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THE CHALLENGE OF MYTH: HEINER MÜLLER'S *PHILOCTETES*★

Brigitte Kaute

Abstract

In this paper, myth and work on myth is understood as work on reflective discourse. At a certain point of history, mythological configurations figure the dark side, the inherent 'wound' of their contemporary reflective discourse. This hypothesis is examined in a reading of Heiner Müller's arrangement of the myth of Philoctetes. Here, the impossibility to re-integrate the excluded Philoctetes into the Greek society corresponds to the *aporia* of modern (post) Kantian enlightenment, that is, to the problem of how the self-enlightening subject can create a difference to itself under the presupposition of the self. Thus, Müller's work on myth does not serve one of the two opposing 20th century ideologies, but critically explores the epistemic basis of those ideologies.

I. WORK ON/WITH MYTH

HANS BLUMENBERG'S theory of myth assigns work on myth, that is, literary arrangements of the early myths, an irreplaceable function of its own.¹ Presupposing that early myth was not a mere pre-form of reflective thought, that it was not the irrational other of rationality, Blumenberg maintains that there has been work on myth throughout history, precisely because mythological configurations have a discursive function which cannot be served by reflective thought. Myths narrate the humanization of the world, and the limitation of the power of gods, that is, of those beings which myth itself has invented in order to fill the edges of the world and to prevent the eye from seeing into empty nothingness. Those narratives function, according to Blumenberg, to offer a total approach to what he calls the absolutism of reality, whereas all theoretical–scientific knowledge can merely be partial—not because of an objective insufficiency, but rather because humans will always

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experience it as being partial. Blumenberg assumes that humanity suffers from an anthropological fear which is caused by the, so to speak, traumatic experience of biological non-adaptation. This fear as well as the need for confidence in the world are condensed in mythological configurations. Work on myth, then, explores the configuration of a myth; it sharpens, condenses and thereby strengthens it, thus preserving its anthropological function under varying socio-cultural conditions.

Asking for the irreplaceable discursive function of (work on) myth, Blumenberg has opened up a very productive perspective. However, his approach is not a consequent historical one. Relating work on myth to anthropological constants means understanding new arrangements of a myth as mere manifestations of one and the same configuration. The problem becomes obvious when Blumenberg interprets modern arrangements of myth which, as he maintains, bring myth to an end.² Surely, Kafka's mythological arrangements obviously do not offer configurations where a 'successful' creation of distance is narrated. There is, however, no need to state the ending of myth here (which contradicts the theory of myth's irreplaceability). Instead of functionally relating all new arrangements to one and the same anthropological factor, it could rather be assumed that the cultural function of myth exists only as a diversity of functions realized by a diversity of configurations. Thus, the anthropological approach can be turned into a historical one. It could be considered that work on myth explores the nucleus of the myth in question but at the same time produces *new* configurations. The nucleus of a myth, then, serves as material for continual production of new configurations whose specific function can only be explained by historical factors.

My hypothesis is that work on myth neither pre- nor re-reproduces reflective thought, nor does it complement reflective thought, as Blumenberg maintains. Rather, work on myth is work with myth *upon* reflective discourse of the particular epoch working on myth—a kind of work which cannot be done by reflective discourse itself. This hypothesis implies the concept of the history of reflective discourse as suggested by Michel Foucault. In every epoch, humanity's discourse in which it reflects on its existence—its work, language and body—is based on a specific configuration of thought which cannot be reflected within this discourse. Thus, reflective discourse establishes a certain limit which it cannot transgress. Foucault has described three main configurations of thought in Western culture since 1600. Characterizing the modern configuration of Kantian enlightenment, Foucault's own discourse tears up, so to speak, the ground it is standing on, thus indicating a new break.

If it could be demonstrated that the specific mythological configurations produced in a certain epoch are work upon reflective discourse in the sense that they show what this reflective discourse cannot say, then we could indeed

talk of a challenging function of (the work on) myth which does not lose its object as long as humans continue to reflect their own existence in discontinual historical configurations. It would be especially challenging for modern thought to look at modern arrangements of myth—not in order to find reflected its illuminated side but perhaps to find outlined there its inner skeleton.

II. THE PROJECT OF RE-INTEGRATION

Heiner Müller, one of the best known dramatists from East Germany, wrote his version of the myth of Philoctetes in 1965. According to the early myth, Philoctetes is among the first Greek warriors to set out for Troy. Divine will determines that he is abandoned by his own crew with a bad wound on his foot caused by the bite of a snake. Ten years later, the Greek army is still besieging Troy, but they do not manage to break through. Prophecy reveals that Troy will be occupied under Philoctetes' leading. A Greek delegation is sent to the Island of Lemnos, the place where they had abandoned him. They take him to Troy and heal his foot. Philoctetes soon kills Paris, the Greeks' primary enemy. Müller's most obvious change of the mythical configuration is that Philoctetes does not leave Lemnos alive but can nevertheless be deployed in the conquest of Troy.

The nucleus of the myth of Philoctetes is not simply the exclusion of someone or something, who or which does not fit in. It is rather the act of creating a reversal to exclusion by re-integrating the excluded element and (re)establishing coherence. Blumenberg's idea that every mythological nucleus narrates a limitation of determining powers does indeed apply to the myth of Philoctetes—with the restriction that not all (and, as we will see, not even all of the earlier) versions of the myth necessarily narrate a successful outcome of this project.

Already, the first literary presentations of the Philoctetes myth, in the tragedies by Euripides, Aeschylus and Sophocles, are *work on* myth. The former configuration, as it is represented in depictions on vases and in hints given in Homer, is not a tragic one. The act of reversal becomes tragic if it is limited by inherent factors, that is, if the act of Philoctetes' re-integration is limited by factors arising from the very act of his exclusion. This constellation was achieved in the three Greek tragedies by enriching the nucleus of the myth with a specific dramaturgical moment: Philoctetes has not accepted his exclusion, and thus he hates his own people and does not identify himself with them any longer. The consequence of this is that he does not want to function for them, does not want to be re-integrated. The element of Philoctetes' resistance to reconciliation is made even stronger by the fact that the Greek

delegation is led by Odysseus, the man who was responsible for Philoctetes' abandonment ten years ago.

Thus the dialectics of tragedy is set into motion. If Philoctetes continues to insist on his point of view that his exclusion was unjust, he is threatened by further isolation and suffering, by social and physical disintegration—his foot is rotting away. On the other hand, if his re-integration succeeds and if he re-identifies with the society that had excluded him, this means that he himself legitimates his former exclusion.

Five further moments structure the plot of the Greek tragedies as well as Müller's play:

- (i) Odysseus explains to his young companion Neoptolemus why Philoctetes was excluded ten years ago.
- (ii) The plan is to deceive Philoctetes regarding the identity of the visitors on Lemnos. Odysseus and Neoptolemus have an argument about the pragmatical necessity of this deception.
- (iii) Philoctetes gives his only weapon, the bow he had inherited from Heracles in his youth, into the hands of the Greeks, not knowing their mission and their identity. Thereby he becomes completely powerless.
- (iv) Philoctetes gains a certain freedom of choice.
- (v) Philoctetes is brought to Troy so that he can be deployed for the conquest of Troy.

Müller's work on myth realizes these moments as follows (widely based on Sophocles):

- (i) Philoctetes had to be abandoned because he had endangered the Greek mission. His painful wound stank and made him cry so loudly that the crew on the ship could not sleep and that the silence of sacrificial ceremonies was disturbed. With Philoctetes onboard, the Greeks would never have reached Troy at all. This is based on Sophocles who, however, combines the pragmatical factors with divine determination which does not play any role in Müller's text.
- (ii) The plan is that Odysseus sends out his companion Neoptolemus, son of Achilles, with the order to tell Philoctetes a lie. In the middle of the lie there is a truth: Neoptolemus, too, hates Odysseus, because Odysseus had appropriated the weapons of the dead Achilles. (Odysseus, again, had pragmatical reasons for this.) Before the plan is set into action, the two of them have a hard and spiteful debate with no moral or ethical winner, whereas in Sophocles it is more like a father–son teaching.
- (iii) Neoptolemus deceives Philoctetes and succeeds in talking him out of his bow. In Sophocles, there is a situation of trust and confidence between them. In Müller, it is first of all Philoctetes' associations of sexuality that

- finally drives him to believe that Neoptolemus will really bring him home to Skyros.
- (iv) Later, Neoptolemus regrets having deceived Philoctetes and he returns the bow to him. Philoctetes refuses to go to Troy. In Sophocles, Neoptolemus agrees against Odysseus' will to bring Philoctetes to Skyros. Müller's Philoctetes, in re-possession of his bow, threatens to kill Odysseus; he talks like a fool and wants to force him to eat a vulture which has been the only kind of food for Philoctetes, besides grass.
- (v) Sophocles lets Heracles appear and explain to Philoctetes that everything happens according to divine determination. Hearing the god, Philoctetes changes his mind and rejoins the Greek army. Müller's Philoctetes is transported to Troy as a corpse. His speech to Odysseus is stopped by Neoptolemus who kills Philoctetes with his spear from behind. Odysseus, whose mission was to bring Philoctetes to Troy alive, is not at a loss for a solution of the new problem. He invents a lie to tell the Greeks: Philoctetes was murdered by Trojan warriors who had come to Lemnos in order to draw him onto their side. Because Philoctetes, as a real Greek hero, refused this, he was murdered by the Trojans. This is how Odysseus and Neoptolemus have found him on Lemnos, and that he was really murdered by the vicious Trojans is indicated by the wound in his *back*. Thus, the Greek delegation will return to their army with a dead hero killed by the enemy, which will be enough to spur on the Greek soldiers' fighting power. Philoctetes' corpse can be given high symbolic value—an idea put forward by Odysseus, which clearly shows that the psychological and the symbolic are as important at war as physical equipment and power.

III. PHILOCTETES' TRUTH

Many interpretations of Müller's play have focused on the problem of the single individual's functionality within a social body.³ Surely, this problem is at the centre of the play. It is constituted mainly by breaking up the homogeneity caused by the Greek situation into which Philoctetes is to be re-integrated, and by replacing divine determination with Odysseus' functionalist perspective. Homogeneity is replaced by the polarisation between, on the one hand, individual interests that nevertheless refer to socially established values such as truth, self-determination and justice, and, on the other hand, an overall social concern nevertheless representing itself as a guarantee of individual interests. Corresponding to that constellation, *Philoctetes* was often interpreted as a play about Stalinism. However, Müller

states, somewhat provocatively, that he had not noticed that it was a play about Stalinism.⁴ Referring to the even more specific suggestion that Philoctetes was Trotzki he says again: 'Darauf wäre ich auch nie gekommen, aber so kann man es natürlich lesen. Man muß es dann nur noch einmal lesen, oder dreimal. Oder so lange, bis man Stalin und Trotzki vergessen hat'.⁵

Once we have forgotten Stalin and Trotzki, we can see that the problem of the individual's functionalization is only one side of the play and that it is deconstructed and hollowed out by another constellation. In Müller's character of Philoctetes, it becomes clear that the individual virtually is an *effect* of its functionalization. Philoctetes is no individual with certain particular interests within a social body, but someone who has long lost what is called individuality. Philoctetes repeatedly speaks about his existence on Lemnos using attributes of foolishness, death, nothingness, loss of identity. For example, he says to Neoptolemus (just before he gives him the bow) that the bow was

Grad gut genug mein Sterben zu verlängern
Bis du mich aufhobst aus vieljährigem Tod
Ins Leben, das den Tod nicht kennt vom Ende.⁶

After he has given away his bow and now being confronted with the real identity of his visitors and their mission, Philoctetes realizes that the only way out of his state without identity is the way into the imprisonment of society:

Beug deinen Nacken wieder, Gaul, ins Joch
Und lern das Leben neu, vor Troja schlachtend.
Steht auf
Du wirst gebraucht, du bist ein Netz wert wieder.
Renn, Fisch, um deinen Platz in seinen Maschen.⁷

Philoctetes is not sure whether he should or should not go this way. His internal conflict drives wide parts of the action. He concludes his long monologue urging himself to regain an identity, that is, to become a member of the social body again:

Leb für den nächsten Fußtritt. Süßes Leben
In der blutsaufenden Gemeinschaft wieder.
Der Faustschlag ist Berührung, Brot ihr Speichel.
Lauf, Einbein, in den Schlamm, der alles heilt
Die alte Wunde mit der neuen Kränkung
Den Stinkenden mit dem Gestank der Schlacht.
*Geht*⁸

Facing Odysseus, however, he changes his attitude, he refuses to follow:

So will ich säumen, bis der letzte Grieche
 Auf Leichenbergen, griechischen, gehäuft
 [...]

 Geschlachtet wird den letzten Trojer schlachtend
 Vom letzten Trojer auf troischem Leichenberg.⁹

Then, Philoctetes threatens to commit suicide:

Ins Leere greift ihr, wenn ihr weitergeht
 Schnürt Luft in euren Strick und frei geh ich
 Vom obern Stein dem untern zugeworfen
 Durch eigenes Gewicht nach eigenem Willen
 Mit jedem Aufprall weniger brauchbar euch
 Den Weg auf dem kein Lebender mich einholt.¹⁰

However, when Odysseus and Neoptolemus go away with the bow, Philoctetes asks them not to leave him alone:

Bleibt. Laßt mich nicht zum zweiten Mal den Geiern.¹¹

Later in the dialogue, Philoctetes again resists his own appeal:

Gebt mir ein Schwert, ein Beil, ein Eisen. Haut mir
 Die Beine ab mit einem Eisen, daß die
 Nicht gegen meinen Willen mit Euch gehen
 Reißt mir den Kopf vom Leib, daß meine Augen
 Nicht nachgehn euch und euerm gehnden Segel
 Daß meine Stimme nicht, lauter als Brandung
 Zum Strand Euch folgt und eurem Schiff aufs Meer
 Haut mir die Hände von den Armen auch
 Eh sie euch anflehn, stimmlos um den Platz
 Auf eurer Ruderbank, in eurer Front
 Reißt mir, dass nicht die roten Stümpfe noch
 Das Ungewollte tun, vom Rumpf die Arme
 Der wird mir, fühllos auf fühllosem Stein
 Nicht den Gehorsam weigern und so will ichs.¹²

All of this is said by Philoctetes after he has been deprived of his bow, thus having the choice—if he has a choice at all—between return into society or death on Lemnos. However, when he gains back his bow from Neoptolemus and thereby his own will, his status as someone with no identity becomes even

stronger. Being 'nothing', he does not want to live either on Lemnos or within society:

Spät nimmst du deine Hand aus ihrer Sache.
 Du änderst nichts mehr, ändernd deinen Sinn.
 Nichts ist ihm selber, nichts euch Philoktet mehr
 Nichts reißt und bricht im Fall von Stein zu Stein
 Wenn mein Fleisch reißt, wenn meine Knochen brechen
 Nichts hält euch aus dem Bauch der troischen Hunde
 Nichts lebt auf Lemnos als die Geier und
 Wenig verschieden von den Geiern, ihr
 Nichts bin ich, seit ich mir entgangen bin
 Euch zu entgehen, auf meiner eignen Spur
 Behalt, wirf weg oder zerbrich was mein war.¹³

There remains only one wish: Philoctetes wishes the unrealisable, that is, to endlessly kill Odysseus:

[...] Dein Tod ist meine Arbeit
 Und ganz will ich die. Wären wir unsterblich
 Daß ich dich töten könnte jetzt und immer.¹⁴

Philoctetes' wish to kill Odysseus does not only express his hatred. Philoctetes does not need Odysseus' endless death in order to reflect his hatred, but rather in order to reflect his experience of emptiness and nothingness in the very moment of Odysseus' death. This becomes clear in the argument between them. First, Odysseus tries to explain to Philoctetes that he is needed to rescue the Greek towns and his own people and that following Odysseus to Troy is the only way he can rescue his own life too. Since Philoctetes will die soon if he remains with his rotten foot on Lemnos, Odysseus presents himself as being Philoctetes' individual life, being his 'green', his 'grass' and 'tree'. Odysseus interrupts him:

Hör wie das Schweigen deine Rede bricht.
 Ich weiß von Städten nichts, ist eine Stadt hier?
 Und so viel sind sie mir. Auch glaub ich keine.
 Gebild aus Worten und Wohnung für Träume
 Falle, von blinden Augen ausgestellt
 In leere Luft, Gewächs aus faulen Köpfen
 Wo sich die Lüge mit der Lüge paart
 Sie sind nicht, Lüge euer Grünzeug auch
 Kahl ist mein Erdkreis und so will ich euren
 Ein Etwas zwischen nichts und nichts gespannt
 Von arbeitslosen Göttern ohne Grund.¹⁵

Finally, Philoctetes establishes a connection between what he thinks is truth or lie and his wish to kill Odysseus:

Reißt euch die Augen aus, sie lügen, leer
Die Höhlen reden wahr, mein Leben selber
Hat keine Wahrheit mehr als deinen Tod.¹⁶

Philoctetes does not speak about the *meaning* of his life here but about its *truth*—as opposed to what he assumes to be a lie. According to his experience, seeing the truth means to see what the empty eye sockets see. Wishing to see Odysseus' endless death, Philoctetes wishes to see Odysseus seeing the truth out of the perspective of the eye sockets. The moment of dying is one of the few moments in life, besides moments of intense ecstasy, when this is possible: the white of the eye turns outside and the black of the eye turns towards the empty sockets, seeing nothing because its dark hollow spreads no light.

IV. THE EMPTINESS OF TRAGEDY

'Die Tragödie geht leer aus, ihr Gang verwirft die Tröstung',¹⁷ said Müller about his play. Müller's phrase suggests the idiomatical and the literal meaning of the phrase '(leer) ausgehen'. The tragedy has an empty end, because it 'ends emptily'¹⁸: without comfort. Comfort, in a metaphysical sense, belongs to tragedy. Müller's tragedy ends without comfort precisely because it comes away empty-handed: it does not get what it needs in order to be a tragedy. The necessary condition of a tragedy is a dialectical contradiction¹⁹: an element contains its own negation, it is contradictory in itself, and the synthesis leads to the *Aufhebung*²⁰ of this contradiction, not necessarily resulting in harmony but in progress. Synthesis brings along the comfort belonging to tragedy.

Sophocles' version of the tragedy does end with the dialectical synthesis of the contradictory terms. This is achieved by Heracles offering Philoctetes insight into divine determination. Consequently, Philoctetes realises the higher meaning of his former sacrifice and his re-integration. He calls out his relief:

O you who have brought to me a voice I longed for, you
Who have appeared at last, I will not disobey your orders!²¹

The conflictual relationship between the excluding instance and the excluded one, which is figured in Müller's play, cannot be solved by dialectical synthesis. However, this does not mean that the play is not tragedy. It is, paradoxically, a tragedy that is no tragedy. The first feature of a dialectical

contradiction is, indeed, given. The two contradictory instances are not separable from each other. Ten years ago, Philoctetes' exclusion was necessary for the status quo of the Greek society, but now it has become its rotting wound, its negation, for Philoctetes' resistance to re-integration endangers the Greeks' mission at Troy. The Greeks have created their own negation in the necessary act of exclusion. However, Müller refuses the second feature of a dialectical contradiction: its openness for synthesis. There is no mediating transcendental instance making possible the *Aufhebung* of the contradiction. Philoctetes is in a position of a radical outside. He is outside with respect to the social body and its individuals, to the ideologies and the discourses of truth circulating within society. Surely, Müller's play implies the dialectic dualism between an individual and society. It makes, however, the concept of the dualism fragile and makes visible its mechanisms by shifting the centre of gravity of the dramatic action, thus producing a relation of mutual exclusiveness: the Greeks are not confronted with an integrateable part of themselves that they had put aside, but with their radical other. Both sides of that contradiction are absolutely incompatible to each other; there is no synthesis possible.

Official literary criticism in the G.D.R., of course, expected a mediating instance in an arrangement of the myth of Philoctetes and criticized Müller for rejecting it. Peter Hacks comments: 'Eine Tragödie benötigt einen bewußten Helden, einen Helden also, der was er tut, täte, auch wenn er wüßte, was er tut. Das lässt sich von Philoktet nicht sagen. Ihn zerstört Starrsinn, nicht Notwendigkeit. Müllers Stück ist besser als das des Sophokles, aber ich meine, dass Sophokles Recht hatte, als er den tragischen Ansatz zur Katastrophe zu treiben sich weigert; die Konfliktlage verlangt Ausgleich auf der höchsten historischen Ebene.'²² The mediating instance Hacks expected was of course no religious construct, as in Sophocles, but 'historical necessity' as it is implied in the Marxist teleological concept of history.

In talking about (non-)tragedy and (im)possible mediation, the problem appears to be that the difference between Sophocles and Müller is *not* the difference between non-tragedy (Sophocles) and tragedy (Müller) as Hacks' commentary implies. The tragedies about Philoctetes function somewhat differently here than other tragedies, which generally do not, interestingly enough, focus on the act of exclusion but on the act of re-integration. Of course, Sophocles does not end with a catastrophe: Heracles' mediation on the highest level prevents catastrophe, and makes Philoctetes relent. At the same time, it makes Philoctetes' ten year long suffering meaningful, it lets appear his awful fate as part of a higher determination, and thereby this fate gets a tragic quality. Müller's play, on the contrary, is not tragic, even though there is a 'catastrophe', that is, Philoctetes' death. This may become clear if we think about other possible plots and endings: Philoctetes' death *would* be tragic, if he

died in the name of the idea of untouchable individuality. A solution like that would sublimate the idea of individuality in the hero's death (it would, first of all, make Philoctetes a hero), and in that case we could speak of a tragic death. Thus, Sophocles' play and the non-existing play which Peter Hacks longed for, with Philoctetes giving up his pride as an individual for the idea of (divine or historical) necessity 'as well as the non-existing play where Philoctetes would die on Lemnos as a hero for the idea of individuality' are tragical ones. The suffering is justified by transcendental instances, which are opposed to each other: necessity vs. individuality. And of course the suffering in question is a different one respectively: from the viewpoint of the 'individual' the ten-year-long suffering would not be justified. However, the continuation of the sufferings as a consequence of Philoctetes' resistance to subordinate to society would be justified as a sacrifice in the name of individuality. These speculations about non-existing plays²³ can perhaps make visible what is peculiar in Müller's play: Philoctetes does not suffer and die in the name of an idea—therefore it is not tragedy. Philoctetes dies 'in the name' of the emptiness and nothingness; he is a non-individual. Deconstructing the opposition of functionalization vs. freedom of the individual or—from official Marxist perspective—historical necessity vs. individualism, the play resists serving one of the two ideologies.

That the concept of tragedy is hollowed out becomes most obvious in the final turn of the action. Odysseus replaces the idea of Philoctetes being irreplaceable by the idea of the usability of his dead body. There is a parallel between this new Odyssean idea and Philoctetes' inclination not to let himself be lured by the idea of being needed within society. Müller commented that here, in the final turn, tragedy turns into farce.²⁴ Indeed, the play 'mimes' tragedy and at the same time it deconstructs its implications. Müller regarded this final turn as the central structural problem which had to be solved when performing the play. The first performance where he thought the problem was solved was fifteen years after the Munich 1968 premiere. It was the performance in Sofia directed by Dimitri Gottscheff. Here, Odysseus takes a magic box from behind the stage and he takes out a doll which turns out to be Philoctetes' divisible double. Apparently, Müller appreciated that solution because it realized the end of the drama as a farce—producing the inevitable effect of laughing—and not simply as a scandalous insult.²⁵ For the play is a farce because it does more than criticise what Odysseus is doing in the end. It is also a critique of the absolutism of the idea which is being insulted by Odysseus—the idea of individuality. At the same time, it does not affirm Odysseus' attitude and action. Farce, as the parody of tragedy, ridicules that which makes tragedy a tragedy, that is, the concept of dialectical synthesis and metaphysical comfort supplied by any absolute idea.

Assuming that the Greek's project to re-integrate Philoctetes is the project of creating a distance or a difference—to themselves, to their act of exclusion—it can be stated that in Sophocles, the act of distancing describes a circle. Since the mediating instance of divine determination is exactly the same that had caused Philoctetes' exclusion, the act leads into a merely *apparent* difference. It is precisely the vision of a preceding unity and coherence of all things happening that makes the Sophoclean Philoctetes relent. In Müller's play, the project of distancing does not succeed at all. His work on myth produces a paradox constellation: it figures the mutual exclusiveness of two sides which nevertheless are inseparable from each other, which imply each other. The only thing remaining to do for the Greeks is to kill the excluded, that is, to exclude it one more time and to transform it into the deceptive symbol of inclusion. (So we might also speak of a deceptive difference here.)

Obviously, a *critical* difference cannot easily be achieved. This is the problem Müller's arrangement is encircling, when exploring the nucleus of the myth in the middle of the 20th century. Philoctetes knows the problem well:

Warum hat mir der Gott verweigert Augen
Zu sehen meine eignen sehnden Augen?²⁶

And indeed, the problem of creating a critical difference seems to be the painful problem modern reflective discourse is confronted with. With Kant's philosophy of enlightenment, reflective thought has established a new kind of relation to itself. Enlightenment does not mean any longer that the knowing subject illuminates the world by means of reason, but that it illuminates itself as a knowing and reasonable subject. According to Kant's famous definition: '*Aufklärung ist der Ausgang des Menschen aus seiner selbstverschuldeten Unmündigkeit*',²⁷ enlightenment is the act in which the subject creates a difference to itself. The problem enlightenment faces, then, is how the self-distancing can succeed under the presupposition of the self. As Foucault has shown, Kant's answer to this problem does not solve it but only covers it.

It is well known how Kant defines the condition of the subject's work upon itself: freedom of public use of reason. This is meant both as a necessary condition and as a sufficient one. It guarantees enlightenment because of the human subject's fundamental disposition for truth and self-enlightenment, an ability preceding and steering any act of enlightenment. Although the subject has self-incurred its tutelage, it is fundamentally able to independently recognize its dependence and find the way out. In other words, the Kantian subject of enlightenment implies the enlightened subject as its condition, and vice versa. Here, Kant's idea of enlightenment meets his transcendental

philosophy. It is the transcendental subject that is finally said to guarantee the critical relation of thought to itself, that is, the self-enlightening subject may rely on a presupposed instance, which is itself. The subject's destination and its determination are a unit; there is no critical difference.

Kantian philosophy of enlightenment is linked to a certain model of history serving discursive justification of the modern Western forms of social organisation. According to this model—which, of course, exists in diverse and opposing derivations—historical process aims at the full development of enlightenment *by means* of enlightenment. This development needs shelter and cultivation, enabling and directing the human will towards its destination which is, at the same time, its determination. The process necessarily implies restricted freedom. Despite all differences between the model of market economy and the Marxist model one could argue that both of them are situated within the frame of the Kantian idea that humans need a master who breaks their will and forces them to obey a universal will which makes possible freedom for everyone.²⁸ Force is to be integrated into freedom; freedom can be integrated into force.

The systems that have been invented in the name of a universal human determination in the 19th and 20th centuries form an almost polar opposition. The single individual is formed by different means, as a function either of the market or the collective, both of them guaranteed by the state. Each ideology in question, then, blames the other side for functionalizing the individual and claims to be the only one to cultivate the individual's 'true' disposition. For the point of the modern concept of the individual is that it does not merely refer to the single individual with its particularities. It refers to the single individual *as* a representative of the universal and transcendental subject, as the empirical through which the transcendental totality expresses itself and which, at the same time, is fundamentally guided by the transcendental. The empirical–transcendental double²⁹ is the configuration inherent in modern ideologies legitimating those social practices which first of all form the single individual.

In his critical studies on modern thought, Foucault has shown the backside of the empirical–transcendental configuration in its darkness. He observed that the discourse of the self-enlightening subject is based on the experience of a fundamental emptiness and that it does nothing else than permanently exclude this experience. The experience of 'God's death', which was openly articulated for the first time by Nietzsche, is the condition of possibility of modern enlightenment. The performance of enlightenment is based on the rotting corpse of the 'dead God', who, paradoxically, is murdered precisely in the performative act. The discourse of enlightenment will never be able to utter this experience, never be able to consciously integrate it into its enlightened world. Nietzsche, seen as a philosopher of madness in his own

time, sensed what Foucault analysed as the aporia of enlightenment a century later.³⁰ Foucault was able to do this by methodologically creating a distance: his discourse does not imply the transcendental subject as something which guarantees enlightenment, but it regards it as a merely *historical* figure of thought which can only be analysed by refusing the methods of progressing enlightenment. Therewith, Foucaultian discourse opens up the possibility of a (merely historical) radical distance: the modern subject can only 'enlighten' itself by questioning its supposed ability to progressive enlightenment and by questioning the idea of its universal disposition waiting for perfection.

There is a structural correspondence between the Greeks and Philoctetes, on the one hand, and the modern idea of the transcendental subject and the experience of 'God's death', on the other hand: there is no mediating instance. Müller figures the Greek's project as an aporetic one: attempting to re-integrate Philoctetes in order to maintain their power against the Trojans, the Greeks have to do exactly the opposite of what they were forced to do in order to establish their power against the Trojans. It could be said that the excluded Philoctetes is the cradle and, at the same time, the grave of the Greek affair, precisely as the modern experience of an ontological emptiness is the condition of the possibility *and* the fundamental critique of the idea of the transcendental subject. Müller's text stages, so to speak, the painful wound inherent in the project of critical self-distancing. The Greeks solve the problem, as we have seen, by deceptively turning the further exclusion (the murder) of their excluded 'wound' into the symbol of inclusion, thus pretending a successful outcome to the act of distancing.

Figuring the aporetic problem inherent in the act of self-distancing, Müller's work on myth models the complicated configuration of the discourse of enlightenment and its opposing ideological derivations. If we ask on which of the (basically) two ideological sides Müller's *Philoctetes* is situated, we cannot even find an ambivalent position. Not offering any comfort, not forwarding the idea of the individual nor the idea of the collective which would let contingency appear as a meaningful part of a great whole, the (non-)tragedy refuses the transcendental 'hook' where the ideological opposition is derived from.

Müller, who practiced a kind of Marxism which permanently touched the border of its own transgression, comments on the play: 'Der kommunistische Grundsatz KEINER ODER ALLE erfährt auf dem Hintergrund des möglichen Selbstmordes der Gattung seinen endgültigen Sinn. *Aber* [emph.—B.K.] der erste Schritt zur Aufhebung des Individuums in diesem Kollektiv ist seine Zerreiung, Tod oder Kaiserschnitt die Alternative des NEUEN MENSCHEN. Das Theater simuliert den Schritt, Lusthaus und Schreckenskammer der Verwandlung. In diesem Sinne ist Philoktet, gegen die

modisch kurz schließende Interpretation als Drama der Ent-täuschung, das Negativ eines kommunistischen Stücks.³¹ I assume that 'a negative of a communist play' does not refer to a mere counter-picture of a vision Müller supposedly aimed at and according to which Philoctetes should have corrected his individual pride and thereby could have contributed to a new society.³² In a photographic negative, light-dark relations are reversed and the negative-picture is not visible by ordinary illumination from the front. It is important to bear in mind the 'however' in Müller's statement. The statement cannot merely be understood as traditional Marxist propaganda against individualism. Rather, an opposition to the traditional Marxist idea of a free and beautiful individuality, which can be unfolded in a classless society, is indicated. Müller seems to aim at 'tearing up' the modern *concept* of the individual as it is rooted in Kantian transcendental philosophy. What becomes visible through the fissure is that the epistemological figure of the transcendental subject is hollowed out from within by its own dark core—by the experience of the loss of all transcendental instances.

The 'tearing up' does not happen in the action of Müller's drama, but rather in the paradoxical figuration of a mutual exclusiveness of two inseparable sides, each of them being the necessary condition and, at the same time, the radical critique of the other one. It could be concluded, then, that *Philoctetes* is the 'negative of a communist play' because it models the aporia of the Marxist project of humankind's salvation. And, it could be added, it figures the aporia inherent in all social and political practices forming single individuals in the name of a universal human will.

Significantly enough, Philoctetes himself knows something like a miniature model of the paradox relation: that between himself and the vultures. Repeatedly, Philoctetes speaks of the vultures as being his only meal *and* his grave, for they are going to eat him when he finally will be too weak to defend himself against those who are permanently attracted by his rotting wound. Philoctetes has come to Lemnos,

Insel der Narren und Geier, rotem Stein
auf dem die Narren Geier fressen und
Gefressen werden von der eignen Mahlzeit³³

Correspondingly, Philoctetes speaks when he wants to force Odysseus to eat a vulture:

Dein Geier. Lern von ihm, was du gelehrt hast.
Friß, deinesgleichen fraß er vor dir, bald
Dich frisst er, mäste dich mit deinem Grab
Dein Grab zu mästen nach Dir. Graut Dir schon
Vor Deiner Arbeit, Freund?³⁴

Killing Philoctetes in that very moment from behind, Neoptolemus prevents Odysseus from carrying out the paradoxical *work* Philoctetes was forced to do over ten years and which extinguished his existence as an individual. It is the model of the (impossible) work of radical enlightenment.

If similar types of figurations could be observed in other modern mythological arrangements, and if we could find specific correlations between the work on myth and the inherent configuration of reflective thought at other points of history and in other cultures, too, we could conclude as follows: the inherent limitations of a historical system of thought which, of course, are different in every epoch are imprinted in the mythological narrations (including religious narrations) which are the product of the respective work on myth. Myth and work on myth have the status of challenge and critique with respect to reflective discourse, with respect to the specific 'wound' that is inherent in a reflective discourse. The difference between mythological/religious discourse on the one hand and reflective discourse on the other hand is not a difference in *approach to reality* as Blumenberg argued. Both types of discourse are not functional complements. Rather, (work on) myth is work (with myth) upon reflective discourse—it stages the performative mode of reflective discourse, which this discourse cannot reflect itself.

REFERENCES

- ¹ Hans Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985 – German original, Suhrkamp Verlag: Frankfurt, 1979).
- ² Blumenberg interprets Kafka's variations of the myth of Prometheus.
- ³ For example: Genia Schulz, Heiner Müller (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1980); Wolfgang Emmerich, 'Antike Mythen auf dem Theater der DDR. Geschichte und Poesie, Vernunft und Terror' in *Dramatik der DDR*, Hg. Ulrich Profitlich (Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 1987); Michael Ostheimer, *Mythologische Genauigkeit. Heiner Müllers' Poetik und Geschichtsphilosophie der Tragödie* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2001). Of course, there has been other research on Heiner Müller: especially after 1989, the question of ideological criticism was not of main interest any longer. Within the general cultural turn, much has been
- written about the representation of diverse cultural practices and discourses in Heiner Müller's oeuvre, for example concepts of body and space, violence, memory, etc. The focus of this study being Müller's epistemological potential, it is nevertheless helpful to relate (critically) to those interpretations which are interested in the ideological aspect, for it can be demonstrated that Müller virtually deconstructs ideology in favour of an epistemic critique.
- ⁴ Heiner Müller, *Krieg ohne Schlacht. Leben in zwei Diktaturen* (Köln: Kiepenheuer und Witsch, 1999), p. 190.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 'Well, I had not noticed this either, but, surely, one can read it like that. One would only have to read it one more time, or three times. Or that often, until one has forgotten Stalin and Trotzki'.
- ⁶ Heiner Müller, 'Philoctet', in *Der Lohndrucker. Philoktet. Die Schlacht Klett*

- (Stuttgart, 1987), pp. 35–67, quot. p. 49: 'Just strong enough to keep this dying alive / Till now you relieve me / Of this too long death into life/That knows no death before its end.' (The English translation given here is by Reindert Westra, unpublished manuscript kindly supplied by Henschel-Verlag Berlin, with my slight modifications.)
- ⁷ Müller, 'Philoktet', p. 54. 'Lower your neck to the yoke again / Horse, learn again / To live, fighting at Troy. [Stands up]. You're needed, worth a net again. / Run, fish, run, / Your place is in his net.'
- ⁸ Müller, 'Philoktet', p. 54ff. 'Live for the next footstep. / Sweet life again / In this community of bloodsuckers, / Where the fistblow touches the emotions / And where the bread is its spit. Walk/You one-legged clown / Into the all curing slime, / The old wound, new / stench with the stench of battle. [Goes].'
- ⁹ Müller, 'Philoktet', p. 56. 'Then I'll wait till the last Greek / Is heaped on the mountain of corpses [...] Is slaughtered the last Trojan slaughtering / by the last Trojan / On the mountain of Trojan dead'.
- ¹⁰ Müller: Philoktet, p. 56. 'You'll be grabbing empty air / If you go further. Tie up / The air while I go free / From the highest to the lowest / Rock by my own weight / More useless with each fall / Down to where no living man can stop me.'
- ¹¹ Müller: Philoktet, p. 57. 'Stay. Don't leave me. / Not a second time to the vultures.'
- ¹² Müller: Philoktet, p. 58. 'Give me a sword, an axe / A knife. Cut my legs off / So they will not follow you. / Cut my head off / So my eyes won't stare after you / Won't see the sails disappear / And my voice won't follow you and your ship / From the beach over the surf to the sea. / Cut these hands off my arms / Before they beg for a place / In your steering bench, in the bow / Cut off my arms, so the red / Stumps won't disobey. / And when they lie there numb on numb / Rock, my torso will finally pretend to obey / And that is how I want it.'
- ¹³ Müller, 'Philoktet', p. 58. 'Your regrets are somewhat late. / You change nothing by changing your mind / Nothing to himself, Philoctetes / Must be nothing to you. / Nothing tears and breaks / In the fall from stone to stone / When my flesh tears and my bones break, / Nothing keeps you / From the teeth of Trojan dogs / And nothing lives on Lemnos / But vultures and like them, I am / Their nothing, escaping myself to escape you / On my own trail. / Keep what is mine / Break it or throw it away.' The role of the body in Müller is not an object of this study but it would be interesting to discuss if and how it can contribute to my argument. Research on that topic has been done for example by Yasmin Inauen, *Dramaturgie der Erinnerung. Geschichte, Gedächtnis, Körper bei Heiner Müller* (Tübingen: Stauffenburg-Verlag, 2001).
- ¹⁴ Müller, 'Philoktet', p. 60. 'Your death is my work, / And I want all of it. / Were we immortal I'd kill you / Now and kill you forever.'
- ¹⁵ Müller, 'Philoktet', p. 61. 'Hear how silence interrupts you. / I know nothing of cities, / Is there a city here? / That is what they are to me, / And I believe in none. Built / With words and homes for dreams, / They fall, exiled by eyes / That are blind to thin air, / Growths in foul skulls / Where lies seduce lies, / And they don't exist, your trees, / They are lies as well, / My planet is bald / And so should yours be, a thong / Stretched between nothing and nothing / By senseless, jobless gods.'
- ¹⁶ Müller, 'Philoktet', p. 62. 'Tear out your eyes, they lie, / The empty sockets speak truth / And life itself holds nothing / More true than your death.'
- ¹⁷ Müller, 'Lusthaus und Schreckenskammer der Verwandlung'. *Theater heute* 9/83, pp. 34–6, quot. p. 34. 'It comes away empty-handed' is the English translation of the German idiom 'leer ausgehen.'

- 'Ausgehen', in one of its literal meanings, is used for example in phrases like: 'Die Geschichte geht gut / traurig / schlecht aus', meaning, 'The story has a good / sad / bad end'.
- ¹⁸ Of course, one does not say this, but Müller plays with the literal meaning here.
- ¹⁹ See Peter Szondi *Versuch über das Tragische* (Frankfurt / M: Insel-Verlag), 1964.
- ²⁰ In Hegel's dialectic, *Aufhebung* is used in order to signify the unity of its three meanings: annulling, keeping, and lifting up to a higher level.
- ²¹ Sophocles, 'Philoctetes', in Hugh Lloyd-Jones (ed.), *Sophocles, Volume II. Antigone. The Women of Trachis. Philoctetes. Oedipus at Colonus*, (Loeb: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 405.
- ²² Peter Hacks, 'Unruhe angesichts eines Kunstwerks' in *Theater Heute*, 10/1968, p. 27. Notice that, despite of his criticism, the dramatist Hacks appreciated Müller's play and sensed its relevance. 'A tragedy needs a conscious hero, that is, a hero who would do what he is doing also if he knew what he is doing. This cannot be said of Philoctetes. Philoctetes is destroyed by obstinacy, not by necessity. Müller's play is better than Sophocles' play; however, I think that Sophocles did right when he refused to drive the tragic idea to catastrophe. The conflict claims mediation on the highest historical level.'
- ²³ Another existing play, André Gide's *Philoctète* from 1898, offers the following constellation: Philoctetes represents himself as having achieved a higher human moral which is situated above the gods and which he cannot express in words. Philoctetes senses what his visitors want and voluntarily submits his bow, but stays alone on Lemnos feeling happiness and inner freedom, although he will certainly die without his bow. Odysseus is embarrassed but sticks to his moral. The interesting point seems to be that Philoctetes regards his act as his individual sacrifice for the Greeks and therefore for his own morality, although that very morality forbids him to follow them to Troy. He splits himself up, so to say, in order to be one.
- ²⁴ Müller, *Lusthaus und Schreckenskammer der Verwandlung*, p. 35.
- ²⁵ Another interpretation is offered by Ostheimer (Ostheimer, *Mythologische Genauigkeit*, p. 123, 124), who relates Odysseus' attitude to its opposite, that is, to piety towards the dead being the ideal which reality is confronted with. Ostheimer assumes that farce or satire criticises what it narrates, that it shows a particular reality as opposed to an ideal. It is hard to see, though, where the effect of laughing should come from in a situation like that, particularly because Odysseus has never claimed to represent that ideal. Satire / farce always subverts the earnestness of (a claim to) an ideal.
- ²⁶ Müller, 'Philoctet', p. 62. 'Why did the god refuse me eyes / To see my own seeing eyes with?'
- ²⁷ Immanuel Kant, 'Was ist Aufklärung?' in *Was ist Aufklärung. Ausgewählte Kleine Schriften* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1999), p. 20. 'Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-incurred tutelage.'
- ²⁸ See Immanuel Kant, 'Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht' in *Was ist Aufklärung*, p. 10.
- ²⁹ See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 2004).
- ³⁰ Of course, philosophers like Derrida, Blanchot and others work consciously with the concept of ontological or transcendental emptiness. It is Foucault's achievement to have worked out that the experience of emptiness is a historical one and that it is inseparably bound to the concept of the transcendental subject.
- ³¹ Müller, *Lusthaus und Schreckenskammer der Verwandlung*, p. 34. 'The communist maxim NONE OR ALL receives its final

sense before the background of the specie's potential suicide. *However*, the first step towards the individual's *Aufhebung* in the collective is its tearing up. Death or Caesarean section is the alternative *des NEUEN MENSCHEN*. Theater simulates the step, pleasure ground and horror chamber of the metamorphosis. In that sense, Philoctetes is, against the fashionable and too short interpretation as a drama of disappointment, the negative of a communist play.'

³² As Ostheimer suggest, *Mythologische Genauigkeit*, p. 124. Perhaps Müller

sometimes did have that vision. Müller's reflective oeuvre is very heterogeneous. Literary configurations, however, have a potential of their own.

³³ Müller: 'Philoktet', p. 52. 'Island of fools and vultures / To these red stones / Where vultures eat fools / And are eaten by their own meal.'

³⁴ Müller: 'Philoktet', p. 63. 'Your vulture. Learn from him / What you have taught. Eat / He ate your equals before you / And soon will eat you. / Fatten yourself with your grave / To fatten the grave behind you. / Shrinking from your work, friend?'