

“AND LIVE WITHIN THE EMPTY MIDDLE”

Medea in the oeuvre of Heiner Müller

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Adaptation is an act of subjugating and appropriating something that has come from afar, from another culture or another time, from an earlier period. As the work is being rewritten it becomes a tool of another discourse and is transported to a different horizon. Adaptation fits the story, the text, the work to new needs, filling in vacua and lacunae, foreseeing other results and allowing the creator to fertilize the ‘other’ without constraints and limitations. To what extent does the next creator want to preserve the trace of the foreign, to enunciate or to obliterate the differences while going ahead with this act of ‘applied hermeneutics’ that is called adaptation? What relationship can the new text have to those texts that were its source and essential precondition or were incorporated in it?

Heiner Müller moved into the domain of adaptation when, stimulated by the ‘babble of old images’, he turned to the Greek myths. For him myths and tragedy were a field of the alien and the ambiguous, capable of functioning as a screen on which to project the paradoxical, the contradictory and the foreign that he himself was striving to express.

His involvement with Medea began in the 1950s. Prior to his *Medeamaterial* in 1982, we have a variation of Medea in the person of Dasha, heroine of the novel *Zement*; we also have the stage pantomime *Medeaspiel*, as well as several oblique references to her figure.

The dramatic triptych *Verkommenes Ufer Medeamaterial Landschaft mit Argonauten*, is the principal Müllerian version of Medea, and is virtually contemporary with two other Medeas, from the field of cinema and modern opera, which were both created in about the same decade (1970-1982). In *Medeamaterial*, Medea condemns her children because she sees them as personifying all her dependencies and her human bondage. Before proceeding to the murder that liberates her - just as it liberates the children from whatever abomination constitutes life’s truth - the Müllerian Medea imputes Jason’s sons with treachery, whereas she herself has betrayed her father and brother. She accuses them of hypocrisy, while she herself is plotting and scheming the

spectacle of revenge. In order to complete her mutiny, to regain her identity and to achieve the final 'nothing now', Medea follows a procedure of rejecting the children. Through her gradual estrangement from them, she becomes independent, she acquires access to her absolute, intact and authentic person.

In Pier Paolo Pasolini's film version of *Medea*, with Maria Callas in the title role (1970), the infanticide is performed as a great act in silence. It is a hieratic ceremony of gestural and expressive character. With this sacrifice of the serenely sleeping, unsuspecting children, and in the absence of all speech, the phases of the famous Pasolinian ritual are fulfilled. The massacre has been preceded by the orgiastic, magical 'rending' of the brother, between the land of Colchis and the sea of the Argonauts, as well as by the death of Creousa and of Creon at Corinth, in an open space before the Cyclopean walls.

In the five-act opera by Gavin Bryars and Robert Wilson (1982), with a trilingual libretto based on Euripides, and Müller's triptych as a prologue (in the sequence: *Verkommenes Ufer - Landschaft mit Argonauten - Medeamaterial*), Medea embarks upon the murder of the children in complete control of an infanticide that has power for all time and beyond time. Everyone around her is blinded by passions, and only Medea, the definitive child-killer driven by passion, carries out impassively, or rather repeats, an archetypal execution. In the Wilsonian extravaganza, Medea is the paradigm of a mother-figure who recalls the childish fear, the traumatic experience of the mother murderer.

Common denominator to the above Medeas is the anthropological, since all three versions of the woman Medea refer to an anthropological model. Pasolini's Medea emerges as paradigm of an archaic and religious culture that comes into catastrophic conflict with Jason, who represents the pragmatic, rational, cynical world of modernity. Behind the passion, the fate, the personal case of the heroine, Pasolini drew up the 'tragedy of the barbaric', maintaining moreover, that we can "see Medea also as the story of a Third-World people which, in its engagement with materialistic, western civilization, can live out a similar disaster".

Müller's Medea moves in the field of the anthropological, with powerful political ramifications. Medea's betrayal by the children and the fratricide that preceded in Colchis constitute basic thematic nuclei in Müller's dramaturgy - especially in *Medeamaterial* - thus linking two of his favourite subjects: Medea and the dialectical relationship between treachery and revolution. The idea of perfidy dominates his entire poetic *oeuvre*, since treachery and revolution appear

in his texts not only as the pre-eminent *topos* for the major political and moral issues of the Stalinist period, but also as a more general component of anthropological type, which is summarized in the maxim of Müller himself: "Everything new is a betrayal of the old".

In none of the Medeas before Müller's do the children's treachery and the fratricide - with the *Leitmotif* "Jason, You owe me a brother" projected against the fixed background of a diachronic, yet topical for twentieth century Germany, civil strife - have the gravitas that the German author accorded them. Medea's sense of betrayal by her children, her feeling that they turn towards the father's side because they prefer affluence and the security of family, are issues that had previously fascinated Franz Grillparzer in *Das goldene Vlies*. Müller, however, uses Medea 'as material' in order to formulate a chapter of the modern tragic state, at the point where the more general theme of treachery intersects with the recalcitrance of the rebellious Medea.

For Pasolini and Müller concurrently, incursion, conquest and colonization are the interesting motifs in the story of the Argonauts, of Jason and Medea. Müller perceives Medea's sexual conquest and enslavement by Jason as a manifestation of colonialism. And with this he returns to a constant that runs through his writing and thinking, and concerns the articulation of sexuality with political authority, of sexuality with the power of imposition and the processes of authoritarianism. Medea in *Medeamaterial* is the barbarian woman oppressed by the conqueror Jason. The woman who will pass to insubordination, who does not follow the road of emancipation - a road with a future -, but instead follows an innate, impetuous, self-destructive compulsion. By betraying her father and killing her brother, the Müllerian Medea has succumbed to the other culture; through the culture of the conqueror Jason, she rejects her own. That is why she has to carry out perfectly her destructive and self-destructive deed. Until she dwells free in the centre of the void: "I want to break mankind apart in two and live within the empty middle"

Thus, a collective Medea occupies the place of the individual, while insurgent man is installed in the place of the woman. The transposition from the individual to the collective - a transposition of political and anthropological content - already accompanies the figure of Medea in Müller's work from the period of *Zement*. In this book, by dramatizing the fictional material of Gladkov in 1972, Müller conjures up Medea through the figure of the revolutionary Dasha Chumalova, who despite family ties, despite maternal emotions, lets her child starve to death, for the sake of the common revolutionary cause. Ivagin tells

Dasha: "I've always admired you. You're a Medea. And a Sphinx in our male eyes". He then goes on to narrate how Medea butchered her children and cast their members at their father's feet, and ends by saying that then the conqueror and traitor, the man, "beheld with horror, beneath the splendour of the mistress, beneath the garments of the mother, the face of the Woman, for the first time".

Just as Müller comes back to Medea again and again - with *Medeaspiel*, with *Medeamaterial*, with various correlations and analogies - so Robert Wilson returns to his 'favourite heroine'. From *Deaf-man's Glance* to this day, Medea rules Wilson's imagination and iconography. In contrast to Müller, where the anthropological essence of the Medea model is the outcome of political charges, in Wilson the anthropological emanates from the fear of the criminal woman and the nightmare of the murderous mother. Wilson has described the shock he felt on seeing, in an experimental film for medical purposes, how much uncontrolled aggression is contained in the mother's reaction to her child's crying. The film froze the first, fleeting reaction, fractions of a second before the mother expressed love and tenderness. Medea, nurse and murderess in *Deaf-man's Glance*, ceremonially offered milk, before proceeding to a ritual slaughter. For Wilson, the passage from the glass of milk to the dagger is the Image that continues *ad infinitum*.

Wilson had cast a black actress in the role of Medea. Other contemporary directors have adopted and proposed black Medeas too, interpreting Medea in the various repertoires from the viewpoint of the other culture, the other tribe, from the standpoint of an anti-racist or a feminist discourse. In Wilson, however, the black Medea signified the otherworldly, the preternatural, the foreign, the one who comes not from an unknown land but from the *terra incognita* of the mind.

Medea was black in the scandalous, for its day, dramatic version by Hans Henny Jahnn, an author who wandered precipitately through the labyrinths of sexuality, erotic desire and physical passion. Jahnn's view can also be considered anthropological, since Medea's and Jason's bodies become a vehicle of alienation, as seat of the instinct, of all possible sadistic, masochistic or other dark impulses. In Jahnn's *Medea*, a drama of human extremes verifying Antonin Artaud's observation that "all the great myths are black", the black woman incarnates the hated foreigner. Precisely because the myth of Medea lends itself to serving the black reality of moral fall, of torture, of shed blood, as well as to taking up the burden of a relentless struggle between ugliness and beauty, youth and old age.

From Pasolini's archaic, dark and cosmological Medea, to Wilson's weird and unfamiliar one, and Müller's subjection to the alien with consequential self-destructive insurrection, foreignness seems to be, in the final analysis, the anthropological category that permits the innovative thinking and creativity of poets such as Pasolini, Wilson and Müller, to reinstate Euripides, in their own modern manner. Or rather, to reinstate Euripides' *Medea* as tragedy *par excellence* of the barbarian woman in a foreign land.

In Müller's triptych *Verkommenes Ufer Medeamaterial Landschaft mit Argonauten*, the parts of which were written at different moments in time, the three texts, each one in another style, are juxtaposed. *Verkommenes Ufer* is a lyrical piece in which, behind the apparently amorphous description of a deserted industrial site - that is a portrait of the destroyed environment and alienated humanity - lurks, through the rhythms of the phrases, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*.

Medeamaterial, although it has the form of a play and introduces Medea, Jason and the Nurse as dramatic personae, limits the dimension of dialogue by expanding Medea's monologue to the utmost.

Landschaft mit Argonauten, a title which brings to mind a painting rather than a play, is a prose poem. A poetic monologue in which there is the latent 'person' of Jason colonizer, conqueror, soldier, with fragmented Ego and whose identity is lost in the limbo between 'nothing' and 'no one'.

To be precise, there is no dialogue between Jason and Medea. As in *Die Hamletmaschine*, Hamlet's soliloquy does not encounter that of Ophelia, but runs parallel with it. Here too, in *Medeamaterial Landschaft mit Argonauten*, we have in the end two large units of monologue following separate orbits. Organized lyrical language, order in the metres and the rhythms for *Medeamaterial*, irregular rhythms, snatches of phrases, of "a quagmire of images and words" for *Landschaft mit Argonauten*. Or to put it another way, an invasion of memorial relics on the pretext of Jason's tattered conscience.

In his autobiography *Krieg ohne Schlacht. Leben in zwei Diktaturen*, Müller recounts how he gradually composed the triptych, from personal experiences and images of East German daily reality:

I'm with a woman in the Straussberg area, beside a lake whose bank was just as described in the work. During the Second World War, the

last tank battle took place at Straussberg. And the National Popular Army had its headquarters around here. The dialogical part of *Medeamaterial* is, almost verbatim, a family quarrel, the last stage in a relationship or its hour of crisis. I wrote it at Lehnitz. Two decades later, at Bochum, I wrote the monologue part, before another marriage ended and while I was living with another woman. It was 1982. The material came from Euripides, Hans Henny Jahnn and primarily Seneca. I could not have written the third part without *The Waste Land*, and consequently without Ezra Pound as well.

A language articulated from other literatures. A poetry predicated on the redistribution of pre-existing literary and other material. The excerpts or quotes that Müller uses are, by definition, *fragmenta*, since they have been excised from other texts, prior to their incorporation, intact or altered, in his own.

The quotes are interposed in the lines of the text in capital letters. As if holes, fissures, voids existed there. Thanks to the way it is printed on the pages of the book, a textual landscape is produced. Phrases from earlier works of his are repeated too: "THIS TREE WILL NOT BEAR LEAF OVER MY BODY ..." variation of a phrase from his *Oedipus Kommentare*. Sometimes, familiar lines of poets are distorted: "THE REST IS POETRY" (Shakespeare); "WHATEVER



Uit: *Medea no comment*, video van Vouvoula Skoura

REMAINS IS CREATED BY BOMBS" (Hölderlin), "A SHRED OF SHAKESPEARE" (T.S. Eliot). An explosion of meanings is ignited in the text. The spark is produced by contact between heteroclitic things that have lost their original meaning. Moreover, alongside his textual experiences, the writer also accumulates visual experiences from external reality, experiences of objects and events.

Müller works with material of enduring provenance, from the myth of the Argonaut Cycle and Euripidean tragedy to personal experiences and pictures of today. He works by resorting to a gesture of usurping foreign literary texts, for the sake of the textual interaction in his own "lone texts awaiting History". In the kind of adaptation that he makes, the myth is not modified to become a story of our time. It is a foreign body, a material, a challenge for the modern mind and conscience.