

## **One who set forth to teach terror\***

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Black skepticism was one driving force of his work: skepticism about the promises of progress announced in party strategists' slogans; skepticism historical optimism that refused to acknowledge a near future of war and barbarism. The world was not good and would not be good so long as people were living on it. Those who still cultivated hope were – according to one of his sarcastic quips – simply uninformed. Such sentences were the reason many considered Heiner Müller to be a radical saboteur of politically motivated promises of salvation. And yet even as a notorious doomsayer, he held on with remarkable tenacity to the utopia of a better world “where wealth and money would be divided more fairly” [wo Reichtum und Geld gerechter verteilt werden] (Bild 1993). His theatrical space was, however, not geared toward making prognoses but rather toward memory work. That is what he meant when he spoke of a necessary “dialogue with the dead” [Dialog mit den Toten] (JN, 31).

The orientation toward a reality different from the given world was another source of power for his writing. But this orientation also made him vulnerable because, until the very end, he imagined his political vision as being fulfilled within the socialist system – a hope that was contrary to reason, as he somehow recognized. The specter of communism nevertheless remained his daydream. “The emotional attachment to socialism” [die emotionale Bindung an den Sozialismus], he said shortly before his death, was something he “could no longer get rid of” [bringe er nicht mehr los] (Lebert 1995). The GDR was thus not only “material” [Material] for Müller (Beer 1993), as he often explained, but also hope without any alternative. And still, it was with tremendous doubt that he publicly proclaimed his optimism for the development of socialism in the GDR. He didn't see his own task as demonstrating political agreement, and so he didn't aim to reveal solutions to existing conflicts but rather the development of new ones.

Müller's early plays show parable-like situations in transition between old and new moments of history. He searched for the foundations of his new society in publicly owned corporations, agricultural production cooperatives, and combines. What he experienced in factory buildings,

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\*This essay is based on my biography of Heiner Müller: *Heiner Müller oder Das Prinzip Zweifel: Eine Biographie (Heiner Müller or the principle of doubt: a biography)* (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 2001).