

## *Müller's Memory Work*

Frank Hörnigk

To quote Heiner Müller in conversation with Sylvère Lotringer in 1981: “To banish the ghoul of history, one must first concede the very existence of history. One must know history. Otherwise it can always return in the old established ways, as a recurring nightmare or Hamlet’s ghost. One must first analyze history to be in a position to denounce it, to banish it.”<sup>1</sup> Müller’s statement contains an implicit warning, an “Otherwise . . . !” It is a vision of horror: the eternal return of Hamlet’s ghost representing an uninterrupted continuum of history.

Nonetheless, the “Otherwise” of that conversation seems to suggest that the hope of some day interrupting that continuum had not yet been entirely relinquished. In Müller’s literary texts of the same period, and indeed of some time earlier, this hope was fast vanishing and, in the end—for himself at least—had disappeared altogether.

An example of this can be found in “Verkommenes Ufer Medeamaterial Landschaft mit Argonauten” (“Despoiled Shore/Medeamaterial/Landscape with Argonauts”) (1982). The subtitle reads “Sea by Straußberg Despoiled Shore Trace / Of Flat-Browed Argonauts.”<sup>2</sup> The text begins:

1. Heiner Müller, “Ich glaube an Konflikt: Sonst glaube ich an nichts, Gespräch mit Sylvère Lotringer;” in *Gesammelte Irrtümer: Interviews und Gespräche*, 3 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag der Autoren, 1986–94), 1:78.

2. Heiner Müller, *Werke 5, Die Stücke 3*, ed. Frank Hörnigk (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2002), 73–84.

Reed bristles Dead branches  
THIS TREE SHALL NOT GROW OVER ME Fish corpses  
Gleam in the mud Biscuit tins Manure heaps  
FROMMS ACT CASINO  
Shredded sanitary napkins The blood  
Of the women of Colchis.<sup>3</sup>

The location is both specific and unclear: it is “Straußberg,” a place near Berlin and another place, Bukow, which was famous as Bertolt Brecht’s summer residence and later also famous for another reason—it was the headquarters of the general staff of East Germany’s National People’s Army. However, Straußberg is also “a mud-filled swimming pool in Beverly Hills or the baths of a psychiatric hospital.”<sup>4</sup> A landscape of desolation containing the traces of a previous time; the point of departure for the action:

On the ground however Medea the dismembered  
Brother in her arms She  
Who is skilled in poisons.<sup>5</sup>

She is everywhere.

What follows is her commentary (as a monologue within a “landscape with Argonauts”), more precisely an image of her to punctuate the living, historical worlds of the dead in the author’s head: “The dead, they say, stand on the ground / Upright swimmers until the bones rest.”<sup>6</sup>

The case of “despoiled shore” is paradigmatic—it gestures beyond itself. The recurring metaphor of the “ground”—a key term in the conceptualization of history as closed space—gives Müller’s disillusionment form and poetic embodiment.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, related signs that seem further to differentiate the semantics of this ground are merely various encodings of the selfsame. These include the kingdom of the dead, the underground or sewers, cellars or even (more profanely) underground car parks, as in, for example, “the dark gaze of Euripides into the underground garages of history.”<sup>8</sup>

3. Ibid., 73.

4. Ibid., 84.

5. Ibid., 74.

6. Ibid., 80–81.

7. See Sven-Thore Kramm, “Gräber im Untergrund: Zur Dialektik von Grund und Oberfläche im Denken Heiner Müllers” (MA thesis, Humboldt University, Berlin, 2001).

8. Heiner Müller, “Brief an den Regisseur der bulgarischen Erstaufführung von *Philoktet* am dramatischen Theater Sofia,” in *Werke 8, Schriften*, ed. Frank Hörnigk (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2005), 266.

In this sense, all societies and civilizations have their grounding (*Begründung*), their naming (*Bezeichnung*) they experience as “realms of the dead.” An example of this, which simultaneously demonstrates Müller’s unique sense of humor, is the following:

New York, built on pilings, is nearer to the water than it is to heaven, its *ground* the corpses of dead Indians, the less fortunate descendants of Abel. . . . And sometimes that *ground* strikes back: In the Seventies in New York, when it was fashionable to give children small alligators instead of hamsters (the easy way of getting rid of the pet when it became a nuisance was to flush it down the toilet, SEE YOU LATER ALLIGATOR), sewage workers started to disappear while working beneath the city. Search teams discovered congregations of fully grown alligators in the waste water of the sewers. They were albino, blind and well fed.<sup>9</sup>

The ground, the surface of which is New York City, is defined by the city’s sewage system—and by the dead, in this case the “corpses of dead Indians.” And sometimes this ground strikes back if it is forgotten/repressed. The flushed alligators strike back just as the flood strikes back in *Quartett*: as a “defect in the sewage system.”<sup>10</sup>

The ground always determines movement on the surface, thereby suspending linear causality.<sup>11</sup> In statements such as “pain registers in a different spot than its source” (*der Schmerz funktioniert anderswo als sein Grund*) or “Russia is still reacting to 1812,” we find Müller, in conversation with Alexander Kluge, once again sifting through variations on this image of history.<sup>12</sup> In recurring disjunctive correlations such as that of excavation and interment, various possible ways of intervening in the structure are played out. The unearthing and exposing of that which has been buried alive is juxtaposed with interring or burying the deceased and the concomitant danger of repression.

Müller sees in this process of correlatives precisely the possibility of revealing in literature the very mechanism of history. The image of the skeleton, another frequently used cipher for the normally hidden structure of history, gives a further definition to the contours of this obscure process: “I think

9. Heiner Müller, *New Yorck oder Das eiserne Gesicht der Freiheit*, in *Heiner-Müller-Material: Texte und Kommentare*, ed. Frank Hörnigk (Leipzig: Reclam, 1989), 97; my emphasis.

10. Heiner Müller, *Quartett*, in *Werke 5, Die Stücke 3*, 50.

11. Kramm, “Gräber im Untergrund,” 36–37.

12. Heiner Müller in conversation with Alexander Kluge, “Wandlungsfähigkeit der Körper,” in *Ich bin ein Landvermesser: Gespräche*, by Alexander Kluge (Hamburg: Rotbuch, 1996), 146, 18.

my strongest impulse is to reduce things to the bare bones, to carve away the flesh and surface. Then the job is done. . . . History too . . . is covered in flesh and skin, it lies beneath a surface. The strongest impulse is to penetrate beneath the surface to get at the underlying structure."<sup>13</sup> Or, as he says in slightly different terms: "When I write about a certain topic, I am interested only in the bare skeleton. In the case of *Quartett*, I wanted to reveal the structure of gender relations as I consider them to be in reality, and to do away with all the associated clichés and repression."<sup>14</sup>

The poem "Yesterday, on a Sunny Afternoon," quite aside from Müller's personal obsession, is a good example of this, perhaps the most convincing of all possible examples:

When I drove through the dead city of Berlin  
 Returned from some foreign country  
 I felt for the first time the desire  
 To exhume my wife from her grave  
 Two shovels full I threw on her myself  
 And to look for what is left of her  
 Bones which I have never seen  
 To hold her skull in my hand  
 And to imagine what her face was like  
 Behind the masks she had worn passing  
 Through the dead city of Berlin and other cities  
 When it was clothed with her flesh

I didn't yield to my desire  
 Afraid of the police and the gossip of my friends.<sup>15</sup>

The skeleton appears in all the cases cited here as the symbol of a hidden structure, the truth of history that has to be unveiled to be recognized. Accordingly, Müller's adaptation of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* is given the new title *Anatomy Titus, Fall of Rome, Shakespeare Commentary*. Moreover, in 1994 after his hospitalization, in conversation with Kluge, he reveals a fascination with the semantics of medical language that tallies with the skeleton imagery. "The vocabulary is interesting: They talk about representing [*Darstellung*] the stomach. This means, everything is cut away that impairs the view of the

13. Müller, "Ich glaube an Konflikt," 102.

14. Heiner Müller, "'Ein Grund zum Schreiben ist Schadenfreude': Gespräch mit Rolf Rütth und Petra Schmitz," in *Gesammelte Irrtümer*, 1:124.

15. *A Heiner Müller Reader: Plays, Poetry, Prose*, ed. and trans. Carl Weber (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 21.

stomach. This is what is meant by representation. This reminded me of Liebermann's comment: "To draw is to omit." This is art."<sup>16</sup>

Another image of Müller's for this very same process is that of "demasking":

Not until the Revolution has finally triumphed  
 In the city of Witebsk as in other cities  
 Will we know what that is, Man.  
 Namely, he is our work, the unknown one  
 Behind the masks, the one buried in the dung  
 Of his history, the real one beneath the leprosy  
 The living one in those petrifications  
 Because the Revolution will tear off his masks.<sup>17</sup>

Beneath the surface, the shell or the mask is the ground. It must be exposed, excavated. This is an archaeological treatment of history, a process of exhuming. "If we assume that the only way that art can deal with history is archaeologically, then it is a question of exposing or removing layer after layer in turn. . . . The process of exhumation is ever present."<sup>18</sup>

The other key process for Müller is burial—for example, that of an outmoded notion of nationhood: "Now that is a topic and a situation, I think, to describe the downfall of this nation. After all, it has really earned its funeral. And so far it has been denied one. I would really be interested in organizing a decent funeral for this nation in the near future, because it is really finished—it is a historical remnant, just like reunification."<sup>19</sup>

The new production of his *Bau* (construction), which Müller had been planning shortly before his death but which never came about, was a similar case: it was conceived as a piece of history work, revisiting "Stories from Production," that Müller had worked up in his early texts about the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and that had become critically important to him again. It was intended as a move against the repression of their East German history—which includes not only the memory of the idea of a socialist utopia but also the memory of the dilemma of its failure, the fatality of its self-destruction at the hands of absurd conditions of its own creation. Ironically, the very image of

16. Müller, "Wandlungsfähigkeit der Körper," 16.

17. Weber, *Heiner Müller Reader*, 102.

18. Heiner Müller in conversation with Ruth Berghaus (1987), in Müller, *Gesammelte Irrtümer*, 2:89.

19. "Apokalypse mit Zigarre," transcript of an unpublished television portrait of Heiner Müller in conversation with Manfred Kluth (1993), quoted in Kramm, "Gräber im Untergrund," 42.

construction captures in petrified form its own ruination. It is a warning both against dreams of resurrection and against the reverse, the posing as the new “victors of history”—including its ideologically strangely familiar-sounding self-image of achievement and sacrifice during the so-called accession to a reunified Germany: “Resurrected from ruins” and onward to those “flourishing landscapes!”<sup>20</sup>

In both cases, Müller sees himself as an undertaker or mortician, aesthetically disposing of the disposable. Another of Müller's images for the process of aesthetic disposal is that of the hyena, an “animal that ensures that the cycle of nature remains intact; it gets rid of what needs to be removed, the rotten and the decayed. They are brave animals, very tough animals, and they stick together.”<sup>21</sup>

Later Durs Grünbein will revisit this same image in his homage to Müller: “The poet concerned probably preferred to see himself as a hyena. . . . ‘The hyena is the symbol of mathematics. It realizes that nothing can be left over. Its god is zero.’ The hyena, with which he emblematically associated himself, was anything but a symbol of decadence.”<sup>22</sup>

At the core of the above lies an artistic principle of Müller's that is linked fundamentally to the notion of tragedy. This conclusion is hardly new and might even be considered a platitude. However, the point becomes more significant when we consider the tragic in Müller's late work: here it has evolved into a conceptualized criticism of the various manifestations of spreading cultural nihilism. The salient characteristic at this point is the absence of a ground, a groundlessness. This is revealed by the terminology Müller uses to describe the postreunification period after 1990 (and not only in Germany): “There is nothing left but superficial processes behind which nothing is happening. This is what is new: All the substance is gone. . . . Projection, imagination, the idea of an alternative reality to the existing one, all this has been lost.”<sup>23</sup>

Precisely this is one of the core images of nihilism: surface without grounds. Something that is not “grounded” (*geerdet*). This diagnosis also

20. “Auferstanden aus Ruinen”—thus began the national anthem of the GDR with lyrics by Johannes R. Becher. It was Chancellor Helmut Kohl who coined the phrase “blühende Landschaften.”

21. Heiner Müller and Alexander Kluge, “Die Stimme des Dramatikers—Postoperative Texte von Heiner Müller,” transcript of the DCTP program “News&Stories,” March 27, 1995, Sat. 1.

22. Durs Grünbein, “Bogen und Leier,” in *Ende der Handschrift: Gedichte*, by Heiner Müller, ed. Durs Grünbein (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2000), 99–116.

23. Müller, *Gesammelte Irrtümer*, 3:215.

applies when a culture is not grounded historically and therefore is in danger of being destroyed by the violent recoil action of this ground. The eternal (and eternally experienced) return of the ground(s) is something that Müller associates with the fatal repetition of those historical catastrophes that the ersatz religions of the twentieth century (the ideology of money as well as that of faith) have produced and continue to produce. In Müller's words: "The crucial difference between the nineteenth century and the first half of this century and what came after it is that the literary and artistic meaning is no longer an issue now. Now it's all about depicting, describing phenomena. Meaning has become an irrelevancy."<sup>24</sup>

In Friedrich Nietzsche's literary estate there is a sentence that reads like a categorical imperative: "Humanity needs a new What for."<sup>25</sup> This prompts Müller to ask about the "What for" of political developments: "If this [i.e., the 'What for'] is not found [his thesis in the early 1990s], then the conditions in Yugoslavia will spread. This whole Balkan massacre is nothing but a search for meaning. In Bosnia things will have to go on now until their bitter end because the neighbors of yesterday can no longer look one another in the eye. Although it is in the interests of no one in Europe that this conflict should continue, it will continue nevertheless. This is the new dimension. War has become a pure search for meaning. Seen in this light, the war is more a religious than a nationalistic conflict. It is a metaphysical war."<sup>26</sup>

At the very latest from this point onward, nihilism becomes for Müller the "vanishing point of Christian capitalist politics"—which he now attacks vehemently. Frank Raddatz's thesis that "Müller's writing and thought" is committed to saving or redeeming "an image of man, an emphatic concept of the individual," takes on new relevance against the background of varying interpretations of his oeuvre in terms of "cynicism," "reveling in catastrophe" and even "nihilism," a relevance that I, in agreement with Raddatz, wish to examine here.<sup>27</sup>

To what extent this redemptive move, this "grounding" or "reconnection," is subsumed in the critical question (and one still very much asked from the position of the hopeless humanist) of how to deal with death and the

24. *Jenseits der Nation: Heiner Müller im Gespräch mit Frank M. Raddatz* (Berlin: Rotbuch, 1991), 53ff.

25. Friedrich Nietzsche, "Die Frage des Nihilismus(us) wozu?" in *Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, new ed., 15 vols. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999), 12:355.

26. Müller, *Gesammelte Irrtümer*, 3:217.

27. Frank M. Raddatz, "Die Erdung des Menschen: Der Tod im Werk Heiner Müllers," *Freitag*, January 12, 1996, 23.

dead will be addressed in the following: "This age of nihilism [Müller summarizes] as Nietzsche described it and in which we currently find ourselves, can be overcome only if society becomes aware of its responsibility for the dead. In the wake of the destruction of the spiritual power of the church, now cultural resources will have to be brought to bear in our dealings with the dead. The quality of a culture is determined by how that culture deals with the dead."<sup>28</sup> This is where the energy of reconnection lies: memory, comprehending the underground esoteric nature of the structure as a hidden tragic ground(s) beneath the surface that lives with the dead. In his autobiography Müller talks about this, albeit rather casually, in connection with two important concepts of theater in the DDR, those of Benno Besson and Brecht: "What I missed most of all in Besson's work was the tragic. Brecht didn't have it either, except in the best texts. But he always used the theoretical to fend it off. . . . [For him] tragedy was almost always fascism. Brecht's enlightenment attitude toward myth. This deliberate blindness to the dark side of the Enlightenment, its private parts."<sup>29</sup> It is the attitude toward tragedy that distinguishes the speaker from the addressees. The image of the dark side, the private parts, makes the antirationalistic thrust clear: in this respect, Müller is much closer to Nietzsche, but also to Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, than he is to the tradition of Brecht and Marxism. Based on this distinction, the poetic impulse to expose the tragic in the historical is always concerned with the mythological in history, which was preserved in the collective movements of the twentieth century, and thereby, by deduction, also concentrates on the history of Germany, and included with that the GDR. In this context Müller speaks specifically of a "violence of context!"

The definition of tragedy as "cases of suffering and death which cannot be remedied by social measures," for example within the socialist society of the GDR, also refers to an existential dimension for the individual.<sup>30</sup> In this context Müller repeatedly cites Ilja Ehrenburg: "When Communism has succeeded and all economic problems have been solved, the human tragedy will begin. The tragedy of mortality."<sup>31</sup> Or in Müller's own words: "Nowadays there is a degenerate attitude to tragedy and even to death. An ideal form for me would be: To live without either hope or despair. And one has to learn to

28. Müller, *Gesammelte Irrtümer*, 3:223–24.

29. Heiner Müller, *Krieg ohne Schlacht: Leben in zwei Diktaturen*, 2nd ed. (Cologne: Kiepenheuer und Witsch, 1994), 205.

30. Cited in *Tragödien-theorien*, ed. Ulrich Profitlich (Rowohlt: Reinbek, 1998), 299n9.

31. See, among others, Müller, *Krieg ohne Schlacht*, 496 (conversation with Jean-Paul Sartre).



do that. People always ask me about hope. That is a Christian question. The Ancient Greeks would never have asked it: They had neither hope nor fear. They lived. With Christianity, this attitude toward tragedy, which enriched both life and theater, was lost. Tragedy is something very vital. I see a person being destroyed and that gives me vitality.”<sup>32</sup>

Again Müller takes up an idea of Nietzsche’s: “The tragic man affirms even the harshest suffering: He is strong, rich and capable of deifying to do so. The Christian denies even the happiest lot on earth: He is sufficiently weak, poor, disinherited to suffer from life in whatever form he meets it.”<sup>33</sup> In fact, there is probably an even stronger affinity with the passage in the introduction to *The Birth of Tragedy* that reads: “Is pessimism necessarily a sign of decline, decay, malformation, of tired and debilitated instincts? . . . Is there a pessimism of *strength*? . . . Conversely, those things which gave rise to the death of tragedy—Socratism in ethics, the dialectics, smugness and cheerfulness of theoretical man—might not this very Socratism be a sign of decline, of exhaustion, of sickness, of the anarchic dissolution of the instincts? . . . Is scientific method perhaps no more than fear of and flight from pessimism? A subtle defence against—*truth*?”<sup>34</sup>

In Müller’s words: “By chance I found myself looking at Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy* again. . . . I came upon the idea that there is also a pessimism of strength and an optimism of weakness. . . . The idea is quite correct if you go back to Greek tragedy.”<sup>35</sup>

At this juncture, I enumerate again the constituent elements of Müller’s concept of tragedy: myth, irrationality (= the dark side/private parts of the Enlightenment), “irremediable cases of death and suffering,” “death” as well as “vitality” and “power.” How is power to be derived from all this—in other words, from this “downfall” (*Untergang*)—for example, in what Müller called the tragedies of the proletarian revolution of the twentieth century? In his own work we find it in the series *Germania Death in Berlin*, *Cement*, and *The Road to Volokolamsk*, or how downfall and drawing energy from something, pessimism and strength, tragedy and vitality fit together leads to the idea of tragedy as a dialectical representation of going under (*Zu-Grunde-Gehen*).<sup>36</sup> Whereas

32. Müller, *Gesammelte Irrtümer*, 1:181.

33. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968), 543.

34. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, ed. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs, trans. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 2–4.

35. Müller, *Gesammelte Irrtümer*, 2:24.

36. Kramm, “Gräber im Untergrund,” 55–56.

going under is always conceived of as an overcoming, downfall is a going over to something, a transition, a change. In other words, this is a concept of a process, a concept of the tragic whereby it returns one to the surface but changed.

“SO THAT SOMETHING CAN ARRIVE SOMETHING HAS TO GO THE FIRST SHAPE OF HOPE IS FEAR THE FIRST APPEARANCE OF THE NEW IS TERROR.”<sup>37</sup> In reference to this, an axiomatic assertion in Müller's theory of poetry states: “One could say that the basis of theater and therefore also of drama is change, and the ultimate change is death. The only thing you can get an audience to agree about, the only thing they can agree about, is the fear of death they all share. And the effect of theater depends on this single instance of communality. In other words, theater is based on symbolic death.”<sup>38</sup>

Not only is it clear that reconciliation with nature requires reconciliation with death, but it is also evident *ex negativo* how close nihilism and repression of death are to each other. Furthermore, what we have is a transformative view of death: death as a metamorphosis or death as the “first manifestation of the new.” Downfall, going under as the precondition for overcoming, requires that one first confront the terror, the fear of death, to transcend it. Müller's dress rehearsal of this idea can be seen in his agreement with Walter Benjamin's Fatzer commentary: “Keep sinking. . . . Fatzer should find his footing in hopelessness. Footing, not hope. Comfort has nothing to do with hope. And Brecht comforts him: A person can live in hopelessness if he is aware of how he got there. Then he can live with it, because his hopeless life has some import then. Here going under means: Getting to the bottom of things.”<sup>39</sup>

Herein lies a key for mobilization against a politics of catastrophe. It is the self-activation of a literary avant-garde at one with its isolation. Inspired from within, it formulates its resistance to nihilism from a cultural theory perspective—of the tragic—as saving a concept of reason, itself wobbly if not staggering from the doubts of misplaced self-justification, from nihilism.<sup>40</sup>

What poetic concretization is achieved by the notions of ground(s), tragedy, or Müller's model of change in his writings in terms of the GDR as “object”?

37. Müller, *Mauser*, in *Werke 4, Die Stücke 2*, ed. Frank Hörnigk (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001), 106.

38. Heiner Müller in conversation with Alexander Kluge, in *Kalkfell*, ed. Frank Hörnigk et al. (Berlin: Theater der Zeit, 1996), 138.

39. Müller, *Gesammelte Irrtümer*, 2:58.

40. Kramm, “Gräber im Untergrund,” 57.

The question relates to images of death and the dead themselves in their relations to the living. The answers are well known, the metaphors often cited; they are part and parcel of the emphatic demand “to liberate the dead” or also to be seen as projections, in the existential experience of one’s own death, “in the mirror the image of the enemy,” to look without looking away.<sup>41</sup> Precisely this “image of the enemy” in the mirror is a key to understanding tragedy as a dialectical figure. I return to this below. But first let us turn to the metaphor of the kingdom of the dead, the underworld as an image for Müller’s concept of history as the antiworld to the world of the living. This underworld is not only the ground(s) of the present but simultaneously a catastrophic underground. Here Benjamin’s influence is evident, particularly his theses on the philosophy of history where the past is also portrayed as a catastrophe, the ruins of paradise. Utopia means to tarry awhile, to awaken the dead and repair the things that have been broken. But Benjamin is prevented from doing this by the unrelenting storm of progress blowing backward from paradise into the future, the storm of progress.

For Müller, this task also remains the experiencing of difference in consensus. Like Benjamin, he wants to wake the dead, depicting the possible flight of the redemptive angel. I simply mention here, without going into detail about it, the relationship between Müller’s “glücklose Engel” and Benjamin’s “Angel of History” and in the following discuss the contexts in which the metaphor of “freeing the dead” as a dialectical image of the historically tragic becomes so important.<sup>42</sup> In this respect the metaphor is different from that of the “underworld of the dead”—it merges with the idea of exhumation, or with the concept of necrophilia that Müller repeatedly uses in this context and that is to be understood in the image of the going under of a figure as overcoming (*Überwindung*). Once again I quote the line “The dead, they say, stand on the ground” from “Landscape with Argonauts.” The aim is to expose their underground graves and thus to free them, to conjure up the past to redeem the present. According to Müller, “Marx talks about the nightmare of dead generations, Benjamin about liberating the past. That which is dead is not dead in history. One of the functions of drama is the conjuring of the dead—dialogue with the dead cannot be broken off until they have revealed

41. This image turns up in the most diverse contexts of Müller’s writing; see, e.g., *Geschichten aus der Produktion 2* (Berlin: Rotbuch, 1974), 22; *Herzstück* (Berlin: Rotbuch, 1983), 69; and *Shakespeare Factory* (Berlin: Rotbuch, 1985), 12. See, among others, Müller, *Werke 5, Die Stücke 3*, 247.

42. Heiner Müller, “Der glücklose Engel,” in *Werke 1, Die Gedichte*, ed. Frank Hörnigk (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1998), 53; Frank Hörnigk, “‘Texte die auf Geschichte warten . . .’: Zum Geschichtsbegriff bei Heiner Müller,” in *Heiner-Müller-Material*, 123–37.

what elements of the future have been buried with them.”<sup>43</sup> “The dead,” he continues, “have to be exhumed, over and over again, because it is only from them that the future can be obtained. Necrophilia is love of the future. It is necessary to accept the presence of the dead either as interlocutors or as destroyers of dialogue—the future comes only from dialogue with the dead.”<sup>44</sup>

Only by processing the past, by clearing away the debris of history (see *Der glücklose Engel*), can we gain the future, can the escape from the continuum of a catastrophic history even be thinkable. The untamed in history—its past—must be exhumed to be reburied. Liberation is made possible only by this act of reburial. Meanwhile, the blocked or repressed catastrophic continues its work in the underground structuring the present.

On a related note: chthonically speaking, the present—including the present in a world of unopposed global capitalism—is codetermined by the history of socialism that has now gone under. In other words, it is determined by a realm of the dead in which the dead have not yet been liberated or put to rest. Having ascertained this, we can conclude that (1) historical catastrophes must be excavated, brought to light, and processed, and (2) utopian possibilities, which have been destroyed and forgotten along with the victims of history (the dead), need to be freed and made fruitful again.

As I stated earlier, this excursus on the dead leads into some remarks on the treatment of the image of death in Müller's work. I have already mentioned that one aspect of tragedy for Müller was human death, mortality: he calls it “the human tragedy,” what humans fear and what unites all humanity. Fear is a prelude to flight. It is also the by-product of repression, which Müller describes as a superficial process behind whose surface nothing is happening. In Müller's own words: “Whosoever cannot die also cannot live”; “The entirety of history and politics can be reduced to the repression of mortality”; “The nonacceptance of death is the precondition of all achievement. . . . All these death machines . . . are designed to repress death as an intrinsic part of life. . . . For millennia this was the basis of all fundamentalism, religion, ideologies.”<sup>45</sup> In other words: Müller considers repression of the dead a key cause of historical catastrophe in Western civilization. Sasportas's address to the Europeans in *The Mission: Memories of a Revolution* can be interpreted

43. Müller, *Gesammelte Irrtümer*, 2:64.

44. *Jenseits der Nation*, 31.

45. Müller, *Gesammelte Irrtümer*, 3:224; *Jenseits der Nation*, 23; Heiner Müller, *Zur Lage der Nation* (Berlin: Rotpunkt, 1990), 37, 50.

in this way: “The problem with you is that you don’t know how to die. That’s why you have to kill everything around you.”<sup>46</sup>

The repression of death relied for a long time, indeed until quite recently, on the fiction of collectivism to dispel the fear of solitariness. And, where this was not enough, the machine took over the work of distraction: “I’m going home and kill some time, at one / With my undivided self” (*Hamletmaschine*) or “May the mob mount itself in passing, their time is expensive, it’s costing us money, our noble profession is to kill time” (*Quartett*).<sup>47</sup>

Müller’s analysis of the situation can be found *in nuce* in the following quote:

This whole consumer and entertainment industry is designed to ensure that no one has any time anymore, not even a second, to think about their final end. The industry concentrates all its efforts on ensuring that as comprehensive a net of entertainment and distraction as possible is spread over humanity so that no one is left to their own devices anymore. But, just before falling asleep, if one hasn’t consumed enough tablets, the possibility of being alone with one’s thoughts does arise, and a new fundamentalism comes into being, and the same old shit starts all over again.<sup>48</sup>

In this case, the return of the ground(s), which are threatened with repression, manifests itself in “being alone.” This is exactly what is meant by “THE MOMENT OF TRUTH WHEN IN THE MIRROR / THERE APPEARS THE FACE OF THE ENEMY.”<sup>49</sup>

This is the moment in which a person as self-aware subject, confronted with his or her own mortality, recognizes the threat not only from what is outside but also from what is inside himself or herself (see *Heracles 2 or the Hydra*). The accompanying feeling of fright means that there is only one option: either one stands one’s ground and confronts one’s image, or one flees. If one flees, the mirror image (= the subject) disappears or the mirror (= subjectivity) is destroyed, and it reveals nothing anymore: “The alternative is the dark mirror that casts no more images.”<sup>50</sup>

This is the source of the horror associated with the vampire: “Whoever looks in the mirror and sees nothing is a vampire.”<sup>51</sup> Müller picks up this

46. Heiner Müller, *Der Auftrag*, in *Werke 4, Die Stücke 2*, 27.

47. Heiner Müller, *Die Hamletmaschine*, in *Werke 4, Die Stücke 2*, 551; Müller, *Quartett*, 49.

48. Müller, *Zur Lage der Nation*, 50.

49. Heiner Müller, *Wolokolamsker Chaussee*, in *Werke 5, Die Stücke 3*, 247.

50. *Ibid.*

51. Heiner Müller in conversation with Frank M. Raddatz, “Das Schweigen des Müller,” in *ThdZ*, February 1995, 3.

image again in his late poem "Vampire" as a symbol of great significance/mourning: "Instead of walls, mirrors surround me / My gaze seeks out my face but the looking glass remains empty."<sup>52</sup>

So, on the one hand, the vampire represents the unconscious (mirrorless), distressed, blinded, lost human; on the other, it represents a society that has lost its self-control, such as, at the moment, "the USA . . . which moves about the place like a vampire, eating everything that takes its fancy."<sup>53</sup>

The "dark mirror," the "empty mirror image," and the "vampire" taken together are all images that represent lack/loss of consciousness, the eradication of the subject—and thereby also the triumph of the machine over the human. To face down this enemy image, to resist it, to stare into the mirror at it, to learn to endure it and rediscover one's lost image in it—which, in the end, also means learning to endure loneliness and learning to die—is the basic credo in the work of Heiner Müller. In this sense, fear of death, loneliness, and subjectivity go hand in hand. In the metaphorical complex of ground and surface, they resurface as the triad of death repression, distraction, and unconsciousness, as the underground that provides the grounds for human existence. The idea of going under as preservation is key to saving the subject in the battle against the machine. To quote (a sarcastic) Müller again: "Capitalism never supplies loneliness, only togetherness [*Einsamkeit nur Gemeinsamkeit*]. Capitalist supply has its foundations in our fear of being alone, and McDonald's offers the ultimate in collectivism. Wherever you are in the world, you can sit in the same restaurant, eating the same shit, surrounded by the same happy people, because in McDonald's you are part of a real collective. Even the faces in the McDonald's restaurants are becoming increasingly like one another."<sup>54</sup>

In conclusion, let me quote Raddatz again:

Müller's writing and thought are grounded in a concept of culture that is not subsumed in the central cultural concepts of our civilization. His central thesis is that our dealings with death and the dead determine the quality of a culture. The potential of a culture to compensate for the *horror vacui* caused by the dynamic of civilization depends on its ability to deal with death and the dead. This is . . . a historicocultural project of truly epochal dimensions.<sup>55</sup>

*Translated by Rachel Leah Magshamrain*

52. Heiner Müller, "Vampir," in *Werke I, Die Gedichte*, 317.

53. Müller, *Zur Lage der Nation*, 29.

54. *Jenseits der Nation*, 58.

55. Raddatz, "Erdung des Menschen."