

## Terror at the Edge of History: Bertolt Brecht and Heiner Müller

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The GDR is a birth by Caesarian section, cutting through classes, families, individuals, on its back the NIGHTMARE OF DEAD GENERATIONS, grounded on utopia with a population that can find its national identity only in the international context, unavoidably entwined with an imperial structure which guarantees its presence and colors its futures.  
—Heiner Müller, “The Block Gnaws at the Wall”

According to the East German playwright Heiner Müller, the GDR never existed. For him it was less a nation than a position of criticism—a space from which to judge state structures, revolutionary potentials, and even the very *idea* of history. One of the objects of criticism was his predecessor at the Berliner Ensemble, Bertolt Brecht. Müller describes the failures of the East German state through Brecht’s curdled dreams of developing a scandalous theater. That ideal theater was to cut rough wounds into the body politic, surfacing ideological splits that would tear apart “an illusory ‘unification’ in aesthetic appearance.”<sup>1</sup> There was no room for such scandals, says Müller, because the GDR could not afford the time required for analyzing the conditions of its own emergence. It had a community of workers to build out of the wreckage of the Second World War.

The critical limitations of his theater did not stop Brecht from achieving recognition in the new nation. But if Brecht’s status as a cultural icon of the GDR proved to be “posthumous petrification,” it was because his once-radical aesthetic was reduced to Party functionalism. He became the “great teacher” for a fragmented and rebellious working class that was not a ready audience for his plays.<sup>2</sup>

It could not have been otherwise, says Müller, given Brecht’s return to Berlin was too late and his exile (1933 to 1948) was too long. Years in Scandinavia and the United States left him far from the “microstructures” of German experience, forever alienated from the true struggles of daily life and damned to what Müller calls a forced “emigration into classicism.”<sup>3</sup> Unable to free himself “from the pressure as perfection as seen or expected by elites of present or future generations,” Brecht was caught by the history he sought to change.<sup>4</sup> Müller’s criticism of Brecht

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promises, then, a way of fulfilling the Brechtian project while changing the approach to the past within the “microstructures” of GDR experience.

Müller’s stage pieces and provoking rhetoric reject the instructive potential of history. His goal seems to be the opening of new hopes still hidden below the horizon of inherited political discourse. The only hope for finding *that* hope, he says, is to lay bare history, churning up the rot and catastrophe so that nothing of the past remains intact. What would this annihilation of history (opposed to the End of History) mean for the GDR, given that Müller took its unity of purpose as mere illusion? He calls his principle the positive side of nihilism. And through his dark rejections, perhaps he thinks of preparing the way for what Giorgio Agamben calls the “coming community”—the collective that emerges through the paradoxical dissolution of any *societas* based on identity.<sup>5</sup>

Such an ideal community does not challenge the existing governance of a particular state. Rather, in an age of genocide, or ethnic cleansing, or the camp in all its forms, including the GDR’s purges, it exposes how any state requires recognizable groupings, named communities, or identifiable identities built from exclusion. For while the state may absorb an infinite array of diverging communities, “What the State cannot tolerate in any way . . . is that the singularities form a community without forming an identity, that humans co-belong without the representable condition of belonging.” Agamben, giving voice to what Müller senses as the underlying emptiness of any aesthetic appearance of unity, challenges the abstractions that supposedly fuel liberal politics:

A being radically devoid of any representable identity would be absolutely irrelevant to the State. This is what, in our culture, the hypocritical dogma of the sacredness of human life and the vacuous declarations of human rights are meant to hide. *Sacred* here can only mean what the term meant in Roman law.<sup>6</sup>

In other words, whatever changes occur to the politics at hand, at the level of state practice, sovereign law remains tied to a sacredness that exposes living beings to sanctioned murder.<sup>7</sup>

Brecht and Müller, within the particulars of a postwar (East) Germany, explore this circulation of violence and politics through their dramatic works. Both Brecht’s 1947 version of *Antigone* and Müller’s 1986 contribution to Robert Wilson’s *Alceste* stage the GDR’s relation to history, as a state and a supposed community of workers. Their respective turns to classicism are by no means searches for some lost source of community, nor a recovery of some abandoned wisdom, but should be read as critical interventions. Both *Antigone* and *Alceste*, of course, hinge upon the reception of the dead, and, in each, a corpse becomes the ideological site for thinking through traces of history. What once lived haunts these adaptations, as if in the Greek

tragedies they found embodiments of the dead who might, as Marx promised, weigh on the brain of the living like a nightmare. Brecht tries to rewrite this nightmare, demonstrating that whatever tragedies have come down should be recognized as political tragedies. Müller, on the other hand, seeks the “enjoyment of the catastrophe,” an immersion in the destructive element that might cleanse the way for some unseen future, some coming community.

After the war’s conclusion and his return to Europe, suspended between exile and entrance to the Soviet sector of Berlin, Brecht translated Hölderlin’s version of *Antigone* while in Switzerland.<sup>8</sup> *Antigone*’s plot, of course, is moved by Antigone’s desire to bury her brother, Polyneikes. He has been killed while in revolt against his uncle, who condemns the rebel to remain an unmourned corpse on the battlefield. A burial sanctioned by the gods would break the law of the sovereign. Nonetheless, Antigone defies the earthly law, mourns her brother, is punished by her uncle, and sets off the chain of suicides that culminates the tragedy. Out of this familiar structure, Brecht creates a blunt text on state terror.

His version opens outside a Berlin bunker, April 1945. Two sisters emerge. One finds her brother, a soldier, hanging on a butcher’s hook. Another soldier enters from offstage, where there are screams of torture. He threatens the sisters with the label of traitor as well. Without cutting down their brother, they are chased away. The play then leaps back into an evocation of Sophocles’ antiquity. Brecht uses a bare stage half-ringed by benches. The figures are austere. Horse skulls are nailed to tall poles. The actors work between those figures of the dead, performing inside the traces of barbarism. Brecht writes that he considers pulling the poles back into the darkened backdrop with the benches, allowing the actors to emerge into light and to perform apart from the skulls, as if coming out of the darkness of the past. Instead, he decides “to place the acting among the totem poles, since we are still living in the totemic state of the class war.”<sup>9</sup>

Theater’s only chance to bring effective critique to the audience, Brecht says, is to “find some starting point in the general ruin.”<sup>10</sup> *Antigone* is a story of seemingly pure ruin. In a post-battle world, Antigone’s gestures of mourning become acts of rebellion. Sophocles’ tragedy is fulfilled through the eventual suicides of Antigone, Haemon, and Eurydice, which together destroy the Labdacus house and, therefore, the power of Kreon. This leaves the chorus to sing of an approaching wisdom for the next rulers. The suicides are sacrifices for the future, sublated into the process of history as they are taken up as the basis for the sake of “wisdom.” But in the wake of fascism’s butchery, Brecht uses the affective force of the suicides, emotionally *moving* the audience toward responses that ideally strengthen an opposition to such systems of sovereign power.

He insists that the violence produces nothing. The dead bring no wisdom to a ruler like Kreon, who is described as “rotten and gruesome, unteachable.”<sup>11</sup> Brecht does not use the classical tale to provide some tragic lesson, but opens (for critique)

the image of a state divided—even at the level of the family—in its attempts to purify itself after war. *Antigone*'s critical power comes from its translation out of the past, a translation made to speak to the present, appearing in the atmosphere of what Brecht calls a “bursting confusion” in the wake of war:

Greek dramaturgy uses certain forms of alienation, notably interventions by the chorus, to try and rescue some of that freedom of calculation which Schiller is uncertain how to ensure. However, there can be no question of using the Antigone story as a means or pretext for “conjuring up the spirit of antiquity.”<sup>12</sup>

If Schiller saw tragedy ideally freeing a viewer from the conditions of time and place, Brecht's “freedom of calculation” is the freedom to choose, politically, within a given set of circumstances. Therefore he tries to make the aesthetic tragedy answer to the material world, a world outside the theater, a world that any single performance nonetheless inhabits.

To accomplish this critique of the present through *Antigone*, Brecht emphasizes Kreon's politics rather than his pride. Postwar Thebes presents a political space wherein power makes decisive gestures. Kreon's use of terror can be read as the after-effect of any war, a shock wave that blocks the very identification of terror itself. When the two sisters find their hanged brother, they must protect themselves from their supposed community. “If you see, you'll be seen,” one warns the other.<sup>13</sup> As if echoing Benjamin's impotent angel of history, the second sister would like to stay and awaken the dead brother, but the accusing officer forces them both back. When the opening scene ends, Brecht's contemporary Antigone is left, knife in hand, suspended in mid-act, neither adhering to nor rejecting the decree. Like Kierkegaard's portrait of Abraham in *Fear and Trembling*, Brecht uses her plight to expose the law. Each member of the audience, if acutely aware of what is at stake, can fulfill either action in the imagination.

“If only he hadn't died” is the lamenting line that closes the prologue. It asks the audience to recognize the cause of such death—conditions of war, soldiers dying at the hands of soldiers, and mourning forestalled by political necessity. Brecht's prologue makes this demand even while acknowledging, through the sisters' retreat, that there are forces to keep one from truly witnessing the hanging corpse or understanding its significance as a remainder of history. When Brecht's version echoes Sophocles' ancient text, it does so through the distortions of Hölderlin's translation, which is a willful misreading exposing the play to itself. Hölderlin's language and poetic inventions bring out “echoes of the mythic past and emotions that together constitute the juncture between the logical structures of archaic, pre-classical, ‘wild-thinking’ and the logic of rational ideas, norms, positive law that structure discursive thinking of the classical *polis*.”<sup>14</sup> Assuming he was

thinking of a German audience, even as he tests the model in Switzerland, Brecht's *Antigone* is situated in and out of a *polis* trying to wake to its own tragedy. The classical form of the Antigone story can draw Brecht's viewers onto familiar terrain so that the play, seemingly "together with them," can "go on to act itself."

Brecht's focus on Kreon's law replaces the moral pleasure from Antigone's sacrificial will and the tyrant's fall, with the tragic death of morality itself. Its failures, as an ethics brought to blindness by vast violence, are born out of those conditions of war:

The action starts from the crucial moment where "very little" is needed for victory and yet the most desperate force has to be employed, i.e. the extravagant proves to be essential. This commitment of the last of the moral reserves fails and hastens the collapse, *which in any case had to follow from the overall constellation*.<sup>15</sup>

There remains a fated end, a constellation writing the destruction. But this is not an equation scripted by the gods, or History as spirit. It is instead a new tragedy of secular power. To the extent Brecht's Antigone is a character of tragedy, it is not through her rebellion, but through her ambivalent relation to power. Deflecting what Lacan called her "fierce presence,"<sup>16</sup> an "absolute individual" whose passion and desire operate at a "savage dimension,"<sup>17</sup> Brecht establishes her uneasy relation to the power of the state. A sister to *The Caucasian Chalk Circle's* Grusha, who is said to hesitate when *tempted* by the just, Brecht's chorus describes her as an accidental rebel tumbling from the royal house. "She too once / Ate of the bread that was baked by slaves." The desire to mourn occurs only when the corpse belongs to her. But beyond the brother, the fields must be littered with them. Antigone's defiance becomes stained by earlier complicity with Kreon's rule:

The bloody hand deals out to each his own, and  
They don't just take it, they grab it.  
Only thereafter she lay  
Rebellious in her freedom,  
Thrust into the good.<sup>18</sup>

While there were already forces at work that would eventually bring about a GDR whose motto was "From I to We,"<sup>19</sup> Brecht was questioning the very opposition between the individual and the collective. The "unknown surrounds us," he writes, leaving the realm of "the good" unclaimed by either subjective morality or ideals of communal justice.

Brecht writes of Antigone's potential power in terms of passivity and uncertainty because no matter how familiar the legend, history does not repeat in action or word. There is always a translation that comes *after*, appearing through what Brecht calls a "bursting confusion":

Greek dramaturgy uses certain forms of alienation, notably interventions by the chorus, to try and rescue some of that freedom of calculation which Schiller is uncertain how to ensure. However, there can be no question of using the Antigone story as a means or pretext for 'conjuring up the spirit of antiquity'; philological interests cannot be taken into account.<sup>20</sup>

In other words, the play must answer to the world it inhabits. "Even if we felt obliged to do something for a work like *Antigone*," Brecht writes, "we could do so only by letting the play do something for us."<sup>21</sup> The coming of *something* is the perpetual *perhaps* of Brechtian drama. The "perhaps" is the distance between *gestus* and its referent, the stumbling of mimesis, the lighting apparatus in full view. Whatever drama provides "our time," as Brecht calls the postwar in "A Short Organum for the Theater," it remains at base undefined and in *play*. It is in motion, pulling the forces of the world in to be seen under those lights. The theatrical gesture, where "a single movement of one of the actors' hands may be able to transform a situation,"<sup>22</sup> can be read as the signal that says "open fire," or, at an Auschwitz *selection*, sends someone to the right or to the left.

In the imaginative space between the gestures, in the trembling cracks of the law, there must be the critical entry into the situation at hand. One passes through Antigone in order to apprehend the outside forces brought into the theater and put in place, at once in time and out of time, hinting at tragic freedom negated. Polyneikes, killed in retreat from the battle, is the rotting evidence of violence. Attended or unattended by a sister's love is less the question than how violence remains, reverberating through the dead and into the theater of the living.

Through the choice of *Antigone*, then, Brecht anticipates the issues underpinning a fledgling East German government striving to escape that general ruin: the terror of justice embodied in the corpse, the empty trace of history. Too simply put, the question for the GDR was akin to Kreon's dilemma: how to purge the past without mourning it? How to purify present motivations, and somehow escape, through a radical rewriting, the process of any power's inception or revolutionary emergence? This leads to that fundamental, political question of how much truth history might hold as its brutal root systems entwine us. As one of W. G. Sebald's post-Holocaust wanderers reports from the depths of the Belgium fortress where the Nazis tortured men like Jean Améry, "the darkness does not lift

but becomes yet heavier as I think how little we can hold in mind, how everything is constantly extinguished with every extinguished life."<sup>23</sup>

Because of the memories of those who were tortured, or did the torturing, where one was *before* the war became a serious question in East Berlin. The residue of Stalin's Western alliance brought intense scrutiny to those who could be suspected of having been co-opted and, therefore, unauthentic in their commitments. Wartime credentials were of absolute importance: "The German Communists returning from Stalin's wartime Moscow had little difficulty mobilizing their version of wartime antifascism in the service of the Cold War. Those [like Brecht] returning from the West, Jews, or simply anyone who could not or would not make such a dramatic and sudden shift of allegiance and memory were in an especially precarious position."<sup>24</sup> The war's conclusion and the new Communist East tried to cover over a bloody, violent condition that Brecht would find lodged in the body politic like a tumor: the concentration camp.

The camp remained beyond its historical specificity as the unimagined real: not a site, but a condition, what Agamben calls "the hidden matrix and *nomos* of the political space in which we are still living."<sup>25</sup> Brecht, Austrian passport at the ready even as he slowly advanced on Berlin, was sensitive to this hidden remainder. It explains his reaction during a decisive stop in Prague, where he stood outside the Jewish cemetery and recorded, in his journal, that of the city's 37,000 Jews, only 800 returned.<sup>26</sup> For he must have seen that while there had been a considerable anti-fascist coalition in Germany up to and through the war, the internal struggles of both the East and West to de-nazify—and thereby make a claim to a cleansed past—led to intense, often anti-Semitic purges in the GDR. Such a collective attempt to keep away the past, like some unconscious drive, allowed the repressed to return with a vengeance. It did nothing less than necessitate a reintegration of the very symbol they were trying to escape, the camp itself. Soviet zone camps held as many as 240,000 internees, all enemies of the East German state, with estimates of 95,643 deaths from starvation.<sup>27</sup> However sympathetic Brecht may have been toward the new East Germany, he was clearly aware of the price to be paid for such an attempted break with history. No war ends until the dead are buried. Or in another metaphor: "The problem with ruins is that the house has gone . . . . And the architect's plans, it seems never get lost. This means that reconstruction brings back the old dens of iniquity and centers of disease."<sup>28</sup> Brecht's *Antigone* captures the sense of lurking terror in the aftermath of war. He presents a world where that terror applied to kill off whomever might hold onto a memory of injustice, beginning: "to frighten the people, / the tyrant spoke of a bloody clean-up, exterminating the enemies under the Theban roof."<sup>29</sup>

Just as Brecht saw Prague exposed in its postwar ruins, he finds in *Antigone* the extreme conditions that lay bare the gearing of the state machine, its need for greed and its desperate attempts to re-affirm power:

In *Antigone* the violence is explained by inadequacy. The war against Argos derives from mismanagement in Thebes, those who have been robbed have to look to robbery themselves. The undertaking exceeds the strength available. Violence splits the forces instead of welding them together; basic humanity, under too much pressure, explodes scattering everything with it into destruction.<sup>30</sup>

The production enacts a violence *made* necessary, the extravagant *made* essential. Brecht offers nothing to suppress this explosion. The destruction is everything. He can only aesthetically advocate a resistance to its force, rejecting the predetermined knowledge fostered by the tragic. He stages not a sacrifice, but rather the acts and motives of the killing at the hands of the sovereign, and the chorus offers only a warning:

Time is short  
 And the unknown surrounds us; and it isn't enough  
 Just to live unthinking and unhappy  
 And patiently bear oppression  
 And only learn wisdom with age.<sup>31</sup>

Sophocles' soothing promise of wisdom becomes Brechtian reminder that oppression is unbearable. It demands a witness, even when to expose it is to be exposed, when, as if under a perpetual sniper's scope, *if you see, you'll be seen*. The natural time in which one would view the tragedy of Thebes contracts under the imperative to leap out of history. This is the rub of Brecht's theater. Tragedy remains bound to its plot, presented in that natural time of narrative he can *only* disrupt on a stage that suspends history. The implied imperative is for the audience act beyond the theater, even if there "isn't enough" promise to maintain the mind while "time is out of joint," resulting in a kind of Hamletic madness of overburdened perception. Tragedy remains in lockstep with history.

For Müller, the burdens that defeated Hamlet are the perfect figures for the demands of catastrophic history. "I was Hamlet. I stood at the shore and talked with the surf BLABLA, the ruins of Europe in back of me. The bells tolled the state-funeral, murderer and widow a couple, the councillors goose-stepping behind the highranking carcass' coffin."<sup>32</sup> Much has been made of Müller's attractiveness to the West given his exotic quality as a socialist writer "censored" in the GDR. When he writes about the difficulty of political work, however, the obstacle is not place, but time. If one turns their backs on the state of ruin, too much history remains unthought and as wordless as surf: BLABLA. In Müller, history demands



an accounting and an annihilation through whatever artistic means are at hand, however insufficient. Brecht's idea of presenting reality with whatever artistic means are required, Müller says, is simply an impossible ideal to fulfill.

With the realities of history allowed to remain in the mind, ideas will be left to "come back in the old fashioned way, as a nightmare, Hamlet's ghost."<sup>33</sup> Müller's cumulative project requires a language Brecht, through those complications of exile and return, never had the opportunity to fully learn and apply for himself. "The net of Brecht's dramaturgy was too wide-meshed for the microstructure of new problems," says Müller, while explaining his own attempts to weave a tighter tapestry of language, reference, and critique. Responding to Brecht's wide dramaturgy of political injustice that needed redressing, Müller's work intensifies the *perhaps* of Brecht's denaturalizing of history. Out of a stammering abundance of word and image, he creates something like a necessary present tense of everything. This is not merely a postmodern reduction of the all to cacophony or pastiche. Instead, it is the necessary politics of babble, replacing the babble of politics.

If Brecht gave us the forms necessary to see the illusions built into history, Müller goes all the way to the nerve center of perception, to how we *see* history and what it is that masks our perceptions. His contribution to Wilson's *Alcestis* offers no material of the past that remains as some historical referent, only shifting traces: mere shadow images on the lids of closed eyes. It is not that the audience sees actual carnage. Instead Müller presents the scene of the crime—a space without content—and asks the audience to imagine where there was murder, treason, and the imposition of sovereign law. In the microscopic vibrations of the political, history becomes too large and clumsy a concept to account for its own incremental creations. Leaving the audience to dream its disastrous effects—apparently unreadable, beyond analysis, and part of a tragedy past criticism—Müller suggests, even through Wilson's precise and slow staging, that history is *always and everywhere* happening too fast to ever be thought whole or truly grasped. As for art as pure aesthetic representation, there is a type of Beckettian break. Art as art is abandoned: "what remains to be done is the effort of describing my failure so that it will at least become an experience."<sup>34</sup> Whatever history *is*, as it is experienced through a failing poetics of knowledge, or even might be, in the reflexes of hope for a different kind of experience, it sinks into a language murkier than possibility.

Wilson's version of *Alcestis* is a hybrid of three distinct pieces. The main text is a rewriting of Euripides' play. It is bracketed by two smaller works. The epilogue is an anonymous Japanese Kyogen called "The Birdcatcher in Hell." Müller's "Explosion of a Memory (Description of a Picture)" is used as cohering prologue to the tale of Heracles' defeat of death for the sake of Alcestis's return to the living.

Euripides' play is a disaster reversed, loss leading to recovery. *Alcestis* is in many ways a study of the desire for wholeness, an escape from tragic fate. Admetus,

the king, betrays fate by allowing his wife Alcestis to die in his place and promises, in return, to never marry again. Admetus is fearful of his own death, but crippled by a future of mourning the lost (sacrificed) wife. Heracles goes to her tomb, defeats death for the sake of Alcestis's return, and, at the play's end, brings *Alcestis* back to the king. She is veiled and must be mute "until / her obligations to the gods . . . / are washed away."<sup>35</sup>

Reaching out to his gift and touching the veiled and silent creature, Admetus says: "I feel like Perseus killing the Gorgon."<sup>36</sup> Through the contact he confirms for himself what cannot be known by sight: that the woman Heracles presents under wraps is indeed Alcestis. If the Gorgon has a face that cannot be seen and is the anti-thesis of the face, it is *its impossibility of being seen* that Admetus desires to kill: "Amazement beyond hope, as I / look on this woman, this wife."<sup>37</sup> As Heracles says, "All that you desired is yours."<sup>38</sup> Admetus accepts the veiled gift and, believing himself capable of seeing what he cannot see, believes he has his wife with him, wholly undead. Does an audience also accept this? That figure of return remains covered and silent, a presence from which death is said to be in retreat. But the figure is not yet cleansed of death, the figure of which still has a hold on her. Wilson concludes by emphasizing the cloak, the obfuscating wrap that introduces what he calls a fourth character, a *seeming* dead presence among the living. Wilson thus preserves the strange, unfinished element of the original play's plot.

The Euripides story ends with Admetus calling for celebration and acting *as if* it is his wife, even while the chorus, "going," as if in retreat, says: "many are the forms of what is unknown."<sup>39</sup> Wilson plays off the mysterious potential that the figure is at once Alcestis and something *other*, perhaps inhuman, or the remnants of something human sacrificed. With his famous detachment Wilson makes the entire piece remote, ensuring that there can be no Perseusian touch by the audience. There is an insistent distance, a forced witnessing of what cannot be touched, effectively or affectively, through illuminating desire. The Gorgon is not dead and will not die. It is among us, Wilson suggests.

This idea of the Gorgon as a form of the inhuman within the human, invisibly visible, has been explored in relation to the concentration camp. For only in conditions like the camp can this death of human death be seen. There, in the universe of manufactured death, Primo Levi encounters the inmate who is alive but no longer living, the *Müsselmanner*, the empty-eyed "muslim" who had "seen the Gorgon."<sup>40</sup> There is, in Wilson's conception of *Alcestis*, a choreographed encroachment of this new threat: the unknown taint of the evolving forms of death and, therefore, perhaps, new fermenting desires for the retrieval of the lost.

While Wilson is well known for his style of an absolutely controlled chaos and accomplished slowness, a stillness in sometimes manic motion, his staging of *Alcestis* suggests something more uncertain and Heraclitian through the fastidious

arrangements. The stage appears as waves of history, so that as the actors wade in, they are trapped without the illusion that they inhabit the same *place* from moment to moment. For the suggestion of a primordial base, Wilson offers the mountains in the background. They are rock steady. Further, they are coupled with signs that cause the imagination, maybe against the will, to jump through centuries. With the sound of a river, the watery flow of time, the mountains show the debris of ancient wreckage: "Caught in the mountain were remains of earlier historical epochs: such as the carved prow of a tenth-century Viking ship and Chinese terra cotta funerary figures from the third century B.C."<sup>41</sup> And yet, he takes the base away. The mountain itself is destroyed, the firmament of historical time exposed to entropic force, as if a graveyard had sunk to ruin.

The mountain breaks down boulder by boulder, and trees morph into Greek columns, only to become, in turn, industrial smokestacks. Admetus's call for celebratory sacrifices comes to mirror his earlier sacrifice of the beloved. With Alcestis apparently returned, more blood must flow. What is made whole requires a sacrificial death, and, in a moment recalling Walter Benjamin's much-cited dictum that civilization has always been built upon barbarism, the symbols of Greek culture—the columns associated with a time of ritualized death—become the new symbols of the twentieth-century holocaust. Both Admetus's world and Levi's *universaire concentration* contain the guiding illusion of a seemingly necessary sacrifice that covers the simple killing. But before this kind of exposure of the illusion can settle into anything Brechtian, the symbols of industrialized death succumb to their own power, fissures of fire eventually running their length. In other words: how to measure a catastrophe that destroys even the instruments with which it might be measured?

Independent of Wilson's ideas for the stage design, Müller writes a "description of a picture," or a translation of image into word. He then plays with the idea behind this stage of stages, the visually veiled appearances of indeterminate origins and ends: the specificity of the visible transformed into ghostly potential. It is fitting then, that the text Müller writes only partially enters the *Alcestis* production, as if Wilson were strangling and suffocating Müller, making the text perform its own sense of submerged, latent excess. This could be seen as a sign of Wilson's clean creations again shaking off the blood of politics. He calls his method one of "putting holes in the text."<sup>42</sup> In this way, even what Müller calls his piece's "own scale of values" remains to be figured, forged tentatively out of the fragments he had come to see as the only form of historically and politically responsible communication.

Caught in time, dissolved by time—like Alcestis returning with the stain of the dead, mute, and, in a sense, still—Wilson's stage and Müller's description together become bundles of ahistorical moments returned to historical time as uncertain possibilities. An inhuman *sentence* of thirteen printed pages, Müller's

breathless pace suggests the mechanical intonation Wilson will give it in the performance. The written text begins listing the image's inherent potential with elements that suggest earthly components nonetheless constructed and artificial. The background of the primary image is a mountain, three trees, a "landscape neither quite steppe nor savannah." Clouds hang, possibly suspended by some hidden rigging. Müller writes, "the sky [is] a Prussian blue, two colossal clouds float in it as though held together by wires, or some other structure that can't be determined, the larger one might be an inflated rubber animal from an amusement park that has broken from its mooring."<sup>43</sup>

Free from boundaries of perception, the imagination of the speaker conjures what is both *present* and beyond the frame, what is in the void of an imperceptible past, or locked in the perpetual present. Even in the representation of natural objects, the describing voice hints at the invisible sources for what is actually there, imprinted. Behind the image are invisible structures. The three trees, despite their distinct appearances, *may* share a common root, and one contains a *pharmakon*—perhaps poison, possibly fruit. What nourishes also kills. This hermeneutical direction of Müller's prologue anticipates the interpretive ethos of the entire *Alceste* production. Wilson suggests as much when talking about actors and their propensity to want sources for the appearances they will generate. How is the past connected to the act of its recovery? As for those actors who would, from habit, search for the psychological kernel that would yield a character, he says: "it doesn't matter where you start . . . if you start with an effect and you think about it long enough, you'll get causes."<sup>44</sup>

Müller's contribution, then, is to thematize this process by radically denaturalizing even representations of the natural. This further forces the imagination to roam through the possible causes while being bombarded with sensations and reverberations of destruction, though what exactly is doing the destroying isn't specified. Brecht would have known and told us, with varying degrees of explicitness, but by building the possibilities into his reading of the image, Müller rejects the Brechtian version of history's abuses. Here it is not that a Hamlet figure can't provide justice, but that the ghost's imploring message, once heard, can do nothing but lead one to "burst in ignorance." As time elapses, the corpse, swelling with rot, bursts its own *cerements*, the encasing costumes of the dead.

The words of "Explosion of a Memory" render the image, itself a translation of the remembered experience of a nightmare. Müller creates the chance to set words into motion with something like the speed of history, which in its continually inhumane propulsions must surely be measured by something other than the breath of speech. And if history moves at a speed that would cramp thought, or outrun language, then only a text without punctuation, defying history by darting from it, could possibly keep up. So Müller, using linkages of the possible instead of

conjunctions, lets those words accrete on the page, as if only in the vast *acceleration of language* can one say anything historical. It is a method that is maybe more akin to Rimbaud than to Brecht.

A woman is in the foreground. Her “image rules the right side of the half of the picture, her gaze directed on the ground as though there were an image she cannot forget and/or another one she refuses to see.”<sup>45</sup> The traumatic-like memory that feels what it cannot recall, brings the reader/viewer into the image’s textual nucleus: terror and its perception. Like Brecht’s focus in *Antigone*, this is another problem of seeing. Müller, troubling the image and its reception, further attaches questions of what one feels. It is either familiar, recognizable, and, therefore, not sensed as terror, or it is a terror that comes veiled, unknown, perhaps unrecognized, and, thereby, all the more deadly. Unlike Brecht’s reflections on the systems of political threats *demonstrated* on the stage of *Antigone*, Müller’s sense of the violent, brutal imposition is that its threats remain uncertain, somehow felt otherwise than as pain. Of the woman he writes:

a fragile forearm lifts a hand to heart level, i.e., the left breast, a defensive gesture from the language of deaf-mutes, the defense is meant against a familiar terror, the blow shove stab has happened, the shot has been fired, the wound no longer bleeds, the repetition hits a void where there is no room left for fear.<sup>46</sup>

Protective reflexes voided by the onslaught of violence, the woman accepts blow after blow, shove upon shove, infinite stabs. Woman and wound(s) are mutual metonyms of emptiness and assault—as is the attack and the later description of the brutal fucking. “The woman stands in a void, amputated by the picture’s edge, or is she growing from the ground . . . and will disappear into the ground”?

What stops this process of violence is the promise of “one unending movement . . . which bursts the frame” but is itself “visible only between one glimpse and the next when the eye HAVING SEEN IT ALL squinting closes over the picture.”<sup>47</sup> Somewhere in the repeated blink of perception the arrested image takes flight, the elusive scope of the scopic becoming, in fading light of a Benjaminian flash, the ALL of history. Terror, as Müller projects it, is a transhistorical entity immune to perception so long as it remains locked in the transit of interpretation, carried by history until it is like baroque ruins becoming natural. Like Nietzsche’s truth that forgets its own origin as deception, the voided place of the wound that Müller describes can no longer hold the memory of pain. It is only in the moment—as the eye closes—when everything feels accounted for, that something like the Gorgon, which *is* the socio-political reality, can be witnessed. Of course, then it is too late. Hans Magnus Enzenberger wrote of the perverse effects of “Europe in Ruins”: “Europeans took shelter behind a collective amnesia. Reality was not just ignored;

it was flatly denied. With a mixture of lethargy, defiance, and self-pity they regressed to a kind of second childhood. Anyone meeting this syndrome for the first time was astonished; it seemed to a form of *moral insanity*.<sup>48</sup> It was the kind of insanity that could not feel the degree of its own continued destruction.

Circulating among the possible causes of a storm of violence that either sweeps Müller's woman within it, or is summoned by her, rising out of the ash of burnt bodies, she may be reconstituted death. A modern Alcestis, "burdened with the weight of the grave's soil," her return to the living would be like a circulation of deadly humanity:

Perhaps the woman is already on the way back into the ground, pregnant by the storm, sperm of the rebirth from an explosion of corpses, bones, and splinters and marrow, the supply of wind marking distance between the parts from which perhaps when the air for breathing has been resettled and the earthquake will blast them through the planet's skin, THE WHOLE will reconstitute itself, the copulation of the star by its dead.<sup>49</sup>

Witnessing the dead requires a break in time, as in the glimpse between glimpses, in the twilight of the blink when it, THE WHOLE, seems to be there. Müller's sperm of rebirth from an explosion of corpses is not only the loss of sacred life, it is death breeding death.

If Enzenberger caught the impossibility of measuring the depths of the Europe's emotional ruin through its victims, Marguerite Duras's *Hiroshima Mon Amour* can help make sense of Müller and the insistence on a rebirth that has paradoxically killed regeneration. Duras's film begins with the imposed "nothing" of history that follows the banality of rebuilding, of rebirth. The Japanese man repeatedly says to the French woman in Hiroshima, "You have seen nothing." She responds with a definition of trauma. At the museum, she says she saw the complex of "innocence" and "the apparent meekness with which the temporary survivors of Hiroshima adapted themselves to a fate so unjust that the imagination, normally so fertile, cannot *conceive* it."<sup>50</sup>

To accentuate the absence covered by rebuilding, Duras adds the note, "[*We never see her seeing*]."<sup>51</sup> The dead in Müller's text, growing, not disappearing, continually piling higher, destabilize the very ground of history, never allowing some distant future from which to see "nothing." The mountain that appears on Wilson's stage is the gravehouse of what was, with a perspective on history, above which an eye appears. This eye looks upon the changes, the stages, and epochs, like some angel of history, or archive manager. At the play's climax this mountain of history tumbles boulder by boulder, broken apart by collecting corpses, those dead who are "the secret pulse of the planet."

Wilson's shredding of the text further heightens the uncertainty of what textualized history can truly contain. But Müller's words on Wilson's stage take on their own kind of pulsating quality, the mumbles, fadeouts, the unarticulated sounds suggesting the secrets trapped below the surface. As the lights come up on a wrapped figure, that fourth character of silence, the voiced text announces, "I'VE TOLD YOU YOU SHOULDN'T COME BACK DEAD IS DEAD."<sup>52</sup> But dead isn't dead, as the figure herself, or itself, shows. The words are surely screamed, if the voice is capable of such a register. In preparation for the electronic chorus that will wonder while affirming "NOTHING," the Müller fragment finishes with "the crude design an expression of contempt . . . the blood pump of daily murder . . . providing the planet with fuel, blood the ink that inscribes its paper life with colors even its sky threatened with anemia."<sup>53</sup>

This is Müller's formation of tragedy. Representation leaves behind (or beyond its frame) what it cannot control, and what it does secure, as image, as illusion, remains tethered to the wreckage, like names of the dead. A catastrophe without end is one without despair. There is, in Müller's meditations on the corpse, a critique. Not a critique of the way history *is*, as Brecht would have it, but of what history demands we even consider, as with Kafka. There is in Müller a renunciation of the very terms history imposes. Müller provides gestures of annihilation, which can *seem* to remove everything but its own trace, which must remain.

To die in the modern world is easy, said Baudrillard, to disappear is the real (impossible) trick. Rimbaud could not outrun his own poetry, and Artaud, as Derrida said, could not, for all his manic will, shake the baseless web of representation and wholly, unalterably, BE.<sup>54</sup> Wishing to disappear, to provide a theater that destroyed the gap between acting and being, Artaud is part of the tradition Müller absorbed from his travels and studies in the West, his own theater moving from the Brechtianism of the 1950s toward the destruction of its inherited memory, forced ways of being. The idea of an inexpressible possibility—one between having been and not yet there—seems Müller's ideal position. Wishing to wipe away representation, or represent without content, his work remains tied to the imprint of the world supposedly left behind. What remains are the bones of a gesture.

In *The Man without Content*, Agamben asks what happens when an artist finds that no content matches the creative consciousness? That there is nothing there that is available for show, or that what remains to show, as in a theater of absolute cruelty, remains in excess of the possible? This is the blight of history for Müller, who in sensing what he cannot show, must tear at history so as to disrupt the spectator's expectations of a coming real. His art remains divided between destroying the historical realities of a brutal political world and exploiting them for works that reduce the real to absurdity. Müller is at once bound by history even as he tries to turn away from it, like his Hamlet, back to the ruins. According to Agamben, when the artist senses the excess of art and history, "the artist can of

course surrender to its violence and try to live” according to the excess. The dream is that by striving beyond the possibilities inscribed by history, “a new human station becomes possible.”<sup>55</sup> We can see Müller flirts with this potential of an absolute split, at least rhetorically, even while he realizes that reality and art remain locked in mutual orbit.

Stripping both history and art of their flesh is paid for by the eventual encounter of what Jean Genet, in *The Screens*, called the “stink,” the “rot that rots.” The nausea of abject emptiness in the facelessness of neck-deep corpses is, for Müller, both the cost of creating content-less art and the “privilege” that allows an “enjoyment of the catastrophe.”<sup>56</sup> The intersection of art’s remains and the acts of hollow critique, death for the sake of a new hope, the utopian pulse buried beneath a layer of endless catastrophe—all this is part of Müller’s continued connection with Brecht. Müller’s dramatic texts, however voided by their abundant material, are attempts to retool the history that squats, sitting, beside them. He moves the imagination through the corpses so that the last of illusions might be likewise stripped bare and raw. No redemption, no comfort in coming beauty. If there is to be a new imagination after the death of memory, then it will be a revolution of a wholly different order. As things stand now,

there is no revolution without a memory. An early design of total utilization of labor, until its transformation into the raw material in the concentration camps. I couldn’t represent this event—the disintegration of thinking, the extinction of memory—only describe it, and any description is silenced . . . when confronted with . . . images.<sup>57</sup>

On the hunt for the dead nothingness of the *Alcestis* figure—what the chorus called the many forms of what is unknown—Müller seems to have his ear so firmly to the ground of the past that he hears the rumbling dead that he must bring to the surface in that final exploding exposition of corpses. The use of citation and derangement allow an undoing of the iterable so that if there is a utopia standing beside history as it is, it might somehow find a chance to speak. Paul de Man argued that the material inscription of words, such as *power* and *battle*, were signs of irrevocable moments of history, lost moments,<sup>58</sup> and Müller’s translation of Brecht is designed for an escape from such hopelessness. Müller’s hope is without definition. It isn’t inscribed. He can only provide an art that challenges what is already thought. This includes a reconception of both the art and the artist. Here he follows a writer like Genet in order to reconcile, or at least understand, how a faith without presence or place (a faith and hope without content) demands an ecstatic critique that grants infinite possibility.



During an interview Müller describes Genet speaking in terms of freedom from expectations: “he justifies his existence as a writer because the world is as it is. If it corresponded exactly to his dreams or idea of utopia he would no longer have any existence. This is the aim of the enjoyment of catastrophes.” Enjoyment of the catastrophe is different than desiring the particulars of the disaster. Brecht had moved onto the ruined stage of Berlin; Genet, in his unflinching style, inhaled the stench of the Algerian war. For Müller, the circumstances of working in the fluidity of rebuilding, the wreckage is ideological; rubble from those intellectual categories that once answered a call for justice—Hamlet drained. He says:

We live from the world’s wealth in catastrophes and conflicts. I find it boring to constantly fixate on a possible world. It doesn’t make for art. Art can after all be a disease. It’s possible but that is the disease we live with. In our lifetime we don’t run the risk of recovering our health. We have to live with this disease and with the paradox that we are parasites because we exploit this world.<sup>59</sup>

Representations of history and historical possibility are the *positive side of nihilism*, an unflinching acknowledgement of the catastrophes of history where “ideas produce dead bodies.” If it is an abandonment of hope, it is only of the hope we know. The terms in circulation must be re-made through stagings at fragile limits. While Brecht offered the audience an imperative to see history as rewritable, Müller rewrites that utopian imperative: hope must be found outside history—history must be destroyed. Müller’s theater, at its strongest, becomes the annihilating disease that, as Artaud dreamt, would be an “immense liquidation” and a chance to gesture through the flames, an immediate translation of the traces without the burdens of memory.

## Notes

1. Heiner Müller, “Brecht vs. Brecht,” *Germania*, trans. Bernard and Caroline Schütze (New York: Semiotext(e), 1990) 127. The scandals Brecht sought to impose, says Müller, took place in the newspapers instead. Their impact was deflected, however, because the newspapers used the category of “arts” or “culture” to diminish their political importance.

2. 132. Müller’s own career spanned the blossoming of the East German state (and its eventual collapse and from this perspective he describes the GDR as suffering from a “state of siege [that] needed and still needs ideology.” This ideology is precisely what Brecht was unable to formulate for the sake of a working class that was taking shape too fast “in an occupied and divided country”—East Germans in name, but living “under the barrage of daily propaganda for capitalist wonders of the other

German state, the rightful heir of the German Reich which had shrunk to healthy proportions in two world wars." Müller says "classical Marxist categories" fail the circumstances Brecht faced, for the complexities of those circumstances "go too quickly to the bone." Writing in 1980, but already anticipating the Berlin Wall's destruction, Müller says Brecht was bound by ideas of "class structure" that no longer applied in the Cold War, and certainly would not be relevant "as far as the situation of a unified Germany is concerned."

3. 124.

4. 131.

5. See Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993).

6. 85.

7. 85. According to that Roman system, the category of *homo sacer* accounts for a being to be excluded from the law's protection. It exiles one who can be killed apart from the crime of homicide. Agamben pushes this extreme point of the law by showing that even in the most rigorous attempts at international justice, the annihilation of single lives is hidden under the language of universalizing identities: "It is significant from this perspective that the extermination of the Jews was not conceived as homicide, neither by the executioners nor by the judges; rather, the judges presented it as a crime against humanity. The victorious powers tried to compensate for this lack of identity with the concession of a State identity, which itself became the source of new massacres."

8. Brecht writes in his journal: "it is presumably the return to the German speaking world which is forcing me into this enterprise [of staging *Antigone*]" (*Journals: 1934-1955*, ed. John Willet, trans. Hugh Rorrison [New York: Routledge, 1996] 377). Returning to Germany would be to face the tragedy of that country's defeat. But the statement may also suggest what Hölderlin made available for German thought, for *Antigone* took on an iconic status in German ideas from Hegel to Heidegger and, by extension, came to represent the essential category of the *tragic* in a German philosophical/aesthetic tradition. Brecht, forced by circumstances to reconsider tragedy, perhaps anticipated an intervention with his adaptation. His work takes up the tragic form in order to challenge a culture's inherited response to tragedy. So instead of epic construction, Brecht demonstrates the mechanisms of cultural reception—trying to lead the audience through a familiar tragic form that binds aesthetic sensation with an apparent and recognizable wisdom.

Karl Jaspers, writing of Germany's response to the collective war experience, describes the dominant Hegelian tradition of interpreting tragedy (*Tragedy is Not Enough*, trans. Karl W. Deutsch, Harry T. Moore, and Harold A. T. Reiche [Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1969]). With observations that can be read with a Brechtian inflection, Jaspers describes how witnessed destruction creates an inverse reflex of self (or collective) formation. Among the complex responses to tragedy there is the circulating emotion of self-defense and forward projection:

where all meaning disappears, and all certainty vanishes, something arises deep inside man: the self-preservation of his essential identity. This identity preserves itself through endurance—"I have to meet my destiny in silence"—and through the courage to live and the courage, at the limits of the impossible, to die with dignity. (77)

Meaning is reasserted as the disaster is transformed as saving sacrifice, a silent sinking that raises the level of the known self and, by extension, the entire culture: "doom becomes [the hero's] restoration, in which the past is included and redeemed" (78-9). Or as in the case of Sophocles, tragic ends come "with a conciliatory act of founding a new institution" (81). The doom is sublated as a force of history, destruction becomes one of necessary sacrifice and resurrection. Brecht was surely showing the violent results of sacrifice without offering the redemption to follow.

9. Brecht, *Journals* 383.

10. Bertolt Brecht, "Masterful Treatment of a Model," *Brecht on Theater*, ed. and trans. John Willet (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957) 209.

11. Bertolt Brecht, *Antigone*, trans. Judith Malina (New York: Applause, 1984) 9.

12. Brecht, "Masterful Treatment of a Model" 215.

13. Brecht, *Antigone* 12.

14. Katherine H. Rosenfeld, "Getting Inside Sophocles' Mind Through Hölderlin's *Antigone*," *New Literary History* 30:1 (1999): 107-108.

15. Brecht, *Journals* 385-86; emphasis added.

16. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Bk VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-60*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: Norton, 1992) 265.

17. 278.

18. Brecht, *Antigone* line 861.

19. Julia Hell, *Post-Fascist Fantasies: Psychoanalysis, History, and the Literature of East Germany* (Durham: Duke UP, 1997) 132.

20. Brecht, "Masterful Treatment of a Model" 215.

21. 210-11. This indefinite approach of *something* is the perpetual *perhaps* of Brechtian drama. The "perhaps" is the distance between the *Gestus* and its referent, the purposeful stumbling of mimesis, or the lighting apparatus in full view. Whatever drama provides "our time," as Brecht calls the postwar period in "A Short Organum" (*Brecht on Theater* 179-208), it is not some certain knowledge.

22. Brecht, "Masterful Treatment of a Model" 214.

23. W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, trans. Anthea Bell (New York: Random House, 2001) 24.

24. Jeffrey Herf, *Divided Memory* (Harvard: Harvard UP, 1999) 106.

25. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998) 166.

26. Brecht, *Journals* 395.

27. Herf, *Divided Memory* 73.

28. Brecht, "Masterful Treatment of a Model" 209-10.

29. Brecht, *Antigone* 2.

30. Brecht, *Journals* 383.

31. Brecht, *Antigone* 64.

32. Heiner Müller, *Hamletmaschine, Hamletmaschine and Other Texts for the Stage*, ed. and trans. Carl Weber (New York: PAJ, 1984) 53.

33. Heiner Müller, *Germania* 24.

34. Müller, "Letter to Robert Wilson," *Explosion of a Memory*, ed. and trans. Carl Weber (New York: PAJ, 1989) 153.
35. Euripides, *Alcestis* (trans. Richard Lattimore) 1144-45.
36. 1118.
37. 1144-45.
38. 1132.
39. 1159.
40. Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz* (New York: Zone Books, 2000) 53.
41. Elinor Fuchs, "An Introduction," *The PAJ Casebook: Alcestis*, ed. Bonnie Marranca, *PAJ* 10:1 (1986): 82.
42. Robert Wilson, *The PAJ Casebook: Alcestis* 97.
43. Müller, *Explosion of a Memory* 97.
44. 100.
45. 97.
46. 97.
47. 98.
48. Hans Magnus Enzenberger, "Europe in Ruins," trans. Martin Chambers, *Granta* 33 (1990): 119.
49. Müller, *Explosion of a Memory* 101.
50. Margurite Duras, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, trans. Richard Seaver (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1961) 20; emphasis added.
51. 17.
52. Müller, *Explosion of a Memory* 101.
53. 111.
54. See Jacques Derrida, "The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation," *Writing and Difference*, ed. and trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980) 250.
55. Agamben, *The Man without Content* 54-5.
56. See Müller's "Writing Out of the Enjoyment of the Catastrophe" (*Germania* 190-97). Here Müller explains his pessimism and its uses for theater and politics.
57. Müller, "Letter to Robert Wilson" 153.
58. Paul de Man, "Kant and Schiller," *Aesthetic Ideology* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996) 129-62.
59. Müller, *Germania* 193.

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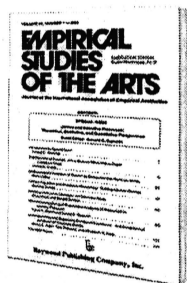
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