning⁸.

Bachelard dedicated a big part of his philosophical work to the analysis of the poetic imagination. He applied the phenomenological reflection to an unusual object: the images of poets. His reflection leads to the organization of poetic images into four main groups, corresponding to the elements of air, water, ground, and fire⁹. Through organizing poetic imagery into these material elements, Bachelard comes to the definition of the *rêverie* as a specific way of human rationality working complementarily to the scientific mind. That is why his work as a philosopher is usually divided in two fields: one related to poetics and the other to epistemology. However, his general perspective is complete and not divided, as his main aim is to critique positivistic reason without renouncing completely to rationalism.

In his posthumous book, *Fragment d'une poétique du feu*, Bachelard bases his reflections on three important myths related to fire: The Phoenix, Prometheus and Empedocles' death. The ideas of origin, revolt and a pure act, each corresponding to the aforementioned three myths, are all present in the image of 'Burning the house' by Eugenio Barba.

While witnessing the interpretation of fire in the realm of poetic imagination, we are going to trace correspondences that we found within the image of 'Burning the house' by Eugenio Barba and we will underline in which way the element of fire as poetic imagery can connect to theatre and performance.

⁷ The foundation of the idea of the *rêverie* in Bachelard has to be traced from his most metaphysical book about the problem of time – *La dialectique de la durée* (1936).

⁸ Bachelard's works on the element of fire are: *La Psychanalyse du feu* (1938), and the posthumous: *Fragments d'une poétique du feu*, ed. S. Bachelard, Paris 1988.

⁹ The others books by Bachelard about the material imagination are: *L'Eau et les Rêves* (1942); *L'Air et les songes* (1943); *La Terre et les Rêveries du repos* (1946); *La Terre et les Rêveries de la volonté* (1948).

RÊVERIE ON THE IMAGE OF 'BURNING THE HOUSE'

Our own *rêverie* on the image of 'Burning the house' can appear as the fulfillment of a parable. A parable can be different although having the same ending. For example, let's imagine a man who builds a house as he wants to have a place to live and work. He succeeds, his work is very productive however, it is also energy consuming. As a result of his activity, an accident happens and a fire starts. The house, that he built for performing his work, burns down. In this parable, the key point is in the accident causing the fire. Was it because the man was not vigilant enough or because he wanted to make a point after having realized that, probably, the house was not the best place for his activity anymore?

We can try to imagine a different story. This one starts with a man who lives in a house with others and this place is beginning to feel more and more like a prison for everybody. In this house, there are rules from which it is impossible to escape. This is particularly true as the place defines the identity of the people living there as all the signs of their past experiences and their dreams of the future are collected there. At some point, this man accepts the risk in order to find a higher definition of himself, as well as trying to free the others living with him; so, he consciously decides to burn his house down. In this case, the house burning is the consequence of an act of will and not of an accident.

If we superimpose these two parables born from our *rêverie* on the image of 'Burning the house', we can see that the casual accident of our first story and the act of will causing the fire in the second one are corresponding to the same point in the plot structure. In terms of performance and acting techniques, the necessity of a fire takes the form of an event that is the fruit of a fatality but, at the same time, it is enacted consciously by somebody.

From the perspective of the structure of the parable, the image of 'Burning the house' corresponds to an act that has the quality of an event generating the meaning of the whole story. The connection between what is before and after goes beyond the cause-effect law for embracing a completely different logic towards poetics and imagination.

Barba's own *rêverie* of the image of 'Burning the house' is in the prologue of the book where he proposes his own parable about an event where a fire burnt down a whole theatre. He offers a vivid impression of the image

of ‘Burning the house’ while describing an imaginary performance that ends with a fire:

They rush with the coffin to the bottom of the garden, deposit it on a pile of firewood, sprinkle petrol on it and light a match. Then they all run away and lock themselves in their rooms, right behind the spectators. Darkness. The Poor Black Man, scorched and deathly pale, advances holding a torch in his hand. He sets fire to everything. The whole theatre burns. He is the only one to leave in peace¹⁰.

In his imagination, Barba sees a performance ending with someone setting fire to a theatre, burning it down and all the people in it.

Towards the end of the book, there is a chapter actually titled *Burning the house*, which underlines the presence of an open history of theatre art, ‘which explains circumstances and facts, theories, hypotheses, interpretations and influences. But under it another history flows, subterranean and anonymous as our dark forces. It is a history of passions’¹¹. He declares that this subterranean history of theatre has been his house. This different history is made of ‘solitude and mirages, stubbornness which looks like blindness or fanaticism, coincidences, loves and refusals, wounds and technical obsessions. It tells of women and men fighting to escape from themselves and from the theatre of their time’¹².

The complex and sometimes ambivalent association of images is typical of Barba’s aesthetic and his transcultural method. Barba has the merit to have extended the discourse on theatre techniques beyond the Eurocentric perspective. With his theoretic work and study, he contributed to the development of the idea of theatre laboratory as a specific cultural tradition. This is evident in his books, such as the most recent one – *The Five Continents of Theatre. Facts and Legends about the Material Culture of the Actor* (2019)¹³ written with Nicola Savarese. This book is

¹⁰ E. Barba, *Burning the house*, op. cit., p. XIII.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 202.

¹² Ibidem.

¹³ This book traces the history of theatre art through the multiple practical aspects that are related to theatre practice from the perspective of the material culture of the actor. These aspects are the so-called auxiliary techniques, for

interrogating theatre art from the point of view of the material culture of the actor, touching also the ambitious question of the ‘Why?’ of theatre making¹⁴. It seems that, beyond its content, which includes lots of details meant to broaden the knowledge about the history of theatre art, the book also discusses the role of the theatre artist and the possibility of theatre existing as an art form.

Barba recognizes his origins as a theatre director in the tradition of the Great Reformers of theatre at the end of the XIX century and the beginning of the XX century¹⁵. Nevertheless, this tradition can also be considered, metaphorically, as the house to be burned.

The protagonists of the Great Reform defined their practice after a strong act of refusal of the current state of things in the theatre arts. While refusing, they placed themselves aside from society. The Reformers of theatre are, for Barba, ‘masters of Disorder, possessed by an almost shameless fervour which they expressed in words of fire and through rigorous practices’¹⁶. He is considering the Great Reform as a place to search for his family roots as a director, pedagogue, and initiator of a laboratory work.

This was the ‘theatre’s big bang’¹⁷. He also called it a ‘theatre revolt’, protagonists of which ‘raised questions which were so absurd that they were

distinguishing them from the artistic techniques that are instead subject of the previous book with Savarese: *The Secret Art of the Actor* (1993). This book is a collection of hundreds of images, quotations as well as new texts written also by other contributors to the volume.

¹⁴ Chapter of the book *The Five Continents of Theatre* are based on questions about theatre; there are two Flaubertian characters, Bouvard and Pecuchet, trying to come to an understanding of what theatre is: When?, Where?, How?, for Whom?, Why?. The sixth chapter is about ‘the fallen pages from the notebook of Bouvard and Pecuchet’, with a subchapter called *Fires* almost at the end.

¹⁵ The Great Reform of theatre is a movement of renovation in theatre art starting in 1876, with the inauguration of the *Festspielhaus* in Bayreuth. This movement is connected with the name of important theatre artists that inspired schools and traditions. For a map and a chronology of the Great Reform of Theatre see: E. Barba, N. Savarese, *The Five Continents of Theatre. Facts and Legends about the Material Culture of the Actor*, Leiden 2019, p. 171–203.

¹⁶ E. Barba, *Burning the House*, op. cit., p. 18.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 202.

met with indifference and derision¹⁸. Barba uses the word ‘incendiary’¹⁹ for characterizing these questions, in relation to the establishment of traditional theatre and society.

The theatre born from the Great Reformers of the XX century, ‘from Stanislavski to Grotowski’, is the environment of Barba’s quest for his identity as a director. He calls them ‘my theatrical ancestors’ which inspired him for ‘the motivations which urged them to separate themselves from the values and practices of the theatre of their epoch’²⁰.

Barba is acting as the protagonist of the parable of his dreamed performance described in the prologue, since he declares:

I have only been an epigone living in the old house of ancestors. I struggled to decipher their secrets and excesses. My zeal has set their practices and ideas on fire. In the smoke, I had a glimpse of a sense that was mine alone. [...] Tradition doesn’t exist. I am a tradition-in-life. It materialises and transcends my experience and those of the ancestors I have incinerated. [...] When I disappear, this tradition-in-life will be extinguished. Perhaps one day a young man or a woman, born along by their dark forces, will exhume my legacy and appropriate it, burning it with the temperature of their actions. Thus, in an act of passion, will and revolt, the unintentional heir will intuit my secret at the same moment in which she apprehends the sense of her heretic tradition²¹.

Barba’s legacy as a director will be taken and destroyed again with an incendiary passion. From the ashes of the past actions something new will rise again. Facing the temperature of new actions, Barba’s teaching just ‘evaporates. And falls as rain on the head of whom least expects it’²².

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 18.

¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 19 and 202.

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 202.

²¹ Ibidem, p. 203.

²² E. Barba, N. Savarese, op. cit. On March 29th 2019 Eugenio Barba declared to leave the direction of the Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium. The text of this declaration is published here: <https://odinteatret.dk/news/eugenio-barba-leaves-the-direction-of-the-nordisk-teaterlaboratorium/> [accessed: 20.09.2019].

REBIRTH, REVOLT AND ACT

In the history, many theatres burned down and were then reconstructed. Those theatres, such as the renowned opera theatre 'La Fenice' in Venice, usually took the name of the Phoenix, the bird of fire born from its ashes. In Barba's last book, co-authored with Savarese, the *Five Continents of Theatre*, the image of a Phoenix is placed at the very beginning. The authors seem to suggest that the complex phenomenon of theatre is lasting for centuries and is transforming, just like the Phoenix, whose birth occurs again and again, precisely every five hundred years.

The symbolic and poetic image of the Phoenix represents the coincidence between the moment of blindness and obscurity, and the rebirth of light. Gaston Bachelard describes the poetic power of the image of the Phoenix as '*courage du renouveau*' ('courage of the renewal')²³.

In many occasions, inspired by the masters of the Great Reform, Barba underlined the fundamental role of refusal enhancing a resistant attitude as well as the idea of a non-violent revolt against conformism as a programmatic element of his theatre aesthetics. As per the reflection of Bachelard on the poetics of fire, the myth of Prometheus underlines the sense of *dissidence* which is not converted into destructive acts, but rather into an act for the humanity. In Barba's storytelling, the artist as an individual, breaks through the obligatory choices of his own biography by embracing the utopia of his artistic work. Art itself becomes a source of life for the artist and the instrument for a personal revolution.

The rebellious act plays an important part here. More than the promethean figure in itself, the promethean action is a metaphor for the artistic work. As we take a closer look at the myth, the main focus is actually on Prometheus' action of stealing the fire from the gods in order to offer it to the community of human beings.

In the text *Tu es le fils de quelqu'un* ('You Are Someone's Son'), Jerzy Grotowski says that 'art is deeply rebellious. Bad artists *talk* about rebellion, but true artists *do* the rebellion. They respond to the consecrated order by an act'²⁴. Barba finds his own origins exactly in this attitude and he connects

²³ G. Bachelard, *Fragments d'une poétique du feu*, op. cit., p. 91.

²⁴ J. Grotowski, *Tu es le fils de quelqu'un* ['You Are Someone's Son'], [in:] *The Grotowski Sourcebook*, eds. R. Schechner, L. Wolford, transl. T.K. Wiewiorowski, London – New York 1997, p. 295.

his theatrical research to a personal quest for his own identity, thus, following the lesson of his master Grotowski.

Grotowski defines the task of the non-dilettante artist in the ‘question of man’ and recognizes that, besides the technical knowledge, ‘there’s an artistic credibility and in front of you something which does not demand technical competence, but competence of yourself’²⁵. In this perspective, the only possible way to follow the art of theatre is an *incendiary* one, in the sense of full passion and personal commitment.

A MOMENT OF DISORDER

The search for the pure act is the actualization of the artist’s rebellion. The predilection for an act over words is stated also in the quotation by Pirandello that Barba places as epigraph to the Prologue of the book *Burning the House*: ‘The work of art in theatre is no longer the text of playwright, but an act of life to be created, moment by moment, on the stage’²⁶.

Pirandello is considered the master of metatheatrical aesthetics, especially after his most famous play *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921). This play ends with the character The Son committing suicide with a revolver. For the author, this final act should be a real event happening on stage. Of course, the author didn’t mean that any physical being should be harmed on stage, but it must happen for real that the character, i.e. a metaphysical being, shoots himself and dies. This instantaneous correlation between the time of storytelling and the time of history is key to understanding the idea of action in theatre, as it is for Barba’s use of the expression ‘Burning the house’.

This predilection for the act in Pirandello is so evident that scholars like Martin Puchner are underlining its violent quality²⁷. Puchner associates

²⁵ Ibidem, s. 305.

²⁶ E. Barba, *Burning the House*, op. cit., p. XI.

²⁷ M. Puchner, *The Drama of Ideas*, New York 2010. We are not entirely convinced that these pure acts reflect just, as Puchner says, ‘a desire to end the talking and start the action’ (ibidem, p. 104), while we rather assume that they correspond to a multidimensional dramatic structure, in which the lines of words and acts are interacting since the beginning of the play, thus appearing clearly in their separated interplay only at the end. The author’s choice of using final violent acts such as the suicide, is probably reflecting the aesthetic of the time (Italy in 20’s), where

this predilection for violence with the structure of metatheatrical plays. He traces the origin of metatheatre to the cave parable from the seventh book of Plato's *Republic*:

As in so many other metaplays this one begins in prison, and its drama consists of the prisoner's escape, the breaking of the shackles, and the turning around and recognition of the setup of the cave, with its fire, the objects, and the way in which they cast shadows onto the wall of the cave. Finally, the prisoner is freed, escapes from the cave, and beholds the things themselves. Violence here happens upon his return to the cave, when his report from the outside is greeted with laughter and even threats of death²⁸.

The 'ritual of Disorder'²⁹ is the title given to the tale about Barba's father's death. This chapter has a relevant role in the whole composition of the book. As we can imagine, the father represents the house, in the sense of origins but also traditions. The father is the master, but also is the other one. As in an ancient ritual, things have to change in order to continue to live: 'In order not to die as son, I had to grow, to become a father able to procure what is necessary and yet *incapable* of forgetting the hunger from when I was a son'³⁰. The ritual of disorder is exactly what happens during a life-changing event: 'When Disorder hits us, in life and in art, we suddenly awaken into a world that we no longer recognise, and don't yet know how to adjust to'³¹.

Like the father's death in Barba's biography, in this moment, 'the irruption of an energy that confronts us with the unknown'³² happens. Barba makes his point about dramaturgy, which he divides between organic, based on a 'pre-expressive level of organisation', and 'evocative, causing a change of state: the reversal, the irruption of Disorder in the order of peripeteias,

in fact historical fascism was ruling and the society was more anesthetized to violence. However, it is curious that the fascist censorship of the time was forbidding suicidal stories to be published, while this could not happen with Pirandello.

²⁸ Ibidem, p. 105.

²⁹ E. Barba, *Burning the House*, op. cit., p. 35.

³⁰ Ibidem, p. 16.

³¹ Ibidem, p. 19.

³² Ibidem, p. 17.

of the plot and montage³³. This conscious, 'sharp and effective' way of causing the irruption of Disorder is like the action described by the expression 'Burning the house'.

In the point of the 'irruption of Disorder', anyone (of course the artist, but also the reader or the spectator) can understand the adventure of the protagonist/author, while the two dimensions of art and life are colliding. An event as such corresponds to dramaturgy, in what Barba calls the moment of truth, after which (or before which) anything and anyone cannot be the same. This truth is poetic, not historical or logical, as Agamben explains in his short pamphlet *L'avventura* ('The Adventure')³⁴. Agamben defines adventure as the coincidence between storytelling and event. He says that the adventure is made to be happening to somebody and somewhere. For this reason, Perceval, before leaving, doesn't have a name and only at the end he will know that he is Perceval the *Galois*³⁵. Agamben observes that the identity of the hero doesn't pre-exist his own action.

Barba's quest as an artist presented in the book *Burning the House* is the same quest as the hero's search for the truth. The idea of 'Burning the house' corresponds to this moment of truth that, in the dramaturgy, has a form of an event-act, in which poetic and ontological lines are coincident. This coincidence is part of the artistic process of research. However, any predetermined reality exists beside the hero who is not yet himself, unless when starting and ending the adventure by mentioning it.

Jerzy Grotowski, in a text from a conference in Paris titled *Teatr i rytuał* ('Theatre and Ritual')³⁶, mentions the character of Perceval, the adventurer in search of The Holy Grail, comparing it to the process of creation in theatrical research. Grotowski refers to it as the underlining importance of asking the essential questions and the necessity of the search. In this model, there is the essence of Grotowski's work as coincidence between

³³ Ibidem, p. 211.

³⁴ G. Agamben, *L'avventura*, Firenze 2015, p. 28.

³⁵ Ibidem, p. 64.

³⁶ J. Grotowski, *Teatr i rytuał*, [in:] idem, *Teksty zebrane*, eds. A. Adamięcka-Sitek, M. Biagini, D. Kosiński, C. Pollastrelli, T. Richards, I. Stokfiszewski, Warszawa 2012, p. 372.

the telling of the story and the event, as in the rituals in which the miracle is re-enacted.

Looking at the structure of Barba's biography as it is presented in the book *Burning the House*, the story of the protagonist starts from the quest of identity that takes him far from his homeland, living as a foreigner and a vagabond, almost rejected by society. After a beginning that starts from a refusal, a sort of rebellion to the common order, that is accompanied by the sense of being banned and a vagabond, the artist starts a process of searching for himself in his work.

While facing the truth of a tragic event, such as the example of his father's death, everything (in terms of certainties and beliefs) burns down. From the point of view of the dramaturgy and performance, this moment of truth causes a sense disorder. The discovery of truth needs to be followed by the coming back to the community of other human beings. There is the final recognition of the hero, the banned one, and a common catharsis. Everybody is reconciliated.

There is a connection between returning towards the human community and the meaning brought by the idea of 'Burning the house' for Barba. At this point of the parable, the protagonist acts in front of everybody. The pure act is a moment of truth in which the conscience is fully awoken. The house, i.e. what is shared with others and always thought to be there, more or less stable and eternal, burns down. The artist has to go through this process in order to find himself again as an individual in the artistic work, independently from any master, school, or tradition.

Bachelard associates the poetic meaning of fire to the pure act, as in the myth of Empedocles falling into Mount Etna. As Bachelard says, we have here an *act-image* or *image-act*³⁷. This act gives a poetic meaning that overcomes the contemplation. The act itself, in its purity, has a mythopoetic value and overcomes anything or anyone involved in it. There is a passage from the contemplation to the participation, says Bachelard³⁸. The word 'participation' is definitely evoking the social aspect of theatre, as for Barba, because the action realizes itself outside, publicly, like in the theatre.

³⁷ G. Bachelard, *Fragments d'une poétique du feu*, op. cit., p. 159.

³⁸ Ibidem, p. 161.

At the end of the book *The Five Continents of Theatre*, Barba makes an auto quotation from the book *Burning the House*:

I am sure that there will always be people – a few or many, depending on the waves of history – who will practice theatre as a sort of bloodless guerrilla war, a clandestine revolt under an open sky or an unbeliever's prayer. They will thus find a way to channel their dissidence along an indirect path without converting it into destructive acts. They will live the apparent contradiction of a rebellion which is metamorphosed into a sense of fraternity and a craft of solitude which creates bonds³⁹.

From this quotation, Barba's answer to the quest of sense of theatre is to act and to restore new bonds on the basis of the deep relation that any individual has to a supposed common origin. Here, the word 'origin' takes a double meaning: the beginning and the source, as a mythical background where the theatre art can ideally resurrect from the ashes. The condition for the constant rebirth of theatre art is the continuous and conscious action of *burning it down*.

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³⁹ E. Barba, *Burning the House*, p. XVI; E. Barba, N. Savarese, op. cit., p. 395.

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The Idea of *Burning the House* by Eugenio Barba

Burning the House is the title of Barba's book on directing and dramaturgy. This expression has a symbolic meaning, although this meaning doesn't find an explicative description in Barba's words. In the paper, we are attempting an explanation of the idea of *Burning the House* in relation with theatre while also exploring the use of various images of fire present in the last book by Barba (and Savarese): *The Five Continents of Theatre: Facts and Legends about the Material Culture of the Actor*. In this work, the idea of *Burning the house* is the hidden *leitmotiv* in the whole composition of the book.

Keywords: Eugenio Barba, material imagination, act, metatheatre, dramaturgy