

## Heiner Müller's *Mauser*

While Bertolt Brecht in his learning plays explored the antinomies of revolutionary autonomy, Heiner Müller responded by experimenting in his learning plays with the revolt against autonomy, specifically, the betrayal of the revolution. He wrote the learning play *Mauser* (1970) to show that rebellion against party discipline means betrayal of the revolution and deserves punitive measures since, in his words, “the first appearance of the new is terror” (Müller 2001: 106). To convey this lesson, he composed a pre-tragic ritual for chorus only, where any claim to personal freedom is treated as a violation of collective necessity, and the only ethics is politics.

Here is the framework. “The text is written in blank verse for a chorus, out of which speakers develop two opposing discursive positions, labelled ‘A’ and ‘B.’ Both are executioners on behalf of the revolution; both are broken by this task, then executed at the behest of the chorus into which they are reabsorbed. ‘B’ fails because of too much sympathy with his victims; ‘A’ because he passes through the stage of functioning like a machine to begin killing for its own sake. Through their exchanges with the chorus, which are always exchanges from within the chorus itself, questions about the killing’s cost are raised” (Rouse 1993: 70).

B respects the humanity inspiring the revolutionary project, and asks: “Why the killing and why the dying/If the price of the Revolution is the Revolution/Those to be freed the price of freedom” (Müller 2001: 98). On the other hand, A adheres to the strategy driving the revolutionary project, and disregards its humanity. Ultimately, emancipatory violence has to turn against not only its enemies but revolutionaries too. “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!’” (Buch 2010: 127). A supreme revolutionary standard is that individuals must be

ready to sacrifice themselves for the interests of the collective. “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” (136).

There is a general critical consensus about the aporia of revolutionary violence in the play. The revolution must use inhuman means to eliminate inhuman social conditions since, until it succeeds, it does not know which means are human. The chorus declares: “A man is something you shoot into/Until Man will rise from the ruins of man” (Müller 2001: 103). The play deals with “the experience of contradiction between humanity and inhumanity of which any legitimate revolution must remain conscious” (Bathrick & Huyssen 1976: 117). “*Mauser* is about coming to terms with the contradictions of violence deployed to battle violence; the necessity of killing to end all killing” (Buch 2010: 133). It “centers on a situation of acute crisis in which violence seems both warranted and self-defeating” (124). The historical situation is one of civil war. The Mauser was a particular kind of pistol which, in the Russian Civil War (1918-20), “represented a status symbol for the Soviet commissar and the professional revolutionary” (Schivelbusch 1974: 109). Mauser was also the name of A in an early draft.

Most critics believe that “throughout the play, the revolutionary claim remains in dialectical tension with the inhumanity of the individual which is the unavoidable result of the collectively organized work of killing” (Bathrick & Huyssen 1976: 115). They also find a strong communist self-criticism, arguing that “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” (Buch 2010: 122-23). If that is the case, Reinhold Grimm is right to see “the play as a tragedy dealing with the insoluble conflict of freedom versus necessity” (113). But I do not believe that Müller confronts the tragic paradox of the binding law of autonomy. I find *Mauser* an exemplary *Lehrstück* that totally resists tragedy. “Against Brecht’s didacticism, Müller positions violence ... as a revolutionary product in and of itself” (Komins 2002: 112). His play justifies this kind of self-consuming violence.

While the play dramatizes communist contradictions, it does not stage a tragedy of revolution, only the failure of revolution when it allows itself to face tragic dilemmas and succumbs to premature humanity. It is not a tragedy because the revolution overcomes the contradiction humanity vs. inhumanity. This is articulated by the chorus, a form of military court charged with upholding the standards of the revolution which resembles the revolutionary council in Brecht's *The Measures Taken*. The chorus has the judicial authority to issue a verdict on the actions of the revolutionaries and defend the doctrine of correct revolutionary work. In its operations, the intrinsic revolutionary conflict between freedom of moral integrity vs. necessity of political strategy is reconciled. "Müller's chorus represents the unity of contradictions in that it makes a critique of humanity *and* a critique of inhumanity" (Schivelbusch 1974: 111).

Müller had no motivation to write a tragedy since he saw no tragic dilemma, not even any persons to face it. The two separate nameless voices, A and B, speak as chorus members: They emerge out of the collective and are reintegrated back without ever becoming independent. There is no tragic antinomy of autonomy. The only question is whether autonomy is at all possible, and Müller rejects the idea, both ideologically and theatrically. *Mauser* works as a ritual for chorus, namely, for the Communist Party. "Historically, Müller's Chorus represents the Vanguard Party at the point of revolutionary reification, mirroring the tactical logic of the Stalinist purges. [] Müller's Chorus is the conscience of frozen Party dogma, which demands that true, loyal revolutionaries 'tear out the old grass so that new grass can grow'" (Komins 2002: 113).

The contradiction inherent in revolutionary conduct can be traced back to Brecht's *The Measures Taken*. As it has been noticed, "it is possible to see the word *Mauser* as an anagram of the word *Massnahme* ('measures taken') since the references to Brecht's play are so obvious and the import of *Mauser* can be assessed only against the background of *The Measures Taken*" (Schivelbusch 1974: 109). In an interview in 1980, Müller remarked that "the relation of *The Mission* to *Mauser* would be like the guerilla's relation to revolution, guerilla meaning the necessity to adapt one's battle techniques to every changing situation" (Müller 1990: 191).

The same contradiction may be traced further back to Büchner's *Danton's Death*: "The dialectics of the revolution, which consists in losing revolutionary goals on the way to these goals, was portrayed for the first time by Georg Büchner in *Danton's Death* (1835)" (Schivelbusch 1974: 111). However, the perspective has changed: "For Büchner the individual hero clearly takes priority over the people. [] For Brecht and Müller, the relationship between individual heroes and the people has been reversed" (113).

The same contradiction may also be traced to Kleist's last drama, *The Prince of Homburg* (1810) whose protagonist disobeys military orders, he is condemned for insubordination, refuses to call his sentence unjust, and agrees to be executed. "In Müller's view, A - like Homburg but unlike the Young Comrade in *The Measures Taken* ... - is a passionate, volatile character whose individuality is annihilated in an encounter with absolute values. [] The crucial distinction is that Brecht, in 1930, is uninterested in the corrupting influence of absolutes whereas Müller, reading Kleist a bit more deeply in the wake of Stalin and Hitler, cannot help but ask whether those who commit murder (such as Brecht's Agitators) and project an unbending militaristic bearing unto the world (such as the *Mauser* Chorus) may have disqualified themselves as potential agents of change toward a more humane world" (Kalb 2001: 54). As we can see, the central dialectical tension at the heart of revolutionary violence has been disrupting German drama since Romanticism.

Nine years after *Mauser*, Müller wrote the play *The Mission: Memory of a Revolution* (1979), a memorial to the betrayed and abandoned revolution of the European whites. Futile attempts to universalize this revolution disillusioned him and led him in 1977 to call publicly a halt to learning plays teaching the Party orthodoxy. Instead, he wrote the postmodern tragedy of a revolution that defies against communist normative autonomy and rejects its world mission.

### Heiner Müller's *The Mission*

Müller's *The Mission* (1979) is modelled after Brecht's *The Measures Taken* (1930) which consists in a series of embedded trials: During a revolutionary mission, a young communist was judged and killed by his comrades. Upon their return, the four agitators give their report to the Control Chorus by demonstrating his behavior in various situations (and taking turns to play the young comrade) and ask the Party to judge their actions. *The Mission* too is about a revolutionary mission and the revolution that assigned it, which is now only a memory. The task was to export a European revolution (the French one) to the colonial world (Jamaica). The action takes place after three revolutions – the French one (1789), the Jamaica and the Saint-Domingue Slave Revolt (1791-93), and the coup of the Napoleonic restoration on the 18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire (1799).

The disaffected former revolutionary Antoine, who is hiding his identity, receives a message about the three agitators he sent in 1794 to Jamaica, a British colony, “to lead a slave revolt against the British in the name of the Republic of France. But before they have even begun to organize the slaves for a revolt, they receive the message that Napoleon has dissolved the Directory and taken over the government by a coup d'état in Paris. The revolution in France is finished and the mission in Jamaica has become meaningless. While Sasportas, a former black slave, and Galloudec, a French peasant, continue to fight oppression, Debuisson betrays the revolution by returning to his former life as a slaveholder. ... Müller's play opens with the text of the letter and its delivery to Antoine in France after 1804, reporting the failure of the mission: Sasportas has been hanged and Galloudec has been detained by the Spanish in Cuba and died in prison” (Bahr 1992: 246-47). The news prompts Antoine to remember and reconstruct in his mind the failed Jamaican mission, hence the play's subtitle, *Memory of a Revolution*.

The main action of *The Mission* “involves the reenactment ... of certain insurrectional events as a morbid *clownerie* ... for a gallery understood to consist of revolutionaries” (Kalb 2001: 130). In the central scene, the three emissaries of

revolutionary France put on masks to perform a grotesque “theater of the revolution” depicting the bankruptcy of the mission by showing that Debuissou, the white intellectual (a figure reminiscent of Danton in *Danton’s Death* and *Marat/Sade*), disgusted by the bloody revolt, betrayed the mission and returned to the privileged world of his colonial slave plantation. His conclusion summarizes the revolutionary “terror:” “The revolution is the mask of death. Death is the mask of the revolution” (Müller 1995: 68).

The play is a memorial to the betrayed and abandoned revolution of the European whites. In the end, “the entire supporting ideology of ‘world revolution’ is revealed finally to be imperialist and Eurocentric” (Teraoka 1986: 66). Furthermore, Müller suggests that “it is not the young comrade who betrays the revolution by abandoning the Party but the Party itself that abandons and betrays the revolution” (71). The futile attempt to export and universalize the revolution is represented in an interlude by the existential predicament of a Beckettian small office bureaucrat, searching in vain for a mission in Peru, who is late for a meeting with his boss and trapped in an elevator.

Both *The Measures Taken* and *The Mission* examine the viability of two missions of revolt, a communist and a bourgeois one. Brecht supports the model of world revolution while Müller criticizes it. “The model of *Massnahme*, which presents the successful exportation of the European revolution to other parts of the world, is thus completely overturned in Müller’s adaptation. [] Müller’s criticism is aimed directly at the European attempt to impose its leadership and its logic on indigenous revolutionary movements abroad” (77).

The major difference between the two plays is that, by refusing to draw a lesson at the end, Müller denies the very possibility of the genre of the learning play. As he wrote in his “Discharge of the Learning Play” (1978), “we have to bid farewell to the LEARNING PLAY until the next earthquake” (Müller 1990: 239). In her excellent paper, Arlene Akiko Teraoka draws a comparison between the two plays. “Indeed, the task of all participants in the *Lehrstück* – the young comrade, the agitators, and the chorus; the actors and the audience – is to learn certain basic lessons of the revolution. [] Underlying the entire project of the *Lehrstück* is the

conviction ... that the revolution can and must learn through its errors". In contrast, *The Mission* "lacks any concluding statement on the part of a chorus summarizing the basic 'lesson' to be drawn – Müller's *Auftrag* ends, abruptly, with the moment of betrayal, left uncondemned or unevaluated by a higher revolutionary authority. [] *Der Auftrag* thus enacts the final demise of the clear revolutionary ideology of the Brechtian learning play; there is no longer any authoritative doctrine of revolution to be elucidated and exported" (Teraoka 1986: 79).

*The Mission* works as a triple memorialization. First, as its subtitle states, it represents the "memory of a revolution," which can be a French, Jamaican, German, or other historical revolt: It unfolds at a time when the revolution has become a disconcerting memory.

It is also a memory of a theatrical tradition, the theater of Kleist, Büchner, Brecht, Beckett, Genet, and others cited, collaged, and repurposed in diverse ways (Pizer 2011: 33).

Last, it dramatizes the memory of revolutionary theater, the radical theater of playwrights and directors who revolutionized the staging of drama.

This triple memorialization (of the theater, the revolution, and the revolutionary theater) makes *The Mission* a consummate postmodern "tragedy" (Prager 1998: 71) whose many dramaturgical complexities are an integral part of its very argument.

The tragic structure of Brecht's *The Measures Taken* is based on a tension between two incompatible kinds of duty, moral integrity and political strategy. Müller's *The Mission* is based on an anterior tragic tension, the "antinomy of duty and inclination" (Rasch 1999: 333). The play shows one of its three protagonists, the bourgeois Debuissou, facing the two basic kinds of freedom, binding and arbitrary.

Binding freedom operates, as Kant's autonomy, under normative law – for example, the law of the revolution.

Arbitrary freedom is not operating under rational self-legislating and may choose among different inclinations.

The tragic paradox of autonomy is that the condition of its possibility is also the condition of its impossibility: The self-prescribed law of autonomy is binding only due to a former non- self-prescribed law (Khurana 2013: 62).

If autonomy, as self-subjugation, is paradoxical, then, instead of trying to reconcile freedom and law, why not ignore the latter altogether and revert to the arbitrary, lawless freedom of the unbound subject? Thus, Debusson's arbitrary freedom, which rebels against normative autonomy and the universal law of world revolution, can renounce the mission and dissolve the fundamental law of the originary lawless act. As an experiment with this extreme view, *The Mission* may be considered a tragic *Lehrstück*, leaving open two attitudes to the revolution, historical pessimism or tragic optimism, which Müller fused in his "constructive defeatism" (Müller 1990: 240).

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