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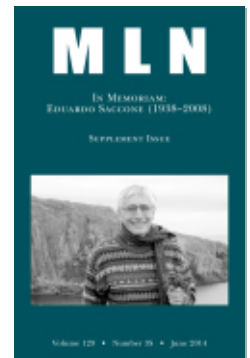
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Phantom of a Corpse: Ophelia From Rimbaud to Brecht



Rainer Nägele

Among the many echoes of Rimbaud's "Ophélie" in modern German poetry, Brecht's poem "Vom ertrunkenen Mädchen" ("Ballad of the Drowned Girl," 1919/20) is one of the last. In this poem about forgetting, even her name seems forgotten. The figure that swam through so many waters since Rimbaud appears to swim away forever, dissolved, decomposed in the transitions and translations from river to river, from language to language: *Aas in Flüssen mit vielem Aas* ("carriage in rivers with much other carriage").¹

But in this decomposition, she returns to a primal scene of modern poetry, to Baudelaire's "Une charogne," where already the forms of a female corpse are dissolving:

*Les formes s'effaçaient et n'étaient plus qu'un rêve,
Une ébauche lente à venir,
Sur la toile oubliée, et que l'artiste achève
Seulement par le souvenir.*

(vv. 29–32)²

This same decomposition carries also the sketch (*une ébauche*) for a translation and transfiguration that preserves the dissolved forms and carries them over into another state:

*Alors, ô ma beauté! dites à la vermine
Qui vous mangera de baisers,
Que j'ai gardé la forme et l'essence divine
De mes amours décomposés!*

(vv. 45–48)

Brecht's poem is one of these translations, one of the last ones perhaps, while at the same time, at the end of the Ophélie series, it points backwards in time to that sketch, the *ébauche*, whose echo it is.

In October 1907, in one of his letters about Cézanne, Rilke evokes Baudelaire's "Une charogne" as a model of *sachlichen Sagens*, of an objective mode of speech.³ The *Sachlichkeit*, the objectivity of this mode of speech seems far remote from that "Neue Sachlichkeit," the new objectivity of the twenties, that was proclaimed shortly after the first publication of Brecht's "Ballad of the Drowned Girl."⁴ And we are confronted with the question what the nature of this other *Sachlichkeit* is that Rilke ascribes to the Baudelaire poem and that not only finds its echo in Brecht's "Ballad," but also continues to resonate through the later sober and political style of Brecht's writings.

For Rilke, the *Sachlichkeit* of Baudelaire's poem seems to have its basis in the overcoming of a resistance: "first the artistic gaze had to overcome itself to the point that it could see Being (*das Seiende*), that which is valid with all other being (*das, mit allem andern Seienden, gilt*)" even in that which is horrible and seemingly simply disgusting. Where Rilke speaks of *das Seiende . . . mit allem andern Seienden*, Brecht's poem speaks of *Aas . . . mit vielem Aas*. We may consider this one of the translations of being, and one that is thoroughly compatible with the consequence of Rilke's phrase: for the *Sachlichkeit* of poetic speech consists in the recognition that the essence of being, its *Wesen*, manifests itself in the decomposition, in *Verwesen*, and that its validity, its significance emerges in the disappearance of the phenomenon. The Thing cannot be had otherwise than in this kind of *sachliches Sagen*. The German word *Sache* is not identical with *Ding*, it is a translation of the *Ding*, that is inaccessible in itself, and appears only in the representation of a speech that signifies it, that *gilt*. (Thus, as Lacan rightly remarked, Freud speaks of *Sachvorstellungen*, not of *Dingvorstellungen*.) The Thing is the horror at whose threshold beauty has its place.

In contrast to the baroque directness with which Baudelaire's poem evokes not only the decomposition but also the sexual horror in face of the *femme lubrique* (thus indicating, very *sachlich*, what the horror of the "Thing" is all about), both Rimbaud and Brecht are strangely restrained in the depiction of the horror of the thing and its decomposing manifestation. It is as if the gaze, exposed to the horror, were interrupted at moments in order to open instead the ear all the more to the euphony and musicality that characterize both poems so strongly.

Rimbaud's poem, written in May 1870, almost three decades after Baudelaire's "Une charogne" preserves nevertheless the basic move of Baudelaire's poem: the composition of the poem as a result and transfiguration of the decomposition of its *sujet*. The poem consists of three parts. The first two parts, each one consisting of four stanzas, evoke the figure of Ophelia, first in the form of a descriptive-narrative report, and in the second part in the form of an address: *O pâle Ophélia*. In the third part, the silenced word of Ophelia is translated into the word and saying of the poet: *Et le Poète dit*.

The saying, the word of the poet emerges after a caesura, marked by a dash—it is the fifth dash in this poem. It repeats and condenses the narrative and address of the first two parts. The word of the poet is also a literal, phonetic echo of part I of the poem: the stanza of the third part repeats the rhyme-scheme of the first stanza of part I with an inversion of the position of *lys*:

I,1: *étoiles - lys - voiles - hallalis*

III: *étoiles - cueillis - voiles - lys*

And not only does the tone find its echo, but so do the pause, the cesura, the silence—the dash at the end of I,1: *On entend dans les bois lointains des hallalis*, and at the beginning of III: *Et le Poète dit . . .* And something else can be heard now: for only now with this *dit* of the poet, the acoustic rhyme with *hallalis* and *cueillis* is achieved, whereas *lys* is only a visual rhyme. Only where the "s" of the *lys*, the lily that is the figure of Ophelia, has been silenced, does the rhyme find its completion in the *dit* of the poet.

We are faced with a curious economy of hearing and seeing in this poem. At the moment when something is heard (*On entend*), the acoustic rhyme no longer works, there is only a mute, visual rhyme, a muteness, paradoxically produced by an excess of sound, the pronounced 's' of the *lys*. On the other hand, one begins to hear something where seeing and what is seen—the white Ophelia on the black wave—is not only veiled (*en ses longs voiles*), but is emphatically withdrawn from our gaze by three dots and a dash—as if something might be unveiled here that is too horrible to see. The semantic level is an inversion of the performance of the formal level. The latter silences the tone and creates in its place a visual rhyme; the former interrupts the vision and instead invokes a sound. Later, the poem thematizes this substitution of vision and sound: *Tes grandes visions étranblaient ta parole*, but only in order to also extinguish—after a dash, it is the fourth in the poem—the ability to see: *E l'Infini terrible*

effara ton oeil bleu! And it is here that, after the last rupturing dash, the word of the poet enters the scene once seeing and hearing have been erased.

The word of the poet speaks as an echo. Its (re-)presentation is a translation in the form of an echo. Echo is the effect of a refraction, of an interruption. Rimbaud's poetic word is the echo of a strangled word (*Tes grandes visions étranblaient ta parole*), of a word that was interrupted, even a word that has never been spoken before; it speaks here as echo in the word of the poet. (Re-)presentation as echo of an inaccessible origin has its own history. Hölderlin translates the whole occidental history of the word into a series of echos:

*so kam
Das Wort aus Osten zu uns,
Und an Parnassos Felsen und am Kithäron hör' ich
O Asia, das Echo von dir und es bricht sich
Am Kapitol und jählings herab von den Alpen*

("Am Quell der Donau", vv. 35–39)

("thus came the word to us from the east, and on the rocks of Parnassos and the mountains of Kithairon I hear, o Asia, the echo from you, and it is refracted at the Capitol and suddenly plunging down from the Alps")

Instead of the *translatio imperii* that shaped the political history of Europe until the end of the Holy Roman Empire—and ominously beyond it—Hölderlin invokes a *translatio verbi* as a sequence of translations and refractions of an origin named *Asia*, each culture another refraction, another echo. Hölderlin does not use the German word *Asien*, but its Greek and Latin name, differentiating the name of the origin from any reifying presentification. Ophelia, as her name appears in modern European poetry, is perhaps another translation of Hölderlin's *Asia*, just as, according to Freud, Hamlet is a modern translation of Oedipus. The name *Ophelia* is also the name of an inaccessible origin, like *Asia*, and present only as an echo, as the effect of a refraction. *Ophelia* and *Asia* are two names of the origin, and they are two female names, while *Asia* also contains phonetically and literally the German word *Aas*.

Brecht's poem no longer names an origin. When the poem begins, the girl has not only drowned, but she has lost her name, carried away in the rivers of translations. In contrast to Baudelaire and Rimbaud, nothing points to a composition or a word that might emerge from the decomposition and the silence, except if we take the last word

Aas—carrion/*charogne*—as the title of Baudelaire's poem and its translation, in which case we might say that, at the end of all the forgetting, there remains the poetic act of a remembrance in translation.

If we follow this hypothesis, we first find in Brecht's poem a purely literary circulation, that corresponds to the circulation of the water from the sea to the brooks and rivers and back to the sea: a literary circle from Baudelaire to Rimbaud and through various other texts such as Georg Heym's poem *Ophelia* and Karl Ammer's German translation of Rimbaud's poem to Brecht and back to Baudelaire. In contrast to Baudelaire and Rimbaud, where a certain transcendence is thematized—be it as form, be it as the poetic word—any transcendence or transfiguration seems to be excluded from Brecht's poem, or bracketed in the circular movement of flowing and dissolving. The movement remains strictly within the immanence of a purely natural circulation on the level of the enunciated, and within the immanence of a literary circulation on the level of the enunciation. Where the quintessential name of transcendence, the word *God*, appears in Brecht's poem, the name signifies nothing other than the principle of forgetting and vanishing:

*Als ihr bleicher Leib im Wasser verfaulet war
Geschah es (sehr langsam), daß Gott sie allmählich vergaß*

("When her pale body was decomposed it happened (very slowly) that God gradually forgot her")

However, there is also the word *Himmel*, which could be both sky and heaven, that glims enigmatically as an *Opal* over the corps.

*Als sie ertrunken war und hinunterschwamm
Von den Bächen in die größeren Flüsse
Schien der Opal des Himmels sehr wundersam
Als ob er die Leiche begütigen müsse.*

("When she had drowned and was swimming down from the brooks into the bigger rivers, the opal of the sky shone very marvelously as if it had to appease the corpse")

This *Opal* of Brecht's heaven or sky shines in more than one direction. It is a precious stone with a certain literary history. Already in the famous ring-parable of Lessing's *Nathan* it gives off a curious light:

*Der Stein war ein
Opal, der hundert schöne Farben spielte*

(III,6)

("The stone of the ring was an opal that shimmered in a hundred beautiful colors")

This ring with its precious opal is supposed to warrant the unbroken link to a genuine origin. But the precise origin is not identifiable. The opal, a rather colorless, pale stone, shimmers or, as the German text says "plays" in a hundred beautiful colors. The play it stages is the effect of refraction. It is pure appearance, shine for others. In Brecht's poem, too, it is *Schein*, appearance and shine, and it appears *sehr wundersam*, very marvellous, or, more literally, very miraculous and wonderful. If one takes "miracle" in the strictest sense as something that escapes the immanent order of natural events, this opal might be an interruption of the pure immanent circulation of Brecht's poem.

As it turns out, it is both within the circulation and its interruption. The word *Opal* belongs to the semantic field of Brecht's poem and at the same time it breaks out of it, quoting purely phonetically Rimbaud's poem: *O pâle Ophélia!* And as in a *Vexierbild*, one of these picture puzzles where the lines of the manifest picture contain a hidden other figure, the following words in Brecht's poem also translate the French address to the pale Ophelia: *als ob er die Leiche begütigen müsse*. If one brackets the *er die*, one reads and hears: *ob . . . Leiche*—"o bleiche." Like a strange miraculous star, Brecht's *Opal* shines from elsewhere into this poem and out of it again.

If the anagrammatic translation of the foreign word-body *ô pâle*, that swims as a German *Opal* like a pale corpse in the sky of Brecht's poem, has been compared to a *Vexierbild*, our comparison followed a hint in Kafka's diary where Kafka reflects on his own mimetic behavior:

Safranski, Schüler Bernhards, macht während des Zeichnens und Beobachtens Grimassen, die mit dem Gezeichneten in Verbindung stehn. erinnert mich daran, daß ich für meinen Teil eine starke Verwandlungsfähigkeit habe, die niemand bemerkt. Wie oft mußte ich Max nachmachen. Gestern abend auf dem Nachhauseweg hätte ich mich als Zuschauer mit Tucholski verwechseln können. Das fremde Wesen muß dann in mir so deutlich und unsichtbar sein, wie das Versteckte in einem Vexierbild, in dem man auch niemals etwas finden würde, wenn man nicht wüßte daß es drin steckt. Bei diesen Verwandlungen möchte ich besonders gern an ein Sichtrüben der der eigenen Augen glauben. (30. 9. 1911)⁵

Much could be said about this text and its curious movement from the mimetic observation to the blurring of one's own eyes. But I will concentrate here on a few traits and turn the attention—as much as the eyes might be blurred in my doing so—toward the *Vexierbild* in whose traits the foreign element is drawn, as part of oneself, invisibly and yet distinctly.

What is drawn in the *Vexierbild* is something that is foreign within the manifest coherence of the drawing or the writing. It becomes readable, invisibly distinct, when we see and read it as something that belongs to another context or configuration. In this reading the foreign element becomes readable as something that is idiosyncratically part of oneself, the foreign as that which is most intimately proper, hiding itself in the manifest composition of the picture and the text. It was in such a way that Freud read in the *Vexierbild* of the *nibbio*, the vulture, that Otto Pfister had discovered in Leonardo da Vinci's painting of Mary and Anna as the secret inscription of a private myth of the painter.

Brecht's *Opal* and its anagrammatic translation belong to such an inscription. Brecht's texts are permeated by pale, white bodies, corpses, and figures. This is true not only for the early texts of the young poet, who lived in the *Bleichstraße* in Augsburg, but the echo of the sigh and apostrophe *ô pâle/o bleiche* can still be heard in the later texts. At the same time as the "Ballad of the "Drowned Girl," Brecht also wrote a series "Psalms." The first one of these psalms projects a vision of white, in which the color white, *weiß* in German, gradually emerges from the play of letters. In the first stanza the word *weiß* is embedded, like a *Vexierbild*, in the letters of another word: *Nachts erwache ich schweißgebadet*; in the second stanza it appears as a separate word, but semantically displaced: *Ich weiß es: ich habe zuviel geliebt*; only in the third stanza it emerges in one of Brecht's favorite figures: *Die weißen Leiber*.⁶

Again and again, the white bodies are the pale, dissolving bodies of women and lovers—and above all the one beloved, the mother to whom Brecht's sigh "o bleiche" is emphatically addressed. Already in the 8th psalm, in the "Song of the Mother" the process of forgetting and decomposition that dissolves the corpse of the drowned girl melts together with the figure of the mother: *Ich erinnere mich ihres Gesichtes nicht mehr . . .* ("I no longer remember her face"), only the hand and the hair remain for a short while: *Sie strich müde die schwarzen Haare aus der Stirn, die mager war, die Hand dabei sehe ich noch*.⁷ ("With a tired gesture she pushed her black hair from the forehead

that was skinny, I still see her hand"). At about the same time, in 1920, the figure assumes a political dimension: *Deutschland, du Blondes Bleiches* ("Germany, you blond and pale one"). Mediated through this political allegory, Brecht can now, in 1933, address directly the pale mother: *O Deutschland, bleiche Mutter*. By 1945, the pale mother has turned into a swine: *Die Sau ist meine Mutter / O Mutter mein, o Mutter mein / Was tuest du mir an?* (BF 15,161).

A net of overdetermined interrelations is condensed in this motif. I will have to limit myself to a few traits. White and pale, indicating purity and corpses, uniting mother and beloved, and thus contaminating all purity, are condensed in a kind of primal scene that is evoked in Brecht's poem *Aussagen eines Märtyrers* ("Lamentations of a Martyr"). The scene is an attic where the mother has put up laundry (*Wäsche*, which in German can also mean lingerie) for drying. The poet refers to the dripping of the laundry as "pissing," an expression his mother finds scandalous: *Meine Mutter sagt jeden Tag: es ist ein Jammer / Wenn ein erwachsener Mensch so ist // Und so etwas sagt, wo ein anderer Mensch nicht an so etwas denkt / Bei der Wäsche . . .* ("My mother says every day: it is scandalous when an adult person has come to this and says such things, where another person would never think of such things—with the laundry"). The poet becomes the martyr of the words of his mother and the guilt feelings they induce:

*Aber dann weint sie natürlich und sagt: von der Wäsche!
und ich brächte sie noch unter die Erde
Und der Tag werde noch kommen, wo ich sie werde
mit den Nägeln auskratzen wollen
Aber dann sei es zu spät*

("But then of course she cries and says: to say such a thing of the laundry! And I would end up putting her under the earth, and the day would come when I would want to dig her out with my nails, but then it would be too late")

One must not be duped by the pert ironic tone of these verses: the mother's words stick. When Brecht's mother died in mai 1920, her words returned in the "Song of the Mother": *Jetzt ist meine Mutter gestorben, gestern, auf den Abend, am 1. Mai! Man kann sie mit den Fingernägeln nicht mehr auskratzen!* (BF 11,22) ("Now my mother has died, yesterday, in the evening, on the First of May! One cannot dig her up anymore with one's nails"). How much the mother's word sticks, how obsessively her judgment haunts the texts (almost like the father's judgment in Kafka's story that drives the son to his death by

drowning), one can see in Brecht's early play *Baal*, particularly in the versions of 1919 and 1920. Thus the mother once more repeats her threat and her judgment: *Deine Verstocktheit und Bosheit bringt mich noch untern Boden. Dann wirst du ihn mit deinen Nägeln aufkratzen wollen, wenn du noch welche hast bei deiner Lebensweise.* (BF 1, 36) ("Your obstinacy and your malice will one day put me under the earth. Then you would want to dig it up with your nails, if you still have some left by that time, given your way of life"). Baal, otherwise completely without scruples, is here overtaken by guilt: *Mother! Forgive me!* he begs. A reconciliation takes place, mother and son embrace each other with tears. *O Baal*, the mother cries. *O Baak*: again we hear the echo of the *Opal*, and now Baal himself has for a moment become the pale Ophelia, the drowned, pale corpse.

And there is something else that sticks: Brecht's obsession with *Wäsche* and *Waschen*, with laundry, lingerie, and washing. The more the anti-aristotelian theoretician of the epic theater wants to eliminate catharsis from his theater as a religious ritual remnant, the more *Wäsche* and *Waschen* enter into the praxis of his theater. Among Brecht's favorite exercises for actors and actresses was the practice of ironing laundry and washing face and hands. One might say: the laundry pisses on his theory.

Wäsche also marks a certain borderline between an idiosyncratic, singular, and private scene which is inscribed in the texts as a kind of *Vexierbild* on the one hand, and the political, social, and public side of these texts.

On the basis of an earlier variant in the title which speaks of a *erschlagenen Mädchen* (a girl beaten to death), critics have seen in Brecht's poem of the drowned girl a political song with a reference to Rosa Luxemburg. Both the variant in the title and the time of the writing of this poem make such an interpretation plausible. But the political dimension of the poem sits, so to speak, on another layer, like the dream, according to Freud, sits, at its extreme margin, at its "navel" as Freud calls it, upon the unknown and is taken for a ride by it. The figure of the girl beaten to death appears already in an earlier poem "Tarpeja" of 1917, several years before Rosa Luxemburg's death. It is an inversion of the Judith-motif in the bible: during a siege of Rome by the Sabinians a beautiful woman "with deep dark wild eyes" sneaks out of the city to the leader of the besiegers and offers herself and the betrayal of the city to him. She was "beautiful as sin," the poem says, evoking in her wild dark eroticism another phantasm of modernity: Salome. And like Salome, she is crushed to death at the

end by the shields of the soldiers. Her death is commanded by the general who falls into complete panic in the face of such eroticism and of something he does not dare to see. I quote the last part of this poem:

*Deckt dieses Aas mit euren Schilden zu
Daß ich es nicht mehr sehen muß. Und wagte
Doch nicht sie anzusehn und wartete nur mehr
Bis er die Schilde krachen hörte
Und ihren Schrei und der Soldaten Lachen hörte—
Dann ritt er weg. Den Hügel erzner Schilde
Der die Erschlagne deckte, sah er nicht.
Sie aber hörte die fremden Soldaten nicht mehr
Den Sieg und den Mord und das Sterben begrüßen:
Im frühen Tag lag sie im Schmutz der Gosse
Den goldnen Reif in den zerquetschten Händen
Zum Fraß den Geiern da—das schöne Aas.
Und über sie, ganz blind mit schweren Füßen
Schritt stumm und abgewandt das eherne Gesetz.*

(BF 13,108)

(Cover this carrion with your shields so that I won't have to see it any more. And he did not dare to look at her and only waited until he heard the crashing of the shields, and heard her scream and heard the soldiers laugh—Then he rode away. He did not see the hill of iron shields that covered up the beaten woman. But she did not hear any more the foreign soldiers greeting the victory and the murdering and the dying. In the early morning she lay there in the dirt of the gutter, the golden ring in her squashed hands, thus she lay there, meal for the vultures—the beautiful carrion. And over her, blind, with heavy foot, stepped mute, its face turned away, the iron law.)

Again, as we have already seen in Rimbaud's Ophelia, hearing, emphatically repeated, replaces the horror of seeing. And with hearing and listening, with *hören* and *horchen*, begins *gehörchen*, obeying, the listening to the law, that steps blindly over the corpse, dreaming of the thing in itself. The vultures bring almost too much of overdetermination into the poem, since vultures in Brecht's poetry not only push their beaks into the mouth of the dreaming man as the *nibio* does in Leonardo da Vinci's dream, but they attack the member itself, as we can read in the song of the "Geierbaum," also written in 1917:

*Und die peitschenden Flügel, die auf ihn gezückt
Zerhauen im Sturz ihm den zitternden Leib und zerstückten ihm Knospe und Glied.*

(BF 13,95)

(“And the whipping wings, aimed at him, plunging upon him, hack to pieces his trembling body, and tear to pieces bud and member”)

The private phantasm participates in a cultural phantasm and its language. It does not erase the political significance, but it is good to remember, that the political significance participates in another scene, sits upon it and is taken for a ride by it.

The structure of the *Vexierbild*, as Kafka saw it before and in himself, as it appears in Brecht's texts, a theater played on another scene, resists the common reductions be it, on the one the hand, the reduction of the political to the private and psychological scene, be it the reduction of the secrecy of the private to the political sphere. What the *Vexierbild* demands of us, is a continuous change of perspective, or rather of the mode of our gaze, because the picture we see always contains also the traits of another picture. The manifest picture contains another, invisible picture, foreign to it yet most intimately proper to it. This other picture is not “behind” or “underneath” the manifest picture, but in it, constituted by the very same traits and lines of the manifest picture. The scene of this other picture is not on a meta-level, but on the surface, seen and yet not seen, a blind trait: the blindness in insight, the unsaid in the said, performing the unsaid in saying something else: its allegory. The unsaid in the not-saying of saying, the blindness in seeing become readable only on the surface, as Benjamin once noted: “Readable is only what appears on the flat plane (or surface).”

The other scene cannot be psychologized in an preanalytic sense, where actions and expressions are reduced to individual psychological motives. Freud's other scene, what he called *der andere Schauplatz*, is as distant from psychology as the political economy of Karl Marx and the family structures of Lévi-Strauss. The other scene is the unsaid in, not behind, that which is said; it appears where the coherence of what is said seems disturbed, interrupted, confused. It can be read in stylistic incongruities as for example in the mother-scene of Brecht's *Baal* in the version of 1919. It is the scene where Baal's mother dies. Baal's return into the house of his mother at this point is presented in a tone and diction, that is radically different from the previous and following scenes, it is in the most literal sense a regression and appears as a foreign speech, more the style of Hanns

Johst than that of Brecht: the foreign element as the most proper secret language.

The political dimension of Brecht's poem of the drowned girl is perhaps less the erased allusion to Rosa Luxemburg than certain elements that are translated and transferred from Rimbaud's poem into Brecht's song. The two poems stand in a certain analogous historical and political context with a specific difference: Rimbaud's poem was written shortly before the Parisian Commune, Brecht's poem shortly after the ferocious repression of the Spartacus Revolution. By this before and after, a difference is inscribed in the two poems. Rimbaud's poem evokes in Ophelia less mourning and forgetting than a word that has a powerful resonance in the French language since the French Revolution: *liberté*. The word is invoked twice. It is the word whose call Ophelia follows:

*C'est que les vents tombant des grands monts de Norvège
T'avaient parlé tout bas de l'âpre liberté*

(II,3-4)

The second time the word appears in the company of two other "big" words, the poem now calls out to the capitalized *Liberté*.

Ciel! Amour! Liberté!

(II,13)

Brecht's poem no longer speaks of *liberté*; it seems that every political trace has been erased. Yet one word of the sublime trinity invoked in Rimbaud's poem is also a key word in Brecht's poem, as we have seen: *Ciel* translated into the *Opal des Himmels*. In the echo of this translation we might also hear the silent resonance of the two other words, *Amour* and *Liberté*: they are the unsaid in Brecht's poem, but, as we have seen, what is not said might be as powerful, and perhaps more, than what is said.

Freud read *Hamlet* as a secular progress in repression. At the end of that play, the stage is covered with corpses. Only the corpse of Ophelia which has already been buried is lacking. Underground she swims away in order to reemerge in the rivers of a later time. Her corpse has become a stage of a dialectics of remembering and forgetting. Remembrance of the call of freedom in Rimbaud's poem, heavenly forgetting in Brecht, whose poem inverts the Platonic anamnesis, spells it backwards, so to speak, in order to make remembrance possible again. For nothing burns itself so indelibly

into memory than what has been said and remarked in the moment of vanishing and irrecoverable loss.

There are other texts that become visible and perhaps readable in a new way in the pale light that shimmers over Ophelia's vanishing body and the opal of Brecht's sky. Rimbaud's sober liberty, the *apre liberté*, that spoke to Ophelia and through her to the Parisian Commune, calls again in Benjamin's essay on surrealism. Since Bakunin, Benjamin writes, there had not been any radical concept of freedom in Europe.⁸ Radical freedom had been covered up by a moralistic-humanistic ideal of freedom. But Benjamin also invokes the other side of this radical freedom in the experience of revolutionary discipline and the dictatorial violence of the revolution. What is the relation between them? Brecht's productions of the late twenties and early thirties insistently address this question, above all in his experiments with the exercise plays, the *Lehrstücke*. Yet, ultimately he has no answer, no more than Benjamin, no more than Heiner Müller after them.

Not the answer, but the question is posed in the *Vexierbild* of the drowned girl, in which, according to one's gaze, different images appear: the beaten, dead body of the revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg, the phantom of the dead, pale mother together with the ghostly phantasms of the European male imagination. Neither can the political layer be erased by a psychologizing reduction, nor can the phantoms and phantasms be denegated in favor of political relevance. The texts are to be read as the constellation of these layers. Yet it would be a simplistic misunderstanding to dissolve these heterogeneous images, that are inscribed in the lines of the same image, as a homogeneous continuity or even more reductively in a causal relationship. None of these layers is reducible to the other, no more so than the levels of meaning in the tradition of allegorical readings. The heterogeneous images of the *Vexierbild* have perhaps more in common with those allegorical traditions—but with a difference. The allegorical layers are hierachical. The "layers" of the *Vexierbild* are strictly speaking not layers at all, they appear on the surface, juxtaposed in the same way in which Blanchot juxtaposes the three modes of discourse or voices in Marx (and on which Derrida has commented in his *Spectres de Marx*):

Chez Marx; et toujours venues de Marx, nous voyons prendre force et forme trois sortes de paroles, lesquelles sont toutes trois nécessaires, mais séparées et plus qu'opposées: comme juxtaposées. Le disparate qui les maintient ensemble, désigne

*une pluralité d'exigences à laquelle, depuis Marx, chacun, parlant, écrivant, ne manque pas de sentir soumis, sauf s'éprouvant manquant à tout.*⁹

In Marx, then, and since Marx, there would not only be a revolutionary mode of action, but also of speaking, writing, and reading. But all of this is still to be learned and practiced. For neither before Marx, nor since Marx has there been a real revolution, only catastrophic repetitions in 1789 as well as in 1917. The revolution is still before us, still to be accomplished, even if its phantom might be readable here and there as a *Vexierbild*. Or more precisely: the phantom of Ophelia no longer as phantom and phantasm of the past, no longer a *revenant*, but the promise of something to come, something unheard of and unseen, a sketch, slowly to come . . .

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NOTES

- 1 Bertolt Brecht, *Große kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe*, Bd.11: *Gedichte 1* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1988), 109.
- 2 Baudelaire, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard [Bibliothèque de la Pléiade], 1961), 30.
- 3 *Du erinnerst sicher . . . aus den Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids, die Stelle, die von Baudelaire handelt und von seinem Gedichte: "Das Aas". Ich mußte daran denken, daß ohne dieses Gedicht die ganze Entwicklung zum sachlichen Sagen, die wir jetzt in Cézanne zu erkennen glauben, nicht hätte anheben können; erst mußte es da sein in seiner Unerbittlichkeit. Erst mußte das künstlerische Anschauen sich so weit überwunden haben, auch im Schrecklichen und scheinbar nur Widerwärtigen das Seiende zu sehen, das, mit allem anderen Seienden, gilt.* (Rilke, *Briefe*. Hrsg. vom Rilke Archiv. [Frankfurt a.M.: Insel Verlag, 1987], I, 195.)
- 4 Brecht's poem was published in 1922 in the *Weltbühne*; the concept *Neue Sachlichkeit* was coined by the art historian Georg Friedrich Hartlaub, and it soon became a catchword of the Twenties in Germany. (See Anton Kaes ed., *Weimarer Republik. Manifeste und Dokumente zur deutschen Literatur 1918–1933* [Stuttgart: Metzler, 1983], XXXIII.)
- 5 Franz Kafka, *Tagebücher*. Hrsg. v. Hans-Gerd Koch, Michael Müller und Malcolm Pasley (Frankfurt a.M.: S. Fischer, 1990), 46f.
- 6 See also the motif of *Kalk* (lime) in the fifth stanza (*Meine Geliebten bringen ein bißchen Kalk mit* (BF 11,17) and its association with the female genital: *Siehst du ihre blassen Fotzen / Kalkig leer wie Spittelmauern / Kannst du statt dem Singen kotzen / Weil die Tröpfe dich noch dauern* [1917] (BF 13,99).
- 7 See on this melting together of the mother and the drowned girl: Hans-Thies Lehmann, "Text und Erfahrung (*Vom ertrunkenen Mädchen*)", in Hans-Thies Lehmann / Helmut Lethen (Hrsg.), *Bertolt Brechts "Hauspostille". Text und kollektives Lesen* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1978), 137f.
- 8 Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1991), II, 306.
- 9 Maurice Blanchot, "Les trois paroles de Marx," in *L'Amitié* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 115.