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Revolutionary Theater and the Classical Heritage

Inheritance and Appropriation from Weimar to the GDR

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Introduction

During the Weimar period, Marxist literary theorists drew sharp lines as to the proper relationship that proletarian authors (and proletarian culture in general) were to have with respect to the German literary heritage. Influenced by the Russian Proletcult movement, the left wing of the KPD favored a more radical break with the bourgeois literary heritage and a rejection of all bourgeois aesthetic norms. The center of the KPD, motivated both to legitimate itself vis-à-vis bourgeois aesthetic standards and to counter the complete break demanded by the left wing of the party, saw the bourgeois literary heritage as the essential pre-history of proletarian literature. Marxist theorists such as Karl A. Wittfogel and Georg Lukács supported this position, describing the project of proletarian literature not as the repudiation of bourgeois literature in its entirety, but rather as the continuation of the unfinished tasks of the bourgeois revolution.

This dispute about proletarian-revolutionary aesthetics had distinct sides. On one side were Wittfogel, Lukács, Johannes R. Becher and the "official" KPD position, as articulated in essays found in *Die Rote Fahne* and *Die Linkskurve* – the need to see contemporary proletarian-revolutionary and future socialist literature as a continuation of bourgeois literary development. On the other side were various proletarian-revolutionary artists – such as Bertolt Brecht, Friedrich Wolf, and Gustav von Wangenheim – some active and politically engaged party members, others less easily defined by party designations. The term "proletarian-revolutionary" requires a slight clarification, since it encompasses a relatively heterogeneous group of artists, both "proletarian," i.e., working-class artists, and "revolutionary," i.e., bourgeois *Mitläufer* who, despite their background, were committed to a socialist revolution. This

designation as a group, having a group position, should not be taken to imply a strict homogeneity; rather this term indicates the dominant, though varied, oppositional position *within* Marxist literary debates.

Retrospective accounts of the Weimar period have organized their analyses of these aesthetic debates to focus on their importance for discussions of contemporary bourgeois literature and to modernism.[1] The relationship to modernism was extremely important for Weimar literary discussions and carried over into the 1930s in the exile journal *Das Wort* as a debate about Expressionism. Yet, this crude and reductive division – Lukács as the anti-modernist looking for a return of nineteenth-century realism versus Brecht, the modernist (now even postmodernist) destroyer of traditional theatrical models in favor of Epic Theater – came to define not only analyses of the Weimar period, but general evaluations of progressive aesthetics in the twentieth century. The concept of the "Brecht-Lukács Debate" so dominated aesthetic discussions, that it was almost entirely forgotten that such a debate never actually took place.[2]

By accepting this opposition, critics in East Germany (such as Mittenzwei) and West Germany (such as Gallas), reconstructed the development of proletarian-revolutionary literature and its relation to the bourgeois heritage in the late Weimar period as a prehistory to their differing contemporary notions of Marxist aesthetics. In both cases, because of the desire to construct a linear model of Marxist literature and literary theory, they ignored the role of the proletarian literary heritage for proletarian-revolutionary art. This neglect mirrors the KPD position of the Weimar period. Although KPD theorists of Marxist aesthetics during Weimar vehemently rejected any notion of proletarian (and later socialist) art being born into a vacuum, in their efforts to contextualize and legitimate this art, they primarily focused on its relation to bourgeois literature and not to earlier forms of proletarian literature or culture. Later analyses of the art and literature of the period, which catego-

rized Weimar artists as either modernist or realist, continued to ignore the prehistory of working-class literature.[3]

An illustration of the inadequacy of this understanding of proletarian-revolutionary theater of the late Weimar period can be found in a short play by Bertolt Brecht. In 1930, Brecht produced his *Lehrstück*, *Der Jasager* (a short play based on the Japanese Noh drama *Taniko*) at the Karl-Marx-Schule in Berlin. In it, a young boy insists on accompanying a teacher and his students on an arduous journey to obtain medicine for people in their town, including the young boy's mother. After insisting that he be brought along, the boy falls ill during the journey himself and is unable to continue. The students demand to go on and leave the boy, since the whole town is waiting for the medicine. The teacher explains this to the boy, telling him that custom requires them to ask if he wants them to bring him home, but that it is also the custom for the boy to refuse. The boy does then ask to be thrown into the valley, so that he may die quickly. The students and teachers comply, the chorus narrating the ending of the play: "Fuß an Fuß standen sie zusammengedrängt / An dem Rande des Abgrunds / Und warfen ihn hinab mit geschlossenen Augen / Keiner schuldiger als sein Nachbar" (55).

Somewhat to Brecht's surprise, the play provoked a mostly negative reaction from the students of the Karl-Marx-Schule, who criticized the young boy's sacrifice and questioned Brecht about other possible solutions to the boy's dilemma. In response, Brecht wrote *Der Neinsager*, a play in which the boy does not agree to be left behind. In this version, the mother is sick, but recovering. Moreover, the trip is not to collect medicine, but knowledge. When the boy falls sick, the students want to toss him into the valley, according to custom. The teacher explains this to the boy, telling him that custom requires them to ask if he wants them to bring him home, but it is also the custom for the boy to refuse. Now the boy refuses, and is rebuked by the teacher: "Warum antwortest du nicht dem Brauch gemäß? Wer a gesagt hat, der muß

auch b sagen." The boy's response contains the essential message of the second play:

> Die Antwort, die ich gegeben habe, war falsch, aber eure Frage war falscher. Wer a sagt, der muß nicht b sagen. Er kann auch erkennen, daß a falsch war. Ich wollte meiner Mutter Medizin holen, aber jetzt bin ich selber krank geworden, es ist also nicht mehr möglich. Und ich will sofort umkehren, der neuen Lage entsprechend. Auch euch bitte ich umzukehren und mich heimzubringen. Euer Lernen kann durchaus warten. Wenn es drüben etwas zu lernen gibt, was ich hoffe, so könnte es nur das sein, daß man in unserer Lage umkehren muß. Und was den alten großen Brauch betrifft, so sehe ich keine Vernunft an ihm. Ich brauche vielmehr einen neuen großen Brauch, den wir sofort einführen müssen, nämlich den Brauch, in jeder neuen Lage neu nachzudenken. (71)

Brecht instructed that whenever possible, these two plays should be performed together; their juxtaposition was crucial to the understanding of both works. As Roswitha Müller writes, "the teaching of the subordination of the individual to the common good is not simply revoked, but rather supplemented, expanded and complicated with another *Lehre*, the necessity to revise old customs" (91). These two "teachings," the tension between individual and collective, and the need to revise old customs, were part not just of Brecht's works, but of the works of other major proletarian-revolutionary dramatists. For while the major tension in proletarian-revolutionary theater of the late Weimar Republic centered on the Marxist construction of individual identity through and against collective identity, this took place against the backdrop of a larger discussion about the relationship of proletarian literature to German literary cultural heritage. Brecht's two plays address precisely these issues: while *Der Jasager* was originally intended to dramatize the need to understand individual identity and individual concerns within the larger context of collective (i.e., socialist) identity and collective concerns (where the medical emergency can be seen as a political emergency in the Weimar period), *Der Neinsager*, while not negating this original lesson, asks that this

dilemma be recontextualized in a situation where old oppositions and old norms (both philosophical and aesthetic) are themselves called into question.

This analysis of the status of heritage in the development of proletarian-revolutionary literature, like Brecht's young boy, will not answer according to custom (by using the distinct categories of modernism and realism), but rather ask whether one shouldn't reconceive of the relationship to heritage outside of this standard opposition. While Lukács remains one of the most insightful literary critics in the German tradition, he derived his position on heritage less from an analysis of aesthetic development and more from a desire to legitimate the status of the KPD as the true inheritor of German culture. Similarly, while Gallas and other West German critics of the late 1960s and 1970s were right to point to Brecht as a more interesting and complex example of proletarian-revolutionary literature of the late Weimar period, their ultimate evaluation of the participants in these literary debates had as much to do with attempts to legitimate their own position by aligning themselves with Brecht as it did to delegitimating the socialist realist aesthetic of the GDR by aligning it solely with Lukács. What they both neglect, and what this work will foreground, is how proletarian-revolutionary playwrights of the late Weimar period simultaneously perceived, appropriated, and built upon various literary and cultural heritages, both bourgeois and proletarian. It will demonstrate that, while their individual aesthetics developed along different lines, their relationships to heritage intersected in a form of refiguration that recognized a multiplicity of predecessors and which saw its task not in the preservation or rejection, but rather the critical appropriation of the entire German literary heritage in order to transform the audience's relationship to the theatrical production from a passive-receptive to an active-critical one. The term "critical appropriation" [*kritische Aneignung*] was a frequent one in Weimar discussions of the bourgeois heritage. Unfortunately, it is also a very vague one, whose ambiguity allowed

Marxist literary theorists such as Lukács and Wittfogel to profess a critical attitude towards the bourgeois heritage that was anything but. This term is employed here to describe the work of the artists under consideration, because their approach best embodies this compound concept. They appropriate elements of the bourgeois heritage by manipulating them in such a way as to incorporate them into their own artistic production. It is a critical appropriation in that the invocation of elements of the bourgeois heritage is done in such a way as to reveal the inadequacy of classical notions – such as that of the world-historical individual – in the modern context. Inherent in this appropriation was the notion that there was no fixed or finite heritage: not only did these artists construct their own aesthetic heritage from a variety of heritages, but once constructed, this heritage was not exempt from critical reassessment.[4]

Further, crucial to this practice of critical appropriation was the underlying assumption that the intended audience for these productions would recognize the appropriated material. Without this recognition, such an appropriation would not produce the desired effect. Thus, while the productions themselves presented the material in a critical manner, they nonetheless tacitly affirmed the need for knowledge of the bourgeois heritage. Moreover, the fact that these playwrights could assume that audiences would recognize appropriated material allowed their plays to function as allegorical representations of the Weimar period. The spatial and temporal displacement involved in this use of allegory – Brecht's use of China, the United States, and Russia or Wolf's use of China or medieval Germany, for example – allowed them to invoke past and present in a moment of simultaneous critique, a critique that was apparent to the audience, but that did not directly confront the authorities.

In the twenty-first century, an artist, proletarian-revolutionary or otherwise, can make no such assumption regarding the general populace's knowledge of the bourgeois literary or artistic tradition.

When studies diagnosing a lack of knowledge for the traditional canon such as Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* and E. D. Hirsch Jr.'s *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* appeared in the 1980s, the debate did not concern the truthfulness of their claims, but rather whether or not such knowledge was still necessary. Today, in the realm of mass culture, the appropriation of the bourgeois heritage takes place without the assumption of knowledge on the part of the audience/consumer. Whereas previously the music used in commercials was easily identifiable as such, now, a 15-second excerpt from "An die Freude" can serve as a jingle, familiar somehow though not universally identified, for selling everything from cars to toothpaste. It's original context lost, the melody appears now merely as higher-quality commercial music. If Adorno argued, in "Lyric Poetry and Society," that serious music was characterized by the fact that a single part of it could not be removed without affecting the whole, there is no such safeguard on the reverse – the isolation and reduction of a part of serious music.

The lack of knowledge about and the lack of reverence for traditional bourgeois high culture have diminished the critical effect of parodies such as Wangenheim's *Die Mausefalle* or Brecht's *Die heilige Johanna*. This begs the question: What would justify a contemporary investigation of these proletarian-revolutionary artists and of the debates concerning cultural heritage that surrounded their work? While the specific context of these debates and works, the question of what socialist literature should inherit from the bourgeois heritage, may now be a moot point, an analysis of these debates as well as the work of these authors which does not operate along the traditional modernism/realism binarism is useful on two levels. On the level of academic discussion, this analysis will contribute to current debates concerning canons and canonicity by providing, through an examination of the theatrical practice of these artists, a dynamic model of canon formation. In their theory, and even more so in their practice, these artists nei-

ther rejected nor wholeheartedly embraced the past, but rather acknowledged the multiplicity of pasts and recognized a multiplicity of canons, a recognition that critiques as well as acknowledges both the bourgeois (here "canonical") authors as well as the proletariat (here "marginalized" or "other") authors.

Second, while the lack of a commonly recognized canon, the specific context for this process of critical appropriation, has been eliminated by the culture industry, interestingly, the process of critical appropriation does continue, though now it takes place in the realm of popular, rather than bourgeois high culture. A full understanding of the complexity of contemporary film and music requires knowledge of the popular culture that preceded it. A genre such as rap music, for example, with its use of sampling, relies on the listener's knowledge of a body of popular music. Similarly, film increasingly "quotes" from a body of work extending back as far as Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (see *The Untouchables* or *Brazil*). Mere citation of a popular culture heritage is not enough of a similarity however: to a great extent such citation is unmediated theoretically and functions only to invoke isolated images for their own sake. Nonetheless, the process of critical appropriation present in the work of the proletarian-revolutionary artists under discussion persists in popular culture and can function as critically and subversively today as it did in the late Weimar period.

The focus here on the genre of theater is not uncoincidental. For various reasons, theater dominated proletarian-revolutionary art of the late Weimar period. Left-wing political parties of the Weimar Republic inherited theater as a means of "exposing" the proletariat to theater and the classics from the *Volksbühne* of Walter Mehring. While novels often enjoyed a relatively wide circulation, theater, particularly in the form of agitprop, was the most accessible art form with plays such as Wangenheim's *Die Mausefalle* being performed over 100 times a year. Moreover, it often traveled to its audience, staged in mainstream theaters at first, then, depending on financial or political considerations, in meeting halls,

factories, or anywhere it could find space. Finally, as a genre, theater was particularly suited to questions of heritage and assimilation. In the strictest sense, each theatrical performance involves a confrontation with a literary past, where choices are made about what remains vital in the work, what must be preserved, and what must be, in its re-presentation highlighted, critiqued, or discarded. This holds true not only for stagings of the classics, but also for their formal assimilation and critique in the contemporary theater.

A word on the approach taken here: as much as possible, this analysis limits itself to the late Weimar works of Wolf, Wangenheim, and Brecht to materials written during the Weimar period. This is done not out of a belief that such a limitation provides historical objectivity or that such a presentation of these texts escapes the implicit interpretation involved in the construction of an historical narrative or presentation. The reasons are twofold. First, such an approach resists measuring earlier phases of these artists' work against their later theoretical pronouncements. A study of these authors that encompasses their entire theoretical development would be more comprehensive, but the purpose here is not to offer a thorough account of these authors' careers, but to focus on a distinct phase of their artistic production. The selection of materials from this period focuses on texts that best illustrate how the specific circumstances of the Weimar period allowed for the dual – and often simultaneous – use of heritage as both a legitimating and a critical force.

Second, this return to the late Weimar period facilitates the development of a reading that reaffirms the importance of these authors. While Brecht and Brechtian aesthetics remains a fruitful object of study, other prominent proletarian-revolutionary dramatists, such as Wolf and Wangenheim, have fallen out of favor. During the cold war, interest in proletarian-revolutionary literature experienced a brief renaissance, even in the West, as scholars tackled this extremely productive period in German artistic production. When these debates were revisited in the late 1960s and

early 1970s, both in East and West Germany, they brought to the surface previously unpublished material (as in the case of Wangenheim, whose early work had in fact rarely been published before 1972) or made available once again material that had gone out of print. The critical analysis of the Weimar situation, however, offered little in the way of new insights. Instead, these debates remained mapped onto an opposition (modernism vs. realism) that was the guiding interpretation of the split between East and West German literature, and between left-wing, proletarian-revolutionary literature and the literature officially sanctioned by the KPD. Now, in the post-*Wende* period, where there appears to be a general hostility towards East German literature, there is the danger that proletarian-revolutionary authors of the Weimar period will be further consigned to a prehistory of GDR literature.[5] To express a methodology in the terms used to define other aesthetic positions and evaluations of the Weimar period, the goal is also one of legitimation – the legitimation of a proletarian-revolutionary method of critical appropriation both as a response to the Weimar situation as well as a model for the contemporary situation.

This study begins by discussing the aesthetic and political situation in the Weimar period. The first chapter involves an analysis of the development of a Marxist aesthetic with respect to the proletarian and bourgeois heritage, beginning with a discussion of Erwin Piscator's first *Proletarisches Theater* in 1920–1921. Here we can see how the German Communist Party (KPD), under the influence of Lenin's stance towards the Proletcult in Russia, was particularly hostile to Piscator and other attempts at proletarian-revolutionary art (agitprop and the revue form) early in the period. This opposition stemmed from a motivation to legitimate itself vis-à-vis bourgeois aesthetic standards as well as a desire to counter the complete break with literary heritage demanded by the Proletcult movement. As the 1920s progressed, the Party gradually changed its position to one of support for proletarian art (as long

as it maintained certain aesthetic standards), culminating in the formation of the *Bund proletarisch-revolutionärer Schriftsteller* (BPRS) and the appearance of *Die Linkskurve*, the official literary journal of the BPRS. The theoretical contributions to the journal by Lukács, Becher, Wittfogel, and others are examined as indicative of the tension between bourgeois literary standards and the development of proletarian art.

The next three chapters examine the work of each dramatist with respect to this tension. While Brecht attacked the central formal elements of traditional theater and saw all literary heritage as "*Materialwert*," the second chapter argues that Brecht's development of Epic Theater was not predicated upon the complete rejection of traditional theater but rather depended upon a confrontation between traditional and Epic Theater, in which contradictory elements were presented and never resolved. Similarly, Brecht's use of the bourgeois literary heritage and other literary and non-literary heritages did not consist merely of negativity, but sought to develop simultaneously a heritage which defined itself by its critical nature. The third chapter discusses how, against Brecht's disavowal of traditional "Aristotelian" theater and its use of catharsis and identification, Friedrich Wolf argued precisely for these devices, but in a way counter to the legitimation of bourgeois ideology. This chapter shows how the synthesis of bourgeois and proletarian heritage in Wolf's theoretical writings such as "Kunst ist Waffe!" is reflected formally and thematically in plays such as *Tai Yang erwacht*. The analysis of the work of Gustav von Wangenheim in the fourth chapter demonstrates that Wangenheim was the most radical of the three in terms of his experimentation with theatrical forms. *Die Mausefalle* offers the most complex presentation of the mediation of the play with the audience, constantly slipping between its three different levels: the play; its commentary on itself and imaginary audience; and the audience. Like Brecht, Wangenheim undermined heritage through its invocation, but like Wolf, he

legitimated his work by offering a tradition of proletarian theater as a counter-heritage.

The last chapter of this book concerns the status of Brecht, Wolf, and Wangenheim since World War II. An analysis of the fate of these three artists in the GDR reveals that it is only Brecht who remains relevant for later GDR playwrights, because Wolf and Wangenheim are unable to develop an aesthetic that maintains a critical relationship to heritage. This work concludes with an analysis of two plays by GDR authors – Ulrich Plenzdorf's *Die neuen Leiden des jungen W.* and Heiner Müller's *Die Hamletmaschine* – and argues that these plays represent the practice of critical appropriation, both with respect to the literary heritage as well as with respect to the work and theory of Brecht himself. These plays also reveal the limitations of the sort of allegorical representation offered by the Weimar proletarian-revolutionary dramatists for the GDR in the 1970s.