

Müller's *Philoktet*: "The Artist as Critic"

Heiner Müller's *Philoktet* dramatizes the state's predicament as it finds itself adopting inhumane methods in order to achieve a humane future for its citizens. In presenting the state's point of view, Müller boldly challenges Sophocles (*Philoktetes*) and Gide (*Philoctète*), who focus their plays on the individual, not the state. With this challenge Müller supports Martindale's argument in favor of "the artist as critic" (1993, 53-54).

Müller's challenge is most evident in his making Odysseus—a villain for Sophocles, and a stupid villain for Gide—the hero and moral center of his play. Not that he is a morally good person—his vision of the good is compromised by the lies he tells to achieve it. He sees in victory over the Trojans a final healing of "the greater wound from which the blood of two peoples has flowed for too long" (Müller, 2000, 15). But Odysseus, who admits that "there is no place for virtue here" (39), will stop at nothing to achieve this good. Odysseus' chief adversary, Philoktet, bitterly refuses to hear any plea for victory or peace—when told his stubborn resistance means the death of fellow Greeks, he says he will tarry "until the last Greek is heaped on a mountain of Greek corpses" (34).

The key to Müller's work is *Widerspruch*, and Schivelbusch formulates the play's fundamental *Widerspruch* well: "the way to the Communists' human goal is, over broad stretches, inhuman." (1974, 147-48). Müller says his main artistic principle is the *Widerspruch*: "I believe in conflict. I don't believe in anything else" (Weber, 1984, 17, cf. 138). But Müller's *Widerspruch* is the state's *Widerspruch*. He locates the central conflict in the state, not in the individual as Sophocles and Gide do. As important as Müller's candid account of the Marxist state's *Widerspruch* is—it was the target of GDR censorship (Miller, 1999, 137)—it is equally important as an incisive critique of the one-sidedness of Sophocles and Gide.

Müller shows us that we allow Sophocles and Gide artistic license to celebrate the individual's morality—which both do brilliantly—against the negative, villainous, and somewhat caricatured backdrop of a state that would compromise this morality. He also cautions us that we cannot responsibly adopt Sophocles' view (that a god will come to see to the state's interest) or Gide's (who, borrowing from Nietzsche, "The New Idol," 1982, 160-63, 244, believes that the state is inherently evil). Of course a good Marxist like Müller will represent the state's point of view, but Aristotle's dictum that the state is prior to the individual (*Politics* 1253a) reminds us that there is validity to Müller's view, no matter what his political persuasion is. Schivelbusch describes Müller's Odysseus as Machivellian (137, 138), but Isaiah Berlin suggests that the Machiavellian morality of the state, though incompatible with other moralities, may have its place (1991, 7-14).

Martindale explores a number of advantages the "artist as critic" offers us (1993, 53-54). Among these is a "dialogic criticism" in which two (or more) artists are fully present in their works, to interrogate one another in full mutuality. This is well illustrated in the challenge Müller presents to Sophocles and Gide.

Works Cited

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