Heiner Müller's *Germania 3 Ghosts at Dead Man: Atrocity and Pain in German History and Theatre*

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What if language has within it its own possibilities for violence and for world-shattering?

Judith Butler (1997)

Even in the era of cybermodels, what the mind feels like is still, as the ancients imagined it, an inner space - like a theatre - in which we picture, and it is these pictures that allow us to remember.

Susan Sontag (2003)

What could befall you that could equal even half my pain.

Heiner Müller (1996)

Language that injures and causes pain is embodied in the work of Heiner Müller. In evaluating this type of language, Judith Butler's enquiry into injurious speech and linguistic vulnerability, applied in a case study of so-called hate-speech, might be usefully applied to theatrical speech:

When we say that an insult strikes like a blow, we imply that our bodies are injured by such speech. And they surely are, but not in the same way as a purely physical injury takes place (Butler, 1997: 159).

Racist, class-based and sexist hate-speech is injurious speech that exposes the linguistic vulnerability of subjects and the power of language to wound like a sword. Applied to Müller's dramatic texts, I argue that the speeches uttered by various figurations mimic the operations of hate-speech in the social sphere, with the addition that the effects of the speech may also be shown.

The question I pose is: Can the discourse of the performance text bear witness to and embody pain as well as demonstrate the violence that is both enacted within and a consequence of speech? I ask with Susan Sontag, What do these imaginary accounts do to the real pain of the victims of war and political struggle and what is the point of
their transformation into art given that "the iconography of suffering has a long pedigree" (Sontag, 2003: 40)?

*Germania* is significant in that it offers imaginary accounts of the pain and suffering of modern German history, inflected with references to the violence of the folktale and myth that underlie modernity. The focus is primarily on German history and culture, but also its effects across the broader field of Europe--Russia, Croatia, Poland and France.

In approaching this play, the pain examined in this essay is multi-layered. First, writing transforms a painful history into the discursive practices of the theatrical text. Language will be seen to create an imaginary space--intellectual, but also visceral and virtual--for the aesthetic representation of pain and suffering. Secondly, the speech acts that comprise the dramatic language are a parodic re-staging of the injurious and hateful speeches of historical figures such as Hitler and lesser fascist functionaries. Thirdly, the transformation of fascist and other injurious speech acts into performative acts exposes the speakers to ridicule and criticism. Finally, Müller's text inhabits the realm of the symbolic where pain is distanced and submitted to the aesthetic conventions and dramaturgies of the theatre. But the effect need be no less powerful. Any discussion of Müller’s plays needs to have an eye to both its theatricality (or artifice) and its performativity (or self-reflexive presence).

Müller’s plays, interviews, poetry, and prose pieces, therefore, lend themselves to the kind of "Double Dialogue" enquiry initiated by Art and Pain. His work for theatre has frequently engaged with classicism--Greek and Shakespearean tragedy--and the pain and death, atrocity and horror contained within. The key shift in Müller’s treatment of these themes and the genre of the twentieth century is the elimination of the moral point, the cathartic release, and the classical unities of time and place. His re-writings use fragments of the well-known plays as analytical and comparative frames for an history of modernity that sets "the banality of evil" (to use the well-known phrase of Hannah Arendt (1964)) and the ambivalence of politics at an ironic distance. Absent is the redemptive power of knowledge.

This essay will focus on Müller's last work for the theatre, *Germania 3 Ghosts at Dead Man* (1996). Germania is significant in that it offers imaginary accounts of the pain and suffering of modern German history, inflected with references to the violence of the folktale and myth that underlie modernity. The focus is primarily on German history and culture, but also its effects across the broader field of Europe--Russia, Croatia, Poland and France.

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Germania, like Sophocles' Oedipus, begins at the present and works its way backwards through time. The play begins at the Berlin Wall and then returns to the historical events--German Socialism, Hitler, Stalin, World War II, German Democratic Republic (G.D.R.), post-war re-construction, and even the Berliner Ensemble--before bringing us back to the collapse of the G.D.R. The strange underbellies of these events, dramatised as comedy and pathos, are set out as precursors to a new crisis--re-incorporation into a unified Germany.

I. Conversation in Brecht's Tower

In the conversation in "Brecht's Tower," atop the Berliner Ensemble theatre building, Müller speaks on the topic of "Why Theatre." Interspersed within the transcript of the interview are memorable images of the artist in parentheses: "[Pause. HM lights a cigar, dips it in whiskey, smokes.][in Weber, 2001: 220]. "Whisky and Cigars," wrote Jonathan Kalb, a few months after Müller’s death, were the "preferred instruments of pleasure and self-destruction" of this artist whose basic character and identity will be of lasting debate (Kalb, 1998: 1). But by this stage, the whisky would have been more pain relief than either pleasure or self-destruction. In the short introduction to the English translation of the transcript, Carl Weber has already revealed that Müller suffered constant pain throughout the video-taping and, shortly after, underwent chemotherapy for a recurrence of the cancer from which he would soon die. Perhaps it is only those who are ill whose physical actions add such punctuation to their conversation and are so noteworthy.

The transcript's parentheses, "[HM: Pauses, Smokes. Drinks.]. . . [Pauses. Smokes. Smiles]. . . [Laughs]. . . [Nods]" (in Weber, 2001: 219-232) accentuate the presence of the author, give emphasis to the comments and point to the pain that is denied. For Müller, the greater dissatisfaction, even pain, at this stage of his own illness is intellectual in nature and caused by the world outside the body. Amongst the comments about contemporary theatre, the continuing necessity of theatre as a space of thought, of critique and as a presentation of dissatisfaction with reality endures:

Dissatisfaction with the world, is the source of all inspiration, be it in the theater or the fine arts or literature. If you are pleased with the world as it is, you don’t need to create anything, you can lean back and rest (in Weber, 2001: 226-227).

As always, there is the question of Müller’s meaning. Not surprisingly for this complex theatre intellectual, dissatisfaction is not simply angst, aversion, or habitual malcontent,
nor is it, romantically, an essential creative tool. It is rather to do with the role of theatre as oppositional and as a presentation of dissatisfaction. Prior to or connected with the notion of dissatisfaction, experienced as pain or intellectual problem or both, is the desire for beauty and the perception of its absence from the world of naturalised atrocity in which we live,

Theater needs to be beautiful. Even when you represent horror or atrocities, it has to be beautiful or it won't be strange [Smiles] (in Weber, 2001: 226).

The smile in parenthesis gives pause to digest the strangeness of Müller, known and criticised for his pessimism and bleakness, discoursing on beauty. Yet, this is more the "terrible beauty" of Yeats' "Easter 1916," of the discovery of political agency, of the uprising, than the beauty of classical form. The parenthetical smile seems to reaffirm the politics of "die Verfremdungseffekt," the estrangement-effect, making the familiar strange. The nexus of dissatisfaction, strangeness and beauty, along with the artist’s own physical pain, suggests the continuation of an aesthetic born of the critique of modernity, particularly Western modernity, in which it is more productive to recoil in pain than to lean back and be pleased. With these thoughts in mind, I will now turn to the play written in the same year as the "Brecht's Tower" conversation.

II. Germania 3 Ghosts at Dead Man

_Germania_ was created in early 1995 in Santa Monica, U.S.A., as Müller recuperated from an operation for cancer and was published posthumously in February 1996, a month after Müller had intended starting rehearsals of the play at the Berliner Ensemble.

Like Shakespeare’s _Hamlet_, _Germania_ begins with two guards at night. They set up watch on the eastern side of the Berlin Wall but are themselves already ghosts. One is Ernst Thalmann, a founding member of the German Communist Party, who was arrested when Hitler came to power and executed at Buchenwald in 1944. He despairs at the current state of the G.D.R. now in its final stages. It is, he says, "the mausoleum of German Socialism" (in Weber, 2001: 184). The stage directions indicate that, for the duration of the scene, tracer shells and shots are sporadically fired at escapees. Thalmann’s fellow guard is Walther Ulbricht, the former head of state who had ordered the building of the Wall in 1961. He has nothing but contempt for the inhabitants of the G.D.R. who snore away "in fuck cells with district heating from Rostock to Joannegeorgenstadt, their skulls hugging the TV screen" (ibid.).

_Germania_ ends in chronological time a few months later during the period of reunification, where, in the woods far away from the celebrations, a serial killer known as the Pink Giant masturbates next to the corpses of a Russian officer’s wife and her children (ibid., 215). In the 1996 Berliner Ensemble production, the Pink Giant is played by the same actor who plays the part of Hitler. The costume is also the same--bare feet and torso and black trousers--but with the addition of a pink rose behind the ear. Müller’s final theatrical vision is of a monster that roams the edges of German civilisation. He is part-historical (there was a serial killer who was named Der Rose Riese by the press), part-traditional (he is a Rumplestiltskin-type who mutters colloquial sayings), and a reference to the East German fear of the fascist West.
On every territory that has yet been occupied by the Enlightenment, unknown zones of darkness have "unexpectedly" opened up (Muller, 1985: 340).

The lacklustre collapse of the G.D.R. hit Muller much harder than he was willing to admit . . . he reacted to this disappointment by intensifying his anti-Western critique of modern life . . . (cited by Barthrick (1998) in Kalb, 1998: 32).

Where Müller’s work deals relentlessly with the critique of the political subject, it also seems to single-handedly carry the weight of German history and German fascism. In the second scene, entitled "Tank Battle," Stalin is at the Kremlin, drinking. It is 1941. He is talking to himself in a paranoid drunken state, thinking simultaneously of conspirators and the "one-sixth of our globe" that is "twitching" in his fist when news is brought that the Germans are attacking. Amidst the parodic representation of the dictator and a complex rendering of his relationship with Hitler, are moments of chilling observations including the innate capacity of humans for evil: "In every human being there is a Hitler hiding" (186).

The effect continues in a further scene, "A Hunter Blew His Horn," in which Stalin later enters Hitler's bunker. The Hitler figuration prosodises as "he" tears up a map:

Poland a joke France a piece of cake  
The Balkans Greece  
Who counts my victories  
In Russia snow in Africa sand  
The Jew was my undoing he drinks the  
Gasoline I need to win His ashes  

Hitler's monologue, amongst others that may be called "injurious speech," enacts a verbal assault on the implied listener who is the despised unrepresented collective of the times. For the contemporary spectator, the monologue is the re-enunciation of the speech acts that constitute a painful-to-hear history. Yet the overall effect of the dual temporalities is the estrangement of the historical figure. This device both contributes to the aesthetic and political value of the work and counters the injurious effects of the speech. The speech is returned to the speaker, the historical figure now out of context
and under the control of the critical playwright, director, actor and audience. As Judith Butler (1997: 4) notes, "to be injured by speech is to suffer a loss of context" and, in its resignification as theatre, the speaker is injured by his own speech act. Hitler and Stalin become the performative construction of their own injurious speech.

The presentation on the banality of evil is followed by scenes that depict the pain of history. There are the bodies of the officers and generals whose attempt on Hitler's life failed and their widows who fear the systemic rape of women in war. These figures speak from within their historical contexts to the present in an effect which creates a museum-like theatre of the dead: voices from the past speaking of pain and suffering. Yet no-one is innocent. The oldest widow reverts to racist hate-speech when she refers to the Russians approaching from the East as "not human, that's Asia" and denies the existence of the concentration camps as "mere rumour" (in Weber, 2001: 197). The discourse of the performance text bears witness to the violence that is both enacted within and as a consequence of speech.

In the context of contemporary theatre, however, history is resignified and transformed through the aesthetic process, into an object to behold. The re-staging of Hitler and Stalin as theatrical figurations, through which they are de-contextualised from the mass rally and the military display and deterritorialised on a stage, symbolically exposes them to critical spectatorship. In fact, the Stalin figure in a multi-layered remark proclaims: "I stand naked facing his [Hitler's] divisions" (ibid., 187). The speech that comprises the play text becomes a form of opposition. This re-working of history goes some of the way towards providing an answer to Sontag's question: "what does it mean to protest suffering, as distinct from acknowledging it?" (Sontag, 2003: 40). The resignified speech acts as a continuing parody of the discourse of fascist Germany by a playwright who believed that the moralising discourse of much political theatre was no longer useful. It works inside the gap envisaged by Butler between the injurious speech act and the effects it produces:

The possibility for a speech act to resignify a prior context depends, in part, upon the gap between the originating context or intention by which an utterance is animated and the effects it produces (1997: 14).

While there is no undoing the bodily effects produced by the historical Hitler's speech acts, the theatre enacts a continuing opposition to the past. This kind of text and its reception, amidst the fraught debate about the representation of German suffering, bears out David Bathrick and Helen Fehervary's eulogising of Müller as one who struggled "to keep the historical memory and vision of political theatre alive" (Bathrick & Fehervary, in Kalb, 1998: 4). Weber wrote in a similar vein that Müller bore witness to the "carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts of the twentieth century" (Weber, in Kalb, 1998: 30). But using Butler's critical frame, it is possible to see Müller opposing it as well as acknowledging it.

III. Snot and tears

In one sequence, with allusions to Brecht's *The Measures Taken* and Müller's 1970 reworking of that as *Mauser*, a German soldier starving on the Russian front during World War Two tells the story of how he was "cured" of Communism. This story is inserted within a scene depicting the failed Fascist German advance on Moscow and
refers to events that took place thirteen years before in Berlin three weeks before the election of 1928. The soldier recalls how his branch of the communist party had dealt with a young member. The relation of the soldier story-teller in the present to the events in the past is unclear, but in the telling he positions himself as a witness. The story concerns a seventeen year old boy, a member of the party, unemployed as they all were then, who in the soldier’s words had “slipped down the wrong way, robbery and murder. . .”:

I don’t recall his name. He was seventeen.
And had slipped down the wrong way, robbery
And murder. Great stuff for their propaganda
Against us, three weeks till election day.
That’s what the Commies do, robbery and murder
His wanted poster on each fence and wall
He was hiding somewhere in Geiseltal
We called a vote at our party meeting
And the majority agreed: We chase him
Doing the job the police couldn’t do
And hand him over at the police precinct.
The honor of the party What kind of honor is that
If we are dragging one of ours to the block.
Who are the judges Is this our state
Why don’t we go and kill him ourselves
The hunt lasted three days His father had
Joined our posse fifty against one
And we turned three times over every bush
Until we found him Snot and tears were running
Down his face I never will forget that
And his father who hit him in the face
It was for our seats at city council.
We also took the price put on his head
Five Hundred marks for the Red Welfare Fund

In the mise en scène imagined by the text, as the soldier tells the story he and his two companions gnaw on bones. At the completion of the story it transpires that the bone may have come from either a horse or "a loyal comrade." After this the teller of the tale vomits. The physical revulsion is an immediate corporeal reaction to the news. Language inflicts violence on the body.

The lesson of this Lehrstück-gone-wrong is uttered by the more cynical of the soldier’s companions and comes out as “to every dog his bone.” This ironic ethic is iterated throughout the whole of Germania and is represented as the default position for the subject of history. Butler’s conceptualisation of hate-speech suggests it is capable of inflicting injury by means of the subject’s identification with the injurious intent:

If hate speech acts in an illocutionary way, injuring in and through the moment of speech, and constituting the subject through that injury, then hate speech exercised an interpellative function (Butler, 1997: 24).

The concept of injurious speech helps us understand something of the multiple sites of pain in this story. There is the pain inflicted by the reported speech act of the
propaganda machine--that’s what Commies do, robbery and murder”--that sets off “an injurious trajectory” (Butler, 1997: 1) in which all suffer except those in power. And then the Party inflicts its own speech act, “Why don’t we go and kill him ourselves.” The injurious trajectory includes the terrible decision to hunt down the boy and, in the end, there is the physical pain. The political intervention of Müller’s text is to show that the illocutionary speech act, the name-calling, and the political rhetoric becomes perlocutionary. It produces painful effects on the body. The boy is slapped by his father, and he is handed over bodily to the police for hanging.

In this construction, language is ascribed agency with the power to inflict injury. The anti-communist propaganda can hurt electoral prospects and interpellates a subject as victim (Butler, 1997: 1-2). “Thus,” writes Butler, "the injurious address may appear to fix or paralyze the one it hails, but it may also produce an unexpected and enabling response" (ibid., 2). In the case of Germania, the stories of which the text is composed contain elements of the injurious address, “that’s what Commies do,” that fix and paralyse the subjects it hails. This mode of analysis helps see the text as a cry of pain within the paralysed state that is history and the literature that represents it.

IV. He looks like a peasant

The story of "The Guest Worker" begins in the final days of World War Two in a manor house in Mecklenberg. The three widows of German generals and officers, on hearing that the Russians are on their way and fearful of what they will do to them, plan to kill themselves. Unable to do the deed themselves, a Croatian SS Man, who looks to these widows like a peasant, arrives and does the job for them with the peasant’s tool, an axe.

The scene segues into the post-war era, perhaps close to the present time, and the Croatian soldier is now a guest worker standing in the abandoned manor, dressed in a suit, shirt and tie with the axe still in his hand. He tells his story:

I am a farmer from Croatia. I work in Germany. After having worked for two years in Germany, I travel back to Croatia, to my village, to my family, my family is a wife and two children. I’m driving my own car that I’ve bought in Germany, I’m wearing a suit that I’ve bought in Germany, “off the rack” as they call it in Germany, with a shirt and tie because I need to look like a German. My farmer’s clothes from Croatia are in the trunk of my car. . . At the foot of the hill where my house sits, I step from my car and open the trunk. I take off the suit and my German shoes, rip the tie off my neck, the shirt off my breast, the buttons are popping, and throw the alien clothes into the trunk. I see the stars of my motherland, they are brighter than those in Germany, there’s no smoke between me and the sky. The house is dark. I fold my suit in an orderly fashion . . . I put on my farmer’s clothes that I’ve worn two years ago when I travelled to Germany, for two days in an overcrowded train, smelling from the sweat and fear of lands foreign. . . I walk through the withered vines up the hill. The house is dark. I unlock the door with the key I carried with me for two years, in whatever clothes I was wearing, even in my overalls at the conveyor belt. I walk into the bedroom. I kiss my wife. She is naked under the blanket. I take off my farmer’s clothes and lie down next to her. Her thighs have turned old, her breasts shrivelled. I
hear the children breathe in the other room. While I make love to my wife, I'm thinking of the brothels in Germany. My wife falls asleep, her head on my shoulder, my skin is wet from her tears. I lie awake until morning and stare at the cracked ceiling of the bedroom. When the children wake up, they recognize me, though they haven't seen me for two years, screaming PAPA; the wife gets up and prepares breakfast the way I was used to: eggs, tomatoes, peppers, bread. After breakfast I go to the tool shed, take the axe that's still hanging from the same hook, and slay my wife with it. With my hands that have worked for two years at the conveyor belt in Germany I kill my children. I leave the house. I lock the door and throw the key away, blindly somewhere between the withered vines. The next rain will sweep it into the soil. I walk through the withered vines down the hill to the car that I bought in Germany, throw my farmer's clothes into the trunk. . . put on my suit . . . and drive back to Germany (in Weber, 2001: 200-201).

The recurrence of the phrase "in Germany" contextualises Germany as a site of economic power from which the speech is produced. It is the place of post-war migration, the expansion of manufacturing and the obsolescence of the farmer's life, represented as the slaughtered family and the withered vines that surround the old farm house. The only apparent explanation for this act is the Old Woman, the widow of the General, whose illocutionary speech act in the final days of the war— that he looked "like a peasant" (ibid., 199)— takes on unforeseen perlocutionary effects. At the time he had taken offence, "what do you have against peasants, lady?" he had asked, before he obeyed her request to kill her.

In this sequence, as in the story told by the German soldier, a throw-away line and a statement of the obvious are illocutionary speech acts that in the act of enunciation, do what they say. These become instances of injurious speech. The empty sayings, "he looks like a peasant" (implying that we can therefore ask him to slaughter us) is shown to have perlocutionary ramifications in that it produces consequences, the murder of the peasant family, many years later. The Croatian SS Man is insulted at being called a peasant by the high-born officer's widow. In the post-war era as a guest-worker in suit, shirt and tie driving his German car, he returns to his village to kill off his peasant past. But first he must put on his peasant clothes. If he comes into existence as peasant through being so addressed, then, in order to remake himself as an urban German, he must make his peasant self unrecognisable as such. Thus his peasant wife and children must become "othered," and killed to offset any further association with his past.

The act of retelling makes the spectator witness to the event. It becomes part of the context in which language "works its force upon the one it injures" (Butler, 1997: 159) and therefore complicit and critical. The story of the Croatian is a force field of pain and injury that includes the listeners and spectators in the formerly unspeakable pain of Germans: underling SS men, Communists, widows of generals, slain peasant families, and the victims of a serial killer.

In conclusion, the discourse of the text suggests the metaphor of "the present" as the condemned of history, laid on a harrowing apparatus like Kafka's condemned man (Kafka 1919: 169-199). Whereas, in Kafka, the name of the law is needled into the body of the condemned, in Müller's last play the present is inscribed with the sentence of history. This represents a strange view of atrocity and horror that inverts the more
frequently used mechanism of the present looking back at the past. Yet, this view of the present is central to Müller’s continuing critique of modernity. The present is represented as something of a voiceless terrain, a passive recipient of dramatic inscription and of memory, but is also driven to resignify its discourse. The pain of history is mediated through subjects whose speech resonates powerfully with the pressure of contemporary experience. Most importantly, however, Müller is the artist, not the historian or the journalist, and his plays transform the past and the present into art, in a way that bears out Susan Sontag’s thoughts in Regarding the Pain of Others: "transforming is what art does" (2003: 76). In this sense, Müller gives some meaning to the banal pain of the historical and fictional subjects of his play. As Elaine Scarry has said in her well-known study:

Because the person in pain is ordinarily so bereft of the resources of speech, it is not surprising that the language for pain should sometimes be brought into being by those who are not themselves in pain, but who speak on behalf of those who are (1985: 6).

Yet, as the circumstances of the writing of Germania and the conversation in "Brecht’s Tower" indicate, the physical pain felt by the author can be understood as another plateau where symbolic and actual pain are not entirely separate. Germania speaks on behalf of those without the resources of speech in an effort to overcome pain inscribed in its surrounding context. Müller’s more enduring dissatisfactions with history will now be spoken by those whose pain will never span the same period of German history and will be felt differently. His theatre will, however, be a space where we remember not only symbolic pain, but opposition, resistance, and contestation.

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