The Pathos of the Real
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Description of an Image

In one of the most erratic texts of Heiner Müller’s later so-called post-dramatic works, Bildbeschreibung, translated into English as Explosion of a Memory, we are summoned before an ever-changing nightmarish scenario. The elements of the image are generic: a barren, desertlike landscape under the glaring sun, some mountains in the background, a few clouds above, a house, a couple of trees, a bird in one of them, a man, a woman, a table, a chair, a glass, and so on. The gaze scans the composition or “experimental arrangement” for clues as to its meaning.1 It imagines different sequences of action, and the domestic scene becomes increasingly apocalyptic: from the intimation of some kind of sacrifice, to violent intercourse, to graphic murder, culminating in the vision of the dead rising from their graves in a kind of cosmic insurrection. In the end, in a cascading series of conjectures about the picture and the I before it, the stasis of the setting gives way to a growing sense of panic; the entire configuration seems to start spinning and collapses, or rather, is blasted apart to then finally come to a halt in the image of a frozen storm. The unraveling that takes place in the description is accompanied by oracular dicta, some drawn from the author’s own works, portending doom and disaster. The image appears to be the materialization of an inescapable and inscrutable curse: the cyclical recurrence of violent death and resurrection, captured in a demented, disturbing vision of copulation and catastrophe.
Bildbeschreibung is, of course, the German term for ekphrasis, the description of an image, and that is exactly what Heiner Müller’s text is, but, characteristically, it takes the register to an extreme. Ever since antiquity, the ekphrastic ambition has had two objectives. The first is to make the reader or listener “see” that which is conjured up in discourse. It is the attempt to effect a kind of oubli de soi on the part of readers or listeners, to let their attention be entirely absorbed by the speech or text and get them to visualize the scenes it evokes. (Initially, ekphrasis designated this kind of visualization, not only of artworks but of virtually any subject. The name of the desired effect was enárgeia.) The second is the opposite: to make the readers or listeners realize that their sense of “being there” is the result of a clever writerly or rhetorical feat, the goal of which is precisely to suspend the semblance of presence that the description achieved momentarily and to credit the speech or writing for the presence-effects it produced. The ekphrastic is thus based on conflicting aspirations: the self-effacement of the medium and the demonstration and exposure of its power, the semblance of transparence, on the one hand, and self-reflexivity, on the other. Bildbeschreibung does both. On the one hand, the focus on detail, aspect, and materiality, on color, light, and composition, placing itself, and the reader, alternately in the picture and before it. On the other hand, the description is continually revising its own observations and conjectures, and it is impossible to forget that the text is not so much rendering an image as it is creating one in the process of depicting it. At the same time, however, this creation is a destruction. With each revision and new conjecture the previous vision is obliterated. In his autobiography the author himself has noted that Bildbeschreibung ought to be taken not only in the sense of a description of an image but rather, in a more literal vein, as writing on and over an image. One is also reminded that Greek ek-phrazein is to tell in full, without any remainder. And in a sense this is what the text appears to do. It not only stages excessive violence on the level of its content; there is also something excessive about the description itself, its frantic attempt to multiply the different narrative possibilities of the picture that culminates in a vision of all-out violence followed by a detonation, Explosion of a Memory, that freezes everything, including, it appears, the description itself.

The text mounts a dizzying collage of aggressive, flashlike images, on the one hand, and of words, often capitalized, which function like sign-
posts or captions, on the other, inscriptions that remind us that the strange space opening up before the reader-beholder is organized by some kind of design after all, even though its meaning is never revealed. The landscape Bildbeschreibung evokes is by turns dreamlike, textual, and scenic, that is to say, an artificial space furnished with stage props. It is, in other words, by turns unreal and too real, especially in its “close up” and multiplication of acts of increasing violence. Müller’s picture-text, indeed, exhibits all the insignia of the Real: a violent reality lurking beneath the surface of domesticity, coupled with a sense of radical contingency that casts doubt on the actuality of the scene—everything could be different⁵—and, finally, the invocation of a possible error, “the gap in the process . . . the potentially redeeming mistake” that could put an end to the nightmarish experiment,⁶ as if the cycle of violence and sacrifice were not the truth underlying the muted scenery but itself an arrangement, a spell waiting to be undone. The vision of horror and the potential of liberating insight coincide, even if it comes at the price of annihilation.

The apocalyptic ending of Bildbeschreibung is supplemented by a postscriptum that suggests different affiliations for Müller’s enigmatic tableau: Shakespeare’s The Tempest, Hitchcock’s The Birds, the Noh play Kumasa, Odysseus’s katabasis in canto 11 of the Odyssey, and the Alcestis. The heterogeneity of these references accounts for the peculiar mixture of registers and motifs that effects a sense of hysteria and pathos. The Tempest is echoed in the final vortex-effect of the image in which all the elements and the text itself seem to disappear. It is also present in the vision of nature turning against humankind, the landscape, indeed earth itself, revolting against its “colonizers.” Hitchcock’s The Birds furnishes not only the picture’s ominous bird—pecking out the man’s eyes, “two jabs from the beak, one right, one left, the reeling and ranting of the blind, blood spouting in the whirlwind of the storm”⁷—but also the Hollywood-esque horror elements that pervade the description, reminiscent of the films of David Lynch or of outright horror movies.⁸ These “trashy” moments are complemented and somewhat balanced by the references to Greek mythology, both of which are instances of characters returning from the netherworld, Odysseus and Alcestis, the woman who died for her husband but is returned to the world of the living by Heracles. In Bildbeschreibung she does not return to resume her place in the domestic sphere though; like many of Heiner Müller’s female heroines,
she returns as an avenging angel. The motif of the angel refers us to the most prominent “intertext” of Bildbeschreibung, not mentioned in the postscriptum: Walter Benjamin’s famous gloss on Paul Klee’s painting Angelus Novus. In Benjamin’s ekphrasis the angel is caught in a storm called progress, pulling him toward the future, while his gaze is riveted to the rubble piling up in what is behind him, the unredeemed hopes of the past. In an earlier adaptation of this famous image from Benjamin’s historico-philosophical theses, Heiner Müller had pictured the angel as being caught up in the rockfall and swamped by the stones going down all around him. The ekphrastic prose poem “Luckless Angel” had presented him as fossilized in a kind of petrified storm of which the frozen tempest of Bildbeschreibung seems the distant echo. “For a time one still sees the beating of his wings, hears the crash of stones, falling before, above, behind him, growing louder with each furious futile struggle, weakening lessening, as the struggle subsides. Then the moment closes over him. The luckless angel is silent, resting in the rapidly flooded space, waiting for history in the petrification of flight, glance, breath. Until the renewed rush of powerful wings swelling in waves through the stone signals his flight.” In Bildbeschreibung the angel has returned as the woman who has worked her way out of her grave, the leader of the alliance of the dead, chthonic forces rising to exact their vengeance on the world of the living.

Heiner Müller has defined his theater as a form of dialogue with the dead. On the stage this dialogue has often taken the form of excessive violence, a fact that has undoubtedly contributed to the success of the playwright, routinely aligned not just with Brecht but also with Artaud and the “theater of cruelty.” At the same time, the apparent gratuitousness of this violence has also made this work more or less unpalatable to many. The physical excess that is usurping the stage, especially in some of the later dramatic texts, of which Bildbeschreibung is a patent example, appears exceedingly pointless. Fascinating to some, it has proved tedious to others.

As we have seen, the later texts take up and redeploy a number of recognizable motifs drawn from the playwright’s own work or from his favorite archives (Greek tragedy, Shakespeare, Brecht, Hollywood mythology). Yet it is often hard to see the significance of the dramatic collages into which they are mounted. To be sure, some of their characteristic fea-
tures appear familiar: a sense of recalcitrance and iconoclasm; grotesque acts of cruelty; and the intimation of an order underneath the order of reality, hinting at the dimension of the real, glimpsed precisely in the moments of utmost destitution and pathos. In this respect the so-called post-dramatic works seem to provide a paradigmatic example of the aesthetics of the real, aiming at a visceral impact and at the release of primal affects (even at the risk of producing the opposite effect, causing viewers a sense of consternation and incomprehension). Although the ghastly fantasies featured in Müller’s postdramatic pieces are devoid of the enthusiasm and exaltation associated with Alain Badiou’s “passion of the real,” the playwright’s necromancy, his dialogue with the dead, clearly echoes the philosopher’s yearning for the impetus that fueled the century’s grand utopian projects. Unlike Badiou’s unabashed look back, however, the author’s recapitulation is torn between defeat and defiance.

The theater of Heiner Müller is a confrontation with the chilling toll of human life exacted in the name of utopia in the twentieth century. It is a confrontation that is itself exacting and chilling, exacting in the rigorous examination to which it submits the “logic” of revolutionary killing but also chilling in the peculiar mixture of denunciation and critique, of indictment and apologetics that it practices, simultaneously exposing the aporias of political terror and defending its necessity. While there is little doubt that many of the violent “tableaux” so prominent in some of the later work are far less compelling than the paradoxical dialectics at work in the earlier plays, the celebration and exaltation of violence is still a continuation of the same “dialogue,” even if it consists mostly of the dead cursing the living.

In what follows I want to look at this “dialogue with the dead” in relation to the excessive violence it stages. The dead, indeed, occupy a key role in the plays. The relation to them is one of obligation and debt but also one of guilt and shame. Part of Heiner Müller’s production can be viewed as trying to come to terms with this burdensome heritage. In this sense his plays are engaged in a salvaging operation: acknowledging the “fallout” of revolutionary terror and salvaging its wreckage. At the same time, as the revolution “integrates” and rehabilitates its own victims, it also instrumentalizes them for the perpetuation of what was begun. What appears to be an act of atonement and an insistence on the dignity of the
dead fuels the same process that seemed to give rise to some doubt. To put it differently, I argue that Heiner Müller’s plays constitute an important, if covert, admission of the enormous toll exacted by the totalitarian experiment (again, an experiment the author himself endorsed, if critically). It is an admission that calls for a different relationship with the dead, seeking to make them an integral part of the project in whose name they were “sacrificed.” At the same time, the admission of this failure is also a way of reasserting the failed project, ever more urgent in view of those whose sacrifice remains to be redeemed. We can note two attitudes vis-à-vis Müller’s dead then: one that tries to pay them their due, give them the respect they deserve, and consign them to the space they demand (the utopian society in the making is built on their sacrifice) and one that seeks revenge for a sacrifice that never paid off. Remarkably, these two positions are not incompatible. Indeed, Heiner Müller’s work can be regarded as a sustained attempt to combine them. These different attitudes have two prominent models in classical tragedy: Antigone and Medea, doing justice to the dead by giving them a proper burial and revenging those who died in a cause utterly discredited and unsalvageable.

Müller has always drawn on mythological subjects. Many of his plays are variations and adaptations of other material. Medea is a relatively continuous motif in a number of works, culminating in the dramatic triptych titled Verkommenes Ufer Medeamaterial Landschaft mit Argonauten, translated into English as Waterfront Wasteland Medea Material Landscape with Argonauts. Antigone, however, is not a prominent presence, although there is a rather oblique reference to her in Medeamaterial (the middle part of Verkommenes Ufer Medeamaterial Landschaft mit Argonauten) that illustrates the attempted combination of the two positions. The ambiguous relation to the dead is most in evidence in the three plays that the author referred to as Versuchsreihe (experimental series), which consists of the plays Philoctetes, The Horatian, and Mauser. In contradistinction to the deliberately erratic postdramatic collages in which the excess that is staged undoes the dramatic plot, the plays of Versuchsreihe are characterized by a remarkable degree of formal and thematic unity. They deal with excess, too, but it is treated with an almost surgical coolness, heightening the sense of inevitability and deadlock.
The three dramatic parables of Heiner Müller’s *Versuchsreihe* revolve around the aporia of violence: its inevitability and its inevitable “fall-out.” Each of the plays centers on a situation of acute crisis in which violence seems both warranted and self-defeating. The predicaments featured in them are adapted from classical models. The first play, *Philoctetes*, is a rewriting of Sophocles’ tragic drama of the same name; the second, *The Horatian*, adapts the story of an episode recounted in Livy’s *History of Rome* (later brought to the stage as *Horace* by Corneille in 1641); another more oblique reference of both *The Horatian* and *Mauser*, the third play in the series, is Kleist’s *Prinz Friedrich von Homburg*. Moreover, *Mauser* is a rewriting of Brecht’s notorious *Die Maßnahme*, or *The Measures Taken*. The three works are also indebted to these precursors with respect to their formal characteristics. One of the most striking features is a certain austerity, very much in evidence both in terms of style and of the works’ tonality. Written in blank verse and making extensive use of patterns (rhythmic as well as syntactical) of repetition, alternation, and variation, the language is reminiscent of Hölderlin’s Sophocles translations (especially in *Philoctetes*), Brecht’s poetry, and of revolutionary oratory. A sense of austerity also characterizes the stance taken vis-à-vis the conflicts that are unfolding on the stage. There is an unsettling sense of progression toward the worst, a troubling and even agonistic inescapability of which it is difficult to tell whether it is staged to trigger awe or indignation. In all three instances the action results in what seems to be the least acceptable outcome. The classical models’ reconciliatory and, as it were, “soft” solutions to the conflicts are supplanted by a disturbing sense of imbalance and intolerable contradiction.

What is it that is being “tried” in the three plays of *Versuchsreihe*? What is the experiment the plays stage? A charitable reading might view them as an experimental demonstration and critique of the use and abuse of violence in politics. Müller himself has insisted on the paradigmatic character of the conflicts on display, claiming that the situations needed to be
regarded as “models.” The remark broadens the scope of the different cases considerably, suggesting that the “models” put forth in the plays can be applied to all kinds of situations, while obscuring their covert political references and historical circumstance. In a similar vein an endnote to Philoctetes suggests that a projection of war clips should conclude the final scene, Odysseus and Neoptolemos, the son of Achilles, dragging away the dead Philoctetes, as if the conflict at the center of the play was about war as such, ancient as well as modern. The author’s own suggestions have paved the way for reading the play, and as a consequence the series as a whole, as a form of antiwar drama. But as we will see, the target of the plays’ criticism doesn’t seem to be war as such, nor does the target seem to be some abstract and universal kind of violence. It is rather both a certain excess of violence and its “fallout” that are at stake. Each of the three plays features a situation in which the exercise of violence seems to defeat the purpose for which it has been deployed. As a means of politics, it overtakes and eclipses the cause in whose service it is used, triggering a dynamic that spins out of control.

The title figure of Philoctetes was left behind on the island of Lemnos because a wound he received while performing a sacrifice that allowed the Greek fleet to continue on its way to Troy started festering and began smelling so bad that the stench and Philoctetes’ constant screams became intolerable for the rest of the Greek army. At the beginning of the play, ten years later, the marooned hero is needed again because his soldiers refuse to fight. The representatives of power, who had once set him aside like a pawn, have to bring Philoctetes back into the game. As in Sophocles’ play, the hero, intransigent in his pain and resentment over the injustice he suffered, rejects their appeal for his help. In the cleverly construed plot of Müller’s version of the play, departing only slightly but nonetheless significantly from its Sophoclean model, the subordination of everything to the cause of the Trojan war has produced a “fallout,” Philoctetes, that later proves to be indispensable for winning the war. But at that point it has become impossible to reintegrate the hero. The ruthless machinations of politics override their own purpose, jeopardizing the very achievement of their initial goal. Philoctetes was sacrificed for the purpose of the war; Odysseus’s and Neoptolemos’s mission is to undo that sacrifice and to reintegrate the outcast. But they succeed in this task only by sacrificing Philoctetes once more; Neoptolemos kills him, if somewhat inadvertently.
The past, it seems, cannot be undone. What seemed opportune and necessary at one time comes back to haunt the cause that the sacrifice was meant to advance. In Müller’s *Philoctetes* this is not the last word though. The sly Odysseus, whose schemes have been thwarted by the inexperience of his “assistant,” comes up with a brilliant lie: they will take the dead body back to Troy and claim that Philoctetes was killed by the Trojans so as to relaunch his reluctant troops into the battle. Ultimately, the dead Philoctetes will serve the cause he refused to endorse while he was still alive.

*The Horatian* presents us with a similar scenario. The violence exercised legitimately cannot be contained; as excessive violence it must be punished. Faced with an imminent attack from the Etruscans, the Romans decide to settle a dispute with their potential allies, the Albanians (like themselves descendants of the Trojans), through a duel between two men. Incidentally, these two, the Horatian and the Curiatian, are brothers-in-law. After having brought down his opponent, securing the unity of the alliance, the Horatian, “the sword’s thrust still in his arm,” kills his own sister because she is mourning her murdered husband, placing matrimonial ties above her obligation to the city:

> And the Horatian—his arm still felt the sword’s thrust  
> He had killed the Curiatian with in combat  
> The man saw his sister weeping for now—  
> Thrust the sword—the blood of the man she wept for  
> Wasn’t dry on it—  
> Into the breast of the weeping girl  
> So that her blood dropped to the earth. He said:  
> Go join him, whom you love more than Rome.16

The play is about the question of how to deal with this chain of events, the alternation between authorized and unauthorized violence, deployed with a purpose and with legitimacy at one moment, and lashing out spontaneously and uncontrollably in the next but still, we must note, in the same spirit of patriotic duty. Given the dangerous proximity (and indeed similarity) between the noble and ignoble killing, the city, Rome, is at great pains to maintain the distinction between the two. The only solution it finds to do so is to honor the victor, who saved the city from internal conflict, and to punish the murderer of his own sister, who by slaughtering a
Roman woman has increased the possibility of inner strife and civil war. The Horatian is first celebrated, solemnly and ceremoniously, to then be put to death, again accompanied by all the relevant symbolic gestures: he is decapitated, his corpse is desecrated, dismembered, and left to the dogs.

Even more than the preceding plays of the series, *Mauser*, openly acknowledging its debt to Brecht’s notorious *The Measures Taken*, a precursor it seeks to overcome and to critique at the same time, brings into sharp focus the disastrous “fallout” of the unconditional and unflinching commitment to violence. The play is based on an episode from Mikhail Sholokhov’s novel *And Quiet Flows the Don*, about the Red Terror in the Soviet Union.17 “A” is in charge of organizing the elimination of peasants and other people suspected of counterrevolutionary activities. As if to foreshadow his own fate, the first man on A’s list is his predecessor, who, in a moment of pity, released some of the suspects who were to be executed. After a period of doing his “work,” A asks to be relieved of his duty. The request is denied. Seized by madness, he doesn’t merely execute the suspects; in a kind of ritualistic killing frenzy he desecrates their bodies. This transgression cannot be tolerated, and A himself is put before the firing squad. The violence exercised in the name of the revolution is indiscriminate and unrelenting. It finally claims the executioner himself, who, at the close of the play, is shown consenting to his own death, pronouncing the very slogan that he used to speak to the firing squad: “Death to the enemies of the revolution!” Violence has become the order of the day; another kind of “work,” a form of production even, it cannot be held at bay; it overwhelms and consumes even those who “dispense” it (to use one of the play’s own terms).

Given these summaries, one could view *Versuchsreihe* as a critique of violence run amok. But indignation over the unforeseen consequences of the use of violence is not really the point of the series, and such a reading doesn’t account for what is so unsettling about these plays: the aporetic deadlock exhibited in all of them. In a number of comments, as in the essays and notes appended to the book edition of *Versuchsreihe*, but also in various interviews, including his autobiography, the author has stressed his commitment to the very positions that the plays seem to call into question. But even if we weren’t aware of Heiner Müller’s signature cynicism and his flirtatious, and by no means ironic, relationship to apocalyptic thinking,18 the point of *Versuchsreihe* is precisely to chastise the stance that purports

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to occupy the moral high ground, the position that seems to presuppose one could renounce or forgo the use of violence in a struggle for political survival. At the same time, however, the works do not propose an uncritically affirmative attitude toward violence but rather one that maintains, and exhibits, a clear awareness of its dilemmas and risks. Notwithstanding the author’s dismissal of the learning play, the Brechtian “Lehrstück” and its pedagogical mission, Versuchsreihe is itself driven by an underlying moral agenda, but it is difficult, if not impossible, to square its “morality” with our received notions of what is morally acceptable. What is targeted in the three plays is a certain moral “doxa,” a morality derived from the ideals of humanism, which, to the extent that we find the plays’ solutions hard to stomach, is still ours. One of the ways of striking at this “doxa” is by systematically countering the emotional response that the dramatic events are most likely to elicit in the spectator: a sense of compassion and pity for the victims. The “experiment” staged in Versuchsreihe is about dismantling these notions, or rather, reassigning them.

PHILOCTETES

...Und vieles
Wie auf den Schultern eine
Last von Scheitern ist
Zu behalten
—FRIEDRICH HÖLDERLIN, MNEMOSYNE

In Müller’s Philoctetes the centrality of pity is evident in the choice of the material itself. Ever since Lessing’s Laocoon the figure of Philoctetes has served as the paradigmatic case of the representation of suffering. According to Lessing’s own premise, excessive suffering is not suitable for the stage because the spectacle of sheer physical pain can never achieve “the sole aim of the tragic stage,” namely, to arouse our pity, for “we are generally unable to respond with the same degree of sympathy to physical pain as to other suffering.”19 The sight and sound of perpetual physical torment, let alone of an open festering wound, would be too repulsive to be the subject of imitation since “feelings of disgust are . . . always real and never imitation.”20 Their impact is too immediate, on a quasi-visceral level, and they undercut the distance necessary for aesthetic appreciation and the sen-
timent of sympathy. According to Lessing, Sophocles’ *Philoctetes* avoids these pitfalls by a number of different means, all of which serve to attenuate the expression of pain, chief among them the hero’s “steadfastness” and “moral greatness.” Only these virtues allow the spectator to react with empathy and identification. The suffering hero is shown not simply succumbing to his physical pain but rather as standing by his principles. The spectacle of physical pain and the hero’s endurance in the throes of such pain elicit admiration and appeal to the spectator’s humanity.

Not surprisingly, Heiner Müller’s *Philoctetes* reverses these priorities and revokes the enlightened desire for reconciliation and unity under the auspices of a common humanity. In his adaptation of the Sophoclean model the urge toward compassion is systematically thwarted and de nied. Driven to the verge of madness by his infected wound, stigma, and continual reminder of the injustice done to him, his Philoctetes rages and rants, wallowing in disgust over his own rotting body and reveling in fantasies of slowly putting to death his archenemy, Odysseus. The notion of the human, along with that of the Greek, prompt his scorn and anger; he is driven by a hatred of a universal scope, but at the same time it is a private, personal affect that has become the decisive feature of his identity. Philoctetes is forever unwilling to compromise, to be co-opted, again for any venture that doesn’t have to do with himself and the satisfaction of his vengefulness. Cast out, he has assumed a position of radical self-interest, a position that is grounded in the constant and all-consuming pain and resentment over the treatment he has suffered. This is a position that cannot be mediated with the exigencies of the community, represented by Odysseus. For the latter, ending the war has absolute priority, and he keeps reminding his two antagonists of what losing the struggle would entail: the devastation of their own hometowns: “if Troy stays intact, our cities are doomed.” Of the three, Odysseus is the pragmatist, the representative of the *raison d’état*: victory over Troy trumps all other concerns. And time is pressing. It is in a situation of imminent crisis and urgency that these irreconcilable positions and claims clash with one another.

The figure that tries to mediate between the two positions is Neoptolemos—but to no avail. In fact, the young idealist fails in the most devastating manner. He tries to side both with Philoctetes and with the cause of the Greeks. He sees in Philoctetes one of the legendary warriors to whose rank he aspires. Moreover, like Philoctetes, he bears a grudge against Odysseus,
who has tricked him out of his slain father’s armory. At the same time, Neoptolemos is obliged to the Greek cause, in whose service his father has met his death. Despite his lofty ideals, Neoptolemos submits to Odysseus’s machinations to win back Philoctetes. When he tries to undo his lies, he sets off a series of events at the end of which he runs his sword into Philoctetes’ back to save Odysseus’s life. It is precisely Neoptolemos’s youthful investment in the ideal of heroism, his compassion for the agonizing Philoctetes, tormented by his wound, that brings about the least desirable outcome. Odysseus had even anticipated this turn of events, admonishing his indocile pupil: “Get rid of your compassion it tastes like blood / no room for virtue now nor time.”23 In the words of the author: “Because he didn’t want to lie, he has to kill.”24 It is only through Odysseus’s proverbial ingenuity that the predicament Neoptolemos has caused is solved.

The author’s own account of his play has varied over the years. In an attempt to counter the charge of pessimism (raised by East German censorship), he claimed that the story was set in “prehistory” (in the Marxist sense of the term) and had nothing to do with the realities of the socialist German state. As Werner Mittenzwei had suggested, Philoctetes was an antiwar drama, a play about the barbarity of times past. Müller later conceded that the subtext of his drama was in fact Stalinism, pointing out that, at the time, such issues could not be addressed openly. Despite the mythological guise, it would have been quite clear to the contemporary audience that the play was actually about the impossible rehabilitation of political renegades, about the difficult reintegration of the victims of political persecutions. In other comments Müller has suggested to view the work as a kind of parable of the dialectics of enlightenment. Reminiscent of Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s famous speculation about the origins of modernity and modern totalitarianism, the play formulates a critique of “instrumental reason” and the ruthless domination of nature (both inner and outer) by humans, with Odysseus as its chief proponent (very much as in the philosophers’ account of things).25 But in what is perhaps the most prominent explication of his play, a letter to the Bulgarian director Mitko Gotscheff, the author has undertaken a rather puzzling reappraisal of the figure of Odysseus, departing from his earlier view, according to which the three positions were equally untenable.26 In his programmatic letter to Gotscheff he clearly privileges Odysseus over the other two characters. A true “political animal,”27 he is the opposite of Hegel’s plastic
Greek ("die Gegenfigur zum Plastischen Griechen Hegels"), whose representative, Neoptolemos, fails so terrifically, but also to the tragic hero’s "stolze Dummheit," his proud stupidity or stubbornness. At the same time, Odysseus is said to have a tragic dimension himself. He, too, had to renounce home and family before joining “Operation Helena,” as the letter calls it. And as he tells his “pupil” Neoptolemos, “You are not the first in this affair to do what you don’t like.” In a series of suggestively vague characterizations, the letter describes him as both a liminal and a transgressive figure. The harbinger of the transition from clan to statehood, Odysseus himself is said to be traversed (and torn apart) by the boundary, by the dividing line he is the first to pass. The first to undo the work of fate, “producer and destroyer of tragedy,” he overcomes the world of mythic doom entering the era of rational domination and manipulation, the world of politics. His near-total identification with the given assignment foreshadows the fervor of the later executioners, especially of Mauser, where the identification with the mission is symbolized in the merging of the executioner with his weapon. The letter speaks of Odysseus as “the tool.” The reading of the play as a critique of instrumental reason (apparently shared by the author himself, at least for a while) is thus replaced by one that champions the sly Greek, precisely because of his unscrupulous “instrumentalization” of Philoctetes’ dead body, his breathtakingly quick adaptation to the new situation, and his utter disregard for principles or moral considerations. As for Philoctetes, the author has pointed out that the success of the play depended on preventing any kind of identification or sympathy with the tormented hero. “The play can only be performed if the audience is kept from empathizing with Philoctetes, at the latest, when his hatred of Greeks turns into a universal hatred of mankind because he can’t see any alternative.”

**THE HORATIAN**

...zwischen Lorbeer und Beil...

—HEINER MÜLLER, DER HORATIER

As in Philoctetes, the title character of The Horatian is a hero and an outcast, distinguished through the highest merit, for having secured the unity of the alliance, and stigmatized for the killing of his sister, a fellow citizen,

*Heiner Müller*
putting at risk the very unity he has achieved. The skillfully patterned play can be read as reiterating the same gesture, that of mercy denied. Killing his opponent, the Horatian is impervious to the latter’s plea for mercy; he then kills his sister, whose outcry at the sight of her slain husband seems to be as much pain over her loss as it is indignation over her brother’s gratuitous cruelty; the Horatian’s father’s plea for his son’s life is overruled by the city; finally, the city’s own hesitations about adding another victim to the chain of death are outweighed by its own sense of justice.

Compared to the first mention of the episode in Livy and to the later adaptation by Corneille, the absence of a merciful solution in Müller’s version of the story becomes even more striking. In Corneille it is the ruler who pardons the Horatian. In Livy the people absolve the Horatian, “more in view of his bravery than out of legal considerations” (History of Rome, bk 1, 26). In both of the earlier renderings of the story, the episode served precisely to illustrate how a rift is overcome, how an irreconcilable contradiction is resolved, “aufgehoben,” so to speak. By contrast, Müller’s paradoxical solution to the predicament—honoring the victor and punishing the murderer—is remarkable in its refusal of any dialectical sublation of the contradiction.

As in Philoctetes, where the murdered hero is taken away on the shoulders of his henchmen, the most gruesome image of The Horatian is that of the dismembered body that has been stitched together in order to honor the dead fighter. The image of a body whose integrity has been restored but whose mutilation remains visible epitomizes the impossible solution. The antithesis of merit and guilt (Verdienst/Schuld), of the murderer/victor (Mörder/Sieger or Sieger/Mörder) structures the tribunal’s deliberations, which at times seem closer to declamation, or even incantation, than to the actual weighing of different arguments. The negotiation pits sentence against sentence, judgment against judgment. Nearly every act and every utterance is repeated but with the opposite sense, creating a peculiar sense of symmetry and balance; yet it is a balance that seems slightly odd, skewed, as it were. The text’s repetitions, alternations, and slight variations result in a rare rhythmic quality but also give it an oddly mechanical character; its paratactical constructions effect a certain monotony and liturgy-like insistence. Repetition governs the text not only on the sentence level but also in its larger segments, as in the depiction of the two subsequent rituals—the tribute paid to the hero and his punishment. The curious doubling
is repeated even after the sentence has been executed: the dead man is first honored and then given over to the scavengers (all this is rendered with a certain loving attention to the bloody details of these acts). Notwithstanding the liturgical and quasi-mechanical character of the discourse that describes and accompanies the execution of the tribunal’s paradoxical decision, there is a demonstrative insistence on distinguishing and keeping separate the two deeds and their consequences, “their fallout.” The ideal invoked at the end of the play—an ideal that seems to be the outcome of their solution, as well as the underlying guiding principle—is that of “reinliche Scheidung.”37 The tribunal’s insistence on such “neat separation,” or “clear distinction,” combines the idea of distinctness, in a cognitive sense—“Deadly to humans is what they can’t understand”38—with that of purity in a moral and linguistic sense: “the words must be kept pure.”39 The antithetical parts of the sentence are not allowed to eclipse each other to then reappear in a synthesis on a higher level. Instead, they need to be kept separate, and, no less important, the contradiction must be kept in mind; its memory needs to be kept alive: “not hiding the rest / That wasn’t resolved in the unceasing change of things.”40

MAUSER

Eine Arbeit wie jede andere . . . Eine Arbeit wie keine andere
—HEINER MÜLLER, MAUSER41

Like The Horatian, Mauser is about coming to terms with the contradictions of violence deployed to battle violence; the necessity of killing to end all killing. Like the tribunal in The Horatian, the chorus in Mauser is at pains to uphold the distinction between authorized and unauthorized killing, legitimate and illegitimate slaughter. As in Philoctetes (but in reverse order), the main character of the play, A, was once useful to the revolution but ends up being a liability (“used up by his work”). Once instrumental in the revolution’s plan, he has become detrimental to the cause and needs to be eliminated himself: “Then we knew that his work had used him up / And his time had passed and we led him away.”42

At first glance Mauser is a chilling experiment in the exercise of indiscriminate and unquestioned violence. It is difficult to tell whether the revolutionary violence that is on the stand, as it were, is affirmed as necessary

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and inevitable or whether the ruthless and antihumanistic logic that seeks to justify it is denounced. In a famous dramaturgical endnote the author has endorsed the very part that appears most scandalous: the killing in the name of the revolution, which is presented as a kind of work and a necessary precondition for the advent of “man” that the revolution seeks to bring about. In the sentence that concludes the endnote, the author has indicated his belief that this is an ongoing process and the lesson of the play therefore still pertinent. “The city of Vitebsk is representative of all places in which a revolution was is will be forced to kill its enemies.”43 If the premise is that revolutions, wherever they may take place, have to kill, systematically and with a clear understanding that innocents will be among those killed, as in the story, then the play appears to “test” and demonstrate how to come to terms with this task and legacy. It imagines a case in which somebody, the nameless “A,” is placed in an extreme situation. Importantly, some of A’s speeches are taken over by the character’s apparent antagonist, the chorus representing the voice of the party. This role change serves to destabilize the different subject positions. The antagonism featured on the stage is, in fact, that of the party with itself: “Who are you, different from us / Or special, who insists on his weakness.”44 The questions and the doubts that A represents are not brought to the process from the outside but rather from within. A represents the struggle that the revolution—“The revolution itself / Isn’t one with itself”—is fighting with itself.45 In his endnote the author has also suggested to involve the audience in the production by letting different groups read different parts in a rotating fashion so as not to identify too quickly and too exclusively with one of the different positions. Facetiously or not, the author had envisioned the party seminary as the ideal venue for staging his play.

Mauser disqualifies two attitudes vis-à-vis the indiscriminate killing: doubt and compassion, on the one hand, and the perverse identification with the slaughter on the other. The first is undoubtedly the more prominent one, and its prominence can easily overshadow the significance of the second. It is virtually impossible for the executioner not to be affected by his “work” of killing. In this respect the story seems indeed very much construed to expose and overcome the kind of compassion that is inevitably going to affect A as much as anybody else. The latter’s appeal to our common humanity—the alleged traitors facing the barrels become human, “before my revolver a man”46—is countered unequivocally with the ax-
iomatic pronouncement that “man” has yet to appear and that the work of killing and destruction is, in fact, a form of production precisely in that it makes room for this appearance. In the dramaturgical endnote, the author had provided another formula for this axiom, “SO THAT SOMETHING CAN ARRIVE SOMETHING HAS TO GO THE FIRST SHAPE OF HOPE IS FEAR THE FIRST APPEARANCE OF THE NEW IS TERROR.”

Throughout, killing as work and production is associated with giving life, perhaps nowhere as explicitly as in the phrase that functions as a kind of leitmotif of the whole:

The daily bread of the Revolution
Is the death of its enemies, knowing, even the grass
We must tear up so it will stay green.

The henchman “dispenses” death like a sacrament. The sacrifice made is not that of the life of his enemies but rather of his own humanity, the urge for compassion that he has to suspend. As A demands to know whether the killing will stop once the revolution has triumphed, he is given a sibylline answer:

You know what we know, we know what you know
The Revolution will triumph or Man will not be
But disappear in the increasing mass of mankind.

The only adequate response to doubt as to whether the “work”—a work “like any other work,” as he was told, and “like no other work,” as he soon realizes—will bear the promised fruit is to continue. This is obviously a maddening logic, endlessly deferring the reward and, as a consequence, driving A into his killing frenzy. It is difficult to decide whether the audience is meant to settle for this logic in which nothing guarantees the outcome. But there are a number of reasons that suggest as much. One is that there is a similar tendency of rewarding unscrupulousness and punishing compassion in the other two plays of the series. Yet it is important to remember that it is not only his human weakness, the identification with the enemy as fellow human being and neighbor, that is being punished. He is executed himself because he has stripped the dead of their dignity, treating them as quarry, “Beute,” desecrating their bodies in a sudden bout of atavistic frenzy. The chorus by contrast insists that the dead are not quarry but rather the burden or yoke that the revolutionary needs to shoulder. It
is the price to be paid, and it is a debt that can only be redeemed by being kept alive in memory, carrying the dead along into the future, which will yield the fruits of this “production.” In short, the experiment of Versuchsreihe insists on the unavoidability of violence and the necessity of acknowledging the price paid in the process. Once dead, the enemies are to be treated as humans. If the “work” of indiscriminate slaughter threatens to dehumanize and delegitimize those acting on behalf of the revolution, then paying respect to the dead and bearing in mind their sacrifice vindicates, in a perverse way, the revolutionaries’ actions.

Horst Domdey has suggested that Heiner Müller’s Mauser attempts to reconcile the position of Kreon and that of Antigone, but the same is true for the other two plays. On the one hand, executing one’s own people/relatives, as presumed traitors, is defended in the name of “Staatsraison”—throughout, the situation is portrayed as one of acute danger, of a state of emergency in which the “cause,” that is, the revolution, trumps everything else, including, and especially, doubt as to its righteousness. At the same time, Kreon’s position, if it can be called that, is counterbalanced by Antigone’s concern with the dead. We must kill our brothers, the enemy within ourselves, the nagging doubt as to the righteousness of our cause. In a sense the killing, the sacrifice, is no less a matter of expediency than a proof of the strength of our faith, our belief in the given cause. But this is legitimated, ultimately, by treating the dead as human—treating our brothers, and by implication ourselves, as enemies and treating the dead as brothers and neighbors (in the biblical sense). Therein lies the harrowing task of the revolution. The play suggests that we must not do one without the other.

As we have seen, the other two plays of Versuchsreihe “experiment” with similar problems. They deal with the relation between means and ends, world revolution and the violence required to bring it about—necessary and authorized violence, on the one hand, and spontaneous, impulsive, and potentially perverted violence, on the other. The question seems to be, What kind of posture could prevent the violence exercised from contaminating or corrupting the cause for which it is deployed? The three plays give slightly different answers to this predicament, but they all perform a curious role reversal between victims and executioners. The compassion for the victims of violence is replaced by a sublime feeling of moral sacrifice on the part of the perpetrators. Their crimes come to resemble sacrificial acts and acquire an almost sacred aura. He who takes it on himself to sacrifice his own humanity by “dispensing death” to others

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is the one who claims our admiration and awe. Compassion for the actual victims of his violence is replaced by a form of piety, a violent act, both cursed and sacred, performed for the sake of overcoming all violence. The idea of catharsis is replaced by the “Schauer der Entfremdung,” the frisson or shudder of alienation, as the author put it in one of his commentaries on the series (apropos of the figure of Odysseus).51 Again, the crux of these plays is to determine whether we are seriously asked to endorse the logic of sacrifice that continually inverts the positions of executioner and victim, of the perpetrators of violence and those suffering and dying from it (the difference is erased in the most literal fashion imaginable in Mauser), or whether A’s creaturely protest is stronger, unassimilable, impossible to integrate, “as the rest that wasn’t resolved,” the recalcitrant remainder. As troubling as it might be, the two positions are advanced as not mutually exclusive. Not losing consciousness of the “fallout” of violence is the only tenable position in “the increasing noise of the battle” that forms the backdrop to Mauser and is the condition of (and reason for) the urgency of the depicted actions.

As the author himself has put it, however, “the eschatological horizon of Brecht’s The Measures Taken is gone.”52 The expectation of imminent upheaval has passed, and the extreme measures advocated and the pathos of that advocacy seem exceedingly strange. If the plays of Versuchsreibe were meant as an experiment and a sort of training for those committed to the socialist utopia, an opportunity to “work through,” to embrace, and to brace themselves against, the inevitable fallout of violence, today they seem more like an atonement that doesn’t afford itself absolution.

“The Pictures of Those Flogged to Death”:
Postdramatic Necromancy

Und immer geht der Tote meinen Schritt
Ich atme esse trinke schlaffe nachts
In meinem Kopf der Krieg hört nicht mehr auf
Die eine Salve und die andre Salve
Gehn zwischen meinen Schläfen hin und her
Und die Medaillen glühn auf meiner Brust
Wenn er zu mir spricht mit geschlossnen Lippen
Und hebt zum Gruß seine zerschossene Hand

—Heiner Müller, Wolokolamsker Chaussee

Heiner Müller
The image of the paradoxical union of victims and perpetrators remains in place in the postdramatic work; it is even taken to another extreme as we are confronted with characters given to acts of extreme self-destruction, not merely in an indirect manner, by inflicting violence on those close to them, their allies or kin, but on themselves. Yet the characteristic ambiguity is also displaced in favor of a rather unconditional affirmation of the redemptive and emancipative potential of violence. The exclusive focus seems to be on redeeming the dead; indeed, the emancipatory project seems to have no other objective than such redemption. It is not the future of the collective that prevails over death (“Death means nothing,” as the chorus in *Mauser* had proclaimed). Instead, it is the dead themselves (or rather the undead) who have the last word. The later texts are increasingly about giving them a voice. Unlike the attempt in *Versuchsreihe* to find ways of integrating the “fallout” into the process that produced it, the postdramatic texts like *Bildbeschreibung*, but also the two I want to examine now, *Hamletmaschine* and *Verkommenes Ufer Medeamaterial Landschaft mit Argonauten*, speak in the name of “those flogged to death”\(^5\) without seeking to defend the cause for which they were sacrificed or to condemn it. In a way it is the radically antagonistic and agonistic position of Philoctetes that seems to prevail in them. Instead of mourning the failed commitments of the past, the figures revel in their hatred, celebrating it in their hymns to destruction and death, in the hope, one feels, of releasing the pent-up energies of revenge.

In the dramaturgical note appended to one of his last works, *Wolokolamsker Chaussee*, translated as *Volokolamsk Highway*, the author has put forth a disturbing image that is supposed to encapsulate what he calls the “proletarian tragedy in the age of the counterrevolution,” of which the cycle of five short plays is the last example (the other two are *Germania Tod in Berlin* and *Zement*). The image features “a wounded man who in slow-motion rips off his bandages, who in quick motion is swathed again with bandages, etc., in perpetuum.”\(^5\) It remains unclear whether the man’s attempt to rid himself of his bandages, or fetters, is premature because he is not yet healed and whether the unending effort at emancipation calls for our sympathy.\(^5\) It is similar images of gagged emancipation, of stifled resistance, that pervade the postdramatic work—images of a paralysis brought about by violence and whose only solution seems to be more violence.

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Plays such as *Hamletmaschine*, *Verkommenes Ufer Medeamaterial Landschaft mit Argonauten*, or *Leben Gundlings Friedrich von Preußen Lessings Schlaf Traum Schrei* are made up of tableaulike episodes whose connection often remains enigmatic.\(^56\) Indeed, they mostly consist of “material” that is arranged into series (as is obvious from some of the titles) without being integrated in any kind of plotlike structures; it is material that remains largely untreated, so to speak. Its organization is highly associative and ostensibly random. It is generally difficult, if not impossible, to attribute the different voices at work in the plays to individual characters. The semantic registers mobilized are extremely heterogeneous, ranging from the sublime pathos of classical tragedy (as in Medea’s monologue in the middle part of *Verkommenes Ufer Medeamaterial Landschaft mit Argonauten*) to the language of commercials, from poetry (Hölderlin, T. S. Eliot, Shakespeare) and sententious folk wisdom to obscene graffiti. In a telling commentary Heiner Müller has pointed out that these late works were meant, above all, to attack, and stimulate, the audience’s imagination.\(^57\) Conceding that it was more or less impossible to perform these texts onstage, he nonetheless insisted that they were written for the theater. But in his own productions, which would typically combine several works, he would often have the texts simply read or recited rather than actually performed.\(^58\) While he had envisioned, a bit naively to be sure, *Mauser* to be performed at the Party school as part of the training of future functionaries, a dramaturgical note to *Verkommenes Ufer Medeamaterial Landschaft mit Argonauten* ironically suggests that the triptych be staged in a stripper’s club, in the bathing facility of a nerve clinic, or, ideally, on a dead planet. The deliberate randomness and the challenge to performability, characteristic of many of the late works, seems less directed against the audience, whose bafflement and disaffection seem rather side-effects than the texts’ principal objective, but is a revocation of the earlier works’ formal perfection, their great degree of cohesion and their austere elegance.

The first part of *Verkommenes Ufer Medeamaterial Landschaft mit Argonauten* begins with the depiction of a shore littered with waste, a place of random sexual encounters and the site of an impending ecological disaster. Like the eye of a camera, a disembodied gaze travels over a cityscape, reminiscent of the infamous “Plattenbau” architecture of East Berlin, taking in the desolation of urban life marked by alcoholism, violent sexuality, and the...
cycles of giving birth and dying. The passage contains a few allusions to the myth of Jason and the Argonauts, as well as a number of oblique references to T. S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland*.\(^5^9\) The first tableau of the triptych ends on a stark contrast: two images of the dead, drawn from very different cultural-historical archives and yet highly characteristic of the playwright’s pictorial repertoire. The first is a recurrent scene in Heiner Müller:

\textit{Einge Hingen an Lichtmasten Zunge heraush Vor dem Bauch das Schild ich bin ein Feigling [Some were dangling from the lamp posts tongues hanging out their mouths In front of their bellies the cardboard signs I’m a coward]}\(^6^0\)

Uncommented, the lines recall a well-known image, one that most readers are likely to have seen in one version or another. The image appears more than once in Müller’s own work: at the beginning of the play *Traktor*, as the subject of a short poem, and in the final episode of *Die Schlacht*.\(^6^1\) It is an image of the display of violent death; the public humiliation and exhibition of extreme atrocity, the particular cruelty of these deaths, “tongues protruding” (in Carl Weber’s translation). It is a testimony to German brutality, especially during the last weeks of the war, when many soldiers, who were ready to surrender to the advancing Allied troops, were summarily hanged (probably a familiar sight for someone lost in the countryside at the end of World War II, like Heiner Müller himself, then fifteen years old). They are also particularly senseless deaths, deaths yet to be redeemed.

The last image of the first part is as follows:

\textit{Auf dem Grund aber Medea den zerstückten Bruder im Arm die Kennerin Der Gifte [On the bottom of the sea though Medea her carved-up Brother in her arms Expert In poisons]}\(^6^2\)

As numerous readers have pointed out, Medea’s gesture evokes several other images. It recalls the dismembered body of the Horatian in *The Ho-
ratian, stitched back together so as to be honored as victor. It also recalls a well-known moment in Brecht’s *The Measures Taken*. As the young comrade, whose incaution and misguided compassion has jeopardized the work of the communist agitators, is about to be executed, he is asked to embrace his fellow revolutionaries: “Lean your head against our arm / Close your eyes.”63 Consenting to his own death, he reaffirms the collective bond in a gesture of love and brotherhood. Finally, the configuration “quotes” both the motif of the pietà and, as Slavoj Žižek has noted, Antigone’s recovery and burial of her brother’s remains.64 Yet, unlike Antigone’s determined commitment to her familial obligation over and against the exigencies of the state, Medea “rescues” the victim of her own violence: it is she who has killed and dismembered Apsyrtus, her brother. If Antigone is the defender and guardian of the bonds of blood, Medea is the figure who transgresses and undoes them. As Horst Domdey notes, Medea in fact instrumentalizes the bonds of kinship: she stops her father, who is pursuing her, in his tracks by throwing the limbs of her dead brother at him.65 Respect for the dead obliges the father to collect and bury the limbs of his murdered son, allowing Medea and Jason to escape. As in *Versuchsreihe*, we are confronted with an image of murderer and victim brought together in a moment of peculiar intimacy and kinship. Reuniting with her dismembered victim in a loving embrace, it is an image of forgiveness and reconciliation.

A similar image of the paradoxical split and identity of perpetrator and victim is at the center of an episode of *Hamletmaschine*, a dramatic collage about the Marxist intellectual’s stance vis-à-vis the rotten heritage of the socialist utopia and arguably the text that has contributed to Heiner Müller’s international reputation like no other.66 The “ruins” of Europe at his back, Hamlet, whose doubts and inability, or unwillingness, to take action have become something of a commonplace, speaks against the waves, rejecting the heritage bequeathed unto him. (He also renounces the literary legacy that he has inherited, declaring numerous times that he refuses to play his part.) Despite the rather cryptic character of the work, a number of fairly direct references to Stalin and to the Budapest uprising in 1956 and its subsequent oppression point to the political subtext of the drama. In one of the play’s episodes the characteristic coupling of irreconcilable positions reoccurs. In a filmlike sequence, with quick shots and countershots, images of the insurrection appear. It starts after the
statue of “a man who has made history” is brought down. “The petrification of hope,” the monument epitomizes the aborted utopian promises, but it also preserves them. The actor playing Hamlet has given up his role and insists that the drama is over. “I am not Hamlet. . . . My drama does not take place any more.” If it were to take place, he explains, it would be “at the time of the uprising.”

I am standing in the sweat stench of the crowd hurling stones at police soldiers tanks bullet-proof glass. Looking through the double doors of bullet-proof glass on to the crowd pushing forwards and I smell the sweat of my fear. Seized by a sudden urge to throw up, I shake my fist at myself who is standing behind the bullet-proof glass. Shaken by fear and contempt, I see myself within the crowd pushing forwards, foaming at my mouth, shaking my fist at myself. . . . I am the soldier inside the tank turret, my head is empty inside my helmet, the throttled scream underneath the tracks. . . . I tie the noose when the ringleaders are hung up, pull the stool from under their feet, break my neck. The parts I play are spit and sputum cup knife and wound tooth and throat neck and noose. . . . Bleeding within the crowd. Catching my breath behind the double doors.

But this time, the uneasy position “between the fronts” gives way to an overwhelming sense of repulsion and resentment against the ambivalent position of the intellectual and his characteristic wavering between involvement and detachment. Disgust and repulsion are indeed the pervasive sentiments in much of *Hamletmaschine*: disgust prompted by the world of capitalist commodity culture and its lures but also by the special privileges enjoyed by the author. Indeed, repulsion itself has become a dubious privilege. Resignation and retreat mark the mood of the text and generate its morbid atmosphere, culminating in images of regression and self-destruction. As a picture of the author is burnt on the stage, a voice, presumably male, declares the desire to disappear, to get rid of his nagging conscience and to revert to a purely bodily existence or even to become a machine.

A similar spirit of refusal and negation animates the second and the last “tableaux” of the series. They feature two female characters, Ophelia and Electra (in fact, in the second instance, it is Ophelia who declares to be Electra). Different from the Hamlet character’s passivity and inde-
cision, the humiliation and violence suffered by these two, depicted in remarkable detail, endows them with a resoluteness that is largely absent from the male figure’s elusive meditations. The first of the two scenes shows the figure of Ophelia recalling her suicides: “I am Ophelia. The one the river didn’t keep. The woman dangling from the rope. The woman with her arteries slit open. The woman with the overdose.” The self-annihilation invoked, however, is not an act of resignation but of defiance. The extreme ruthlessness of what appears to be a potentially infinite multiplication of the woman’s self-destructive acts is a form of revolt. Ophelia’s disregard and contempt for death give her the power to declare war on the world, endowing her with an unimagined force. Anticipating the image of the fettered figure evoked in the dramaturgical endnote to Wolokolamsker Chaussee, the final scene of Hamletmaschine features Electra/Ophelia swathed to a wheelchair with bandages. Set in the deep sea (“Tiefsee”), like the image of Medea and her carved-up brother on the bottom of the ocean, the play’s last “tableau” becomes something like the epitome of paralysis. And yet, again, it is this strange figure, humiliated and nearly muted, who emits a speech replete with hatred and apocalyptic visions of disaster. A kind of universal curse, articulated “in the name of the victims,” her speech is a hymn to destruction, a global revocation of creation and procreativity. “Long live hatred, contempt, uprising, death.”

This spirit of revocation and revolt is echoed in Medea’s long monologue in Medeamaterial, the middle piece of Verkommenes Ufer Medeamaterial Landschaft mit Argonauten. This stirring speech in the tradition of genus grande, or the grand style, culminates in the evocation of the murder of her children. Jason’s “treason,” his plan to marry Kreon’s daughter, has made Medea realize the full scale of her own betrayal, of Colchis, of her city, and of her family. Faced with Jason’s ostentatious disregard for her sacrifice and haunted by “the screams of massacre” and the “pictures of those flogged to death,” she is overtaken by a boundless desire for retribution. The scheme she conjures up is not only to match her own past crime, the murder of Apsyrtus, but to surpass it. Medea’s infanticide is both an act of self-destruction and an assault on the order of things, on social conventions and the bonds of motherhood. Her vengefulness trumps her maternal instincts, overriding all inhibitions and releasing an unrealized destructive potential. Like the figures in

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Mauser, The Horatian, and Philoctetes, or even in Russian Opening, the first play in the Volokolamsk Highway cycle, Medea has sacrificed what was dearest to her. But we meet her when she comes to realize that her sacrifice did not bring about what it was meant to yield. Medeamaterial focuses on the moment in which the character recognizes the full scale of her (self-)deception. This realization and its consequences seem to be all that matters.

In the earlier plays the overarching purpose of the sacrifice advocated is generally left in vague terms. Although the ultimate cause for which the protagonists kill remains rather abstract, most often the threat of an imminent attack provides the immediate pretext for and lends urgency to the measures taken. What Versuchsreihe actually sought to accomplish was to confront an ongoing project with its own contradictions. The plays suggest that only such a confrontation could consolidate the project, protect it against its own doubts, and render it legitimate. They are about acknowledging the sacrifices made, about shouldering the burden of the dead, required by the ongoing revolutionary efforts. The lines from Hölderlin’s famous Mnemosyne poem, quoted earlier, encapsulate this agenda:

And much
As on the shoulders a
Burden of failure must be
Retained.

In contrast, Medeamaterial, and this is true of many of the other post-dramatic texts as well, is about the claims of the dead as it becomes clear that these efforts have failed. Instead of achieving the “project” so as to finally redeem the sacrifices made in its name, redeeming the dead is the only project left. It is a redemption that does not seek reconciliation. Recalling and restaging “the pictures of those flogged to death” is not about coming to terms with the past. It aims at unsettling and disturbing the prevailing inertia; its goal is to break the spell of resignation and paralysis. The characters’ self-destructive acts, repeating and replicating but also out-doing the violence visited upon them, constitute a kind of self-empowerment, brazenly suspending the taboos and inhibitions in the way of their radical engagements. In view of the measure or balance sought in Versuchsreihe, between “guilt” and “merit,” necessary and unnecessary killing,
in view of the series’ insistence that the excess caused needs to be reinte-
grated, the postdramatic works exhibit this excess itself, the “remainder / That wasn’t resolved in the unceasing change of things.” Staging this ex-
cess is supposed to set free the lethal energies of revolt and destruction. It is often hard to distinguish between the element of pathos and that of hysteria in these experiments, the “explosion of a memory in an extinct dramatic structure.”76