

UCLA

New German Review: A Journal of Germanic Studies

Title

“Die Ewigkeit als Dauererektion”: Synchronic and Diachronic Abjection in Heiner Müller’s *Quartett*

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5jh6n6n4>

Journal

New German Review: A Journal of Germanic Studies, 26(1)

Author

LaFountain, Pascale

Publication Date

2014

Copyright Information

Copyright 2014 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

“Die Ewigkeit als Dauerreaktion”:

Synchronic and Diachronic Abjection in Heiner Müller’s *Quartett*

Pascale LaFountain

The paltry amount of criticism addressing the aesthetics of Heiner Müller’s *Quartett* has, for the most part, been limited to reviews of specific performances published during the 1980s in *Theater heute*.¹ Scholarly articles pay little attention to the role of taboo language and images presented in the text, specifically those of blood, bestiality, and the decomposing body. The GDR Germanist Hans Christoph Stillmark remarks in his ideologically influenced interpretation, “Die Bereiche der Sexualität und des Todes sind dabei bewußt gewählt, rühren sie doch an Problemzonen, die auch heute noch tabuisiert sind. In der öffentlichen Kommunikation lösen sie zumeist Befremden und Beklemmung aus.”² Astonishingly, Stillmark excludes analysis of the most shocking and significant element of the drama: the relationship between abjection and the work’s political and historical implications. In light of previous reluctance to deal with Müller’s abject language and imagery, which is indeed “bewußt gewählt,” a close analysis of the pervasive abjection of the text’s language is clearly needed to better understand *Quartett*.³

Julia Kristeva’s 1982 book *Powers of Horror*, published in the same year as the first performance of *Quartett*, outlines cultural and psychological reasons for the abjection of grotesque elements of existence: death, excrement, blood, etc.⁴ Kristeva, a trained psychoanalyst and the preeminent feminist in America at the time, ties abjection to language and the development of subjectivity. According to Kristeva’s theory, the subject must push away these elements in order to gain coherence of identity. For Kristeva and other poststructuralists, Western society is based on symbolic systems that include the logic of language, mimesis, history, ideology, and philosophy.⁵ Kristeva contrasts this system with semiotics, which exists in figurations and images. The pre-spatial and pre-temporal (non)place of the *chora* is the source of the semiotic. Though the semiotic system would easily be expressed as rhythm, music, or as some other form irreducible to verbal language, socio-historical constraints subdue and structure the *chora* (*Révolution* 29f.). Abjection then, as Judith Butler describes it, “designates a degraded or outcast status within the terms of sociality,”⁶ being thus akin to repressed sexuality, but also, as Müller shows, to repression in history and memory. This repression of the semiotic X is liberated in the *presentation* of abjection. The abject is the other, unable to be recognized as subject because of its widespread repression. Revealing the abject marks a crossing of borders, the release of ambiguity, contact with the unreasoning animal, and above all the denial of the laws of propriety that shape society (*Powers* 7, 9, 12, 15). The main shock in reading *Quartett* is the extent to which its aesthetic and meaning rely on the presentation of the abject, bringing into language the

physicality of the bloody, aging, and copulating body in order to awaken a consciousness for historical memory and mortality.

While Kristeva's outline of abjection is essential to understanding subjective identity in *Quartett*, Müller's specific employment of abjection is related as much to consciousness of historical temporality as to a relationship between the "I" and the other. To differentiate between Kristeva's general psychoanalytic formulations and Müller's concentration on historical elements, I suggest pulling apart the synchronic and diachronic forms of abjection. Synchrony in this sense, as derived from linguistic notions, refers to concepts and experiences as they are in the present moment without pertaining to evolution or development over time. An object, word, or symbol can be analyzed either synchronically, in relation to its surrounding objects, or diachronically, in relation to changes that take place over the course of an utterance or other event in the temporal sphere. Kristeva's concept of abjection is based largely on synchronic observations pertaining little to historical development on a personal or social level. While it builds on psychoanalytical functions and processes, Kristeva's abjection is largely static and an abject object is, in her theorization, either already cast off and pushed away, or in a constant state of being pushed away. The abject is thus defined for Kristeva as largely synchronic, by its relation to its surroundings, rather than diachronic, with relation to a subject's memory, current development, or future. While it is not possible to completely separate synchronic and diachronic forms of abjection, an attempt to do so highlights *Quartett's* political relevance. This is done without downplaying the importance of the drama's gender conflicts. The subject of Müller's drama is challenged to recognize abjection and to continue to exist as subject, as well as to recognize its historical past and future while continuing to exist in the present.

For the first step, I highlight the *synchronic* significance of abjection in *Quartett*, that is, the aesthetic figurations that threaten the constitution of the subject with little reference to temporality. These include the interchangeability of the subject with other subjects, as well as the subject's similarity to the animal and to the oppressed female non-subject. A second step focuses on the diachronic elements of abjection in *Quartett*, those that represent a relation to memory and history. Here, the abject is not the subject's 'other', but the past and future 'others' of the present. The privileged images of diachronic abjection are those of excrement, the aging body, and corpses, all related to decay, waste, and mortality. In the drama, Merteuil and Valmont are exposed to the diachronic abject, though neither of them survive this exposure. *Quartett*, along with Müller's previous drama *Der Auftrag*, posits an approach to history that responds to Walter Benjamin's *Engel der Geschichte*, but goes beyond Benjamin both in its more positive affirmation of the present and future, and in its particular gendering of this liminal role as female. The drama suggests that without the painful exposure to the past and future, however, there is only stagnation. It becomes clear that this exposure is necessary in theater, in thought about the subject, and in history. Unlike theater reviews that

concentrate largely on the aesthetic aspects of isolated performances,⁷ and unlike critical analyses which outline the drama's intertextuality to point out how Müller diverges from Laclos' social commentary in *Les liaisons dangereuses*,⁸ the present article ties together the aesthetic level of Müller's text with the drama's philosophy of history.

I. Synchronic Abjection and the Challenge to the Subject

Quartett begins with Merteuil's long monologue addressed to Valmont, during which she represents her complex relationship to this long-time acquaintance. The Marquise swears the end of her love for Valmont, but cannot help engaging in what is a possibly masturbatory imaginary sexual encounter with him: "Ja Ja Ja Ja. Das war gut gespielt, wie" (46). When Valmont does appear, the first and only lengthy conversation in which Valmont and Merteuil play themselves ensues. Toward the end of the conversation, Merteuil insults the pointlessness of Valmont's libertine lifestyle, accusing:

Was sonst haben Sie gelernt als Ihren Schwanz in ein Loch zu manövrieren, dem gleich, aus dem Sie gefallen sind, mit dem immer gleichen mehr oder weniger kurzweiligen Resultat, und immer in dem Wahn, der Beifall der fremden Schleimhäute gilt Ihrer einzigen Person, die Schreie der Lust gehn an Ihre Adresse, während Sie doch nur ein taubes Vehikel sind, gleichgültig und ganz auswechselbar, für die Lust der Frau, die Sie gebraucht, den machtblöden Narren ihrer Schöpfung. (51)

Merteuil highlights the delusion at the core of libertine lifestyle. Attacking the myth that there is any meaning in the sexual act or in the uniqueness of the body that performs it. Merteuil furthermore argues that sexual acts are only performances of the exchangeable body. The essence of the argument is the basis idea of the theory of the abject, which exposes the subject to his or her own human unoriginality. This weight of meaninglessness brings the individual to the edge of the abyss from which Valmont — and Merteuil as she plays Valmont — try to save themselves by indulging in sexual pleasure.

In its most general sense, abjection is the representation of that which goes against logical rules and social conventions. While the subject needs to differentiate itself from the other in order to define itself, such boundaries of difference are radically discarded in *Quartett*; the bestial nature is included into human character and the gender division between Merteuil and Valmont is repeatedly crossed during the several *mise-en-abîme* performances within the drama. In his Marxist reading of the drama, Hans Christoph Stillmark reads this portrayal of animal nature as a metaphor for the bestializing influence of capitalism on human relations, but such a reading ignores the connection between this mixing and other boundary crossings in the drama.⁹ In the conversation that follows her first monologue, Merteuil insults Tourvel as a *Kuh* and vengefully requests that Valmont sleep with Merteuil's

virgin cousin, Volanges, so as to cuckold Volanges' husband, putting the classical animal symbol of the stag's antlers on Gercourt, the *Tier*. She warns that the president has bitten into the *Fleisch* that is Tourvel, and commands Valmont to go to Volanges: "Sei ein guter Hund, Valmont, und nehmen Sie die Spur auf, so lange sie noch frisch ist" (48). Playing both on Merteuil's word choice and the primitive nature of the conversation, Valmont suddenly pronounces, "Mich langweilt die Bestialität unsrer Konversation. Jedes Wort reißt eine Wunde, jedes Lächeln entblößt einen Fangzahn. Wir sollten unsern Part von Tigern spielen lassen. [...] Die Schauspielkunst der Bestien" (51). While the bestial nature of the two characters' interaction is exposed, the immediate solution is neither to give in to civilizing forces and marry each other, as the Marquise has suggested (48), nor to destroy each other (yet), but rather to begin an experimental role-play with others' characters, a sort of mimicry that continues to expose the mixing of boundaries in their subjects.

Though Valmont wants to end the conversation, the Marquise finishes with a narrative of a trip to an Urahn, where something "zwischen Mensch und Vieh" (51f.) disgusts her to the point of driving the sweat from her pores, but also has erotic appeal:

Aber manchmal träume ich, daß es aus meinen Spiegeln tritt auf seinen Füßen aus Stallmist und ganz ohne Gesichter, aber seine Hände sehe ich genau, Klauen und Hufe, wenn es mir die Seide von den Schenkeln reißt und wirft sich auf mich wie Erdschollen auf den Sarg, und vielleicht ist seine Gewalt der Schlüssel, der mein Herz aufschließt." (52)

This abject mixing of animal and human repulses her as a reflective being, but she is not able to reject it completely, and even fantasizes violent sex with the being. While this abject crossing of animal-human boundaries undermines the 'othering' required for human subjectivity, a similar mixing is carried out on the gender level.

Valmont initiates the change in conversation, but Merteuil first speaks alone as Valmont on stage. This is the first of many convoluted role changes. A brief summary of the changes: in this second segment, Merteuil takes on Tourvel's role, while in the third, both protagonists briefly play themselves again. In the fourth segment, Valmont plays himself in an encounter with the virgin Volanges, played by Merteuil. Next, Valmont and Merteuil again leave their play roles to express their masochistic desires for one another. In the sixth segment, Merteuil reminds Valmont that it is time to let Tourvel die for her adulterous sin of sleeping with Valmont, while Merteuil takes on the masculine role and serves Valmont a glass of poisoned wine, causing both the end of the perverse sadomasochistic role-play and, in a unification of performance and reality, Valmont's real death.

Writing about crossing boundaries and changing shapes, Kristeva notes: "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The

in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (*Powers* 4). The abject exchanging of identity, particularly in the twist toward reality it takes at the end of the drama, violates the divisions between genders and calls into question individual subjectivity. While some scholars and critics have read Merteuil and Valmont’s role-play as a power reversal within the battle of the sexes and thus a liberation of the woman, such readings ignore that the constellation of identities is much more complex than a reversal, for each of the characters plays several different roles, and though Merteuil plays Valmont, he never plays the cancer-infected lonely woman, but only the younger virgin object of his seduction.¹⁰ Moreover, as Jan Berg reminds us, there are not just four roles being played by the two characters, but even six, since Valmont also plays a different version of himself in the first role-play encounter with Merteuil as Tourvel, and Merteuil plays a different version of Valmont in his seduction of Tourvel than in the final death scene.¹¹ While this does not go so far as to make identification of voices impossible to read, as one might observe in works by René Pollesch, it certainly does reflect a deliberate gender ambiguity and a violation of the identity boundaries that normally regulate society.¹² Alexandra von Hirschfeld has convincingly linked the gender switching to other social implications: “Was hier stattzufinden scheint, ist die Verschmelzung der Rollen von Mann und Frau, Sieger und Verlierer, Schlächter und Opfer.”¹³ Müller uses the abject crossing of boundaries to represent the destruction of hierarchical oppressor oppositions that play out in society.

Thus, the role-play is a partial undermining of boundaries, but an incomplete one, because Valmont still retains more power even as he becomes the oppressed Tourvel. Valmont’s role-play is even more of an expression of his power, for he derives pleasure from the fantasy (“Ich glaube, ich könnte mich daran gewöhnen, eine Frau zu sein, Marquise.” — 59), while Merteuil is still aware of her reality and bitterly responds, “Ich wünschte, ich könnte es” (59). As Alexandra von Hirschfeld points out, “Das gerade macht ihn als Patriarch kenntlich, der so souverän ist, daß er auch noch den Knecht spielen kann” (105). Moreover, even when Merteuil ‘wins’ the battle after Valmont’s death, this is a Pyrrhic victory after which she is left with only a cancer representing the impossibility of childbearing or a viable future, as she sees it. Thus, while the experimentation with boundaries certainly makes evident the divisions that define masculine-feminine relations, *Quartett* does not completely succeed at overcoming these hierarchies.

II. Diachronic Abjection and the Threat to the Subject in History

By using the abject to reveal the boundaries that artificially mark differences between male and female, human and animal, Müller explores the sources and requirements for subjectivity. *Quartett* also reveals a similar phenomenon in reference to history and memory, suggesting that diachronic abjection is at least as important to the individual as the sexual, moral, and religious abjections

highlighted by Kristeva (*Powers* 20). In *Quartett*, sexual and religious abjection appear as the key to historical abjection.

Quartett makes a particular statement on historical reflection, beginning with the location of its setting in a dual *Zeitraum*: “Salon vor der Französischen Revolution / Bunker nach dem dritten Weltkrieg” (45). Müller refused to provide a practical explanation as to how this should be performed, and when asked about why he chose the aftermath of a third world war, he replied enigmatically, “Nach dem zweiten wäre ja langweilig. Das kann sich jeder vorstellen.”¹⁴ On another occasion, he called this a kind of “Geschichtsoptimismus,” in that it expressed his hope that there would indeed *be* a third world war, adding his hope for even a fourth (*Gesammelte Irrtümer* 107)! While it is difficult to draw a clear intention from either of these ironic comments, one can indeed observe a result of this in the collision of past and future in the present of theatrical performance.¹⁵ This particular relevance of the *Zeitraum* as double location has been overlooked in previous criticism. Jan Berg concentrates on the second element, “[D]ie Zeit nach dem dritten Weltkrieg steht für die noch unausdenkbare Zukunft” (Berg 212), and Eva Brenner calls this a “sci-fi environment” (Brenner 162), but both of these interpretations take the emphasis away from the intentional *simultaneity* of past, present, and future in the setting, which perform the main problematic of the drama.

Julia Kristeva only briefly considers the way that the abject relates to conceptions of time, commenting, “The time of abjection is double: a time of oblivion and thunder, of veiled infinity and the moment when revelation bursts forth” (*Powers* 9). This suggests the extremes of what, in *Quartett*, are the almost forgotten past and the eternal abyss into which the characters are about to fall. Merteuil and Valmont, however, attempt to reject these poles and strain to define themselves as individuals only in the present. In the first monologue, Merteuil describes her past romance with Valmont as a series of moments of happiness, reminding herself, “Minuten, vielleicht sollte ich sagen Augenblicke, eine Minute, das ist eine Ewigkeit” (45). In a life where only pleasure counts, Valmont and Merteuil try to convince themselves that only the single moment can take one away from the abyss of disappearance or annihilation. Valmont moves so quickly from one lover to the next that the Marquise has to ask about the “Glückliche des Augenblicks” (47), and Valmont, both when he is played by himself and by Merteuil, seeks momentary happiness in Tourvel and Volanges. Merteuil, in the role of Valmont, recalls the “Abgrund” (52) that Valmont was before encountering Tourvel, and the seducer believes only in the salvation of the sexual act. The abyss, or the “Nichts,” can be warded off by sex and violence: “täglich verlangt es sein Opfer” (56). The need for presentness even becomes pathological in the desire for sadomasochism: “der tägliche Dolchstoß der Begierde” (55). Merteuil asks, “Was ist das Leben ohne den täglichen Tod?” (61). In the seduction of Tourvel, Merteuil/Valmont desires the physical souvenirs of scratching and biting that seem to be the only way of making him remember a lover: “Jeder Schlag wird eine Liebkosung sein, jeder Riß von Ihren Nägeln ein

Geschenk des Himmels, jeder Biß ein Denkmal" (55). Furthermore, the characters go so far as to desire murder and Valmont expresses the sincere hope that Merteuil's husband is at war so as to keep him amused (50).

The past encroaches on this presentness, however, threatening it with abject images of death and virginal blood. At the beginning of the drama, Merteuil fantasizes about her past affair with Valmont, envisioning them rubbing their animal-like "Felle aneinander" (46). Beyond this vulgar image, memory itself is related to sickness, crippled both in that it can no longer recall the past and in that the memories themselves cause pain and disgust: "Unser Gedächtnis braucht die Krücken: man erinnert sich nicht einmal an die verschiedene Krümmung der Schwänze, von den Gesichtern zu schweigen: ein Dunst" (47). The past is represented as the grotesque physical formation and deformation of the male body, which Merteuil reluctantly senses she should remember.

The museum of lovers performs a potent image of this memory based on momentary abject sexual encounters. As memory, even of the strangest anomalies, begins to fail, the museum freak show attempts to recall the bodies of the past: "Eine ergiebige Vorstellung: das Museum unsrer Lieben. Wie hätten volle Häuser, wie, Valmont, mit den Bildsäulen unsrer verwesten Begierden. Die toten Träume, nach dem Alphabet geordnet oder aufgereiht in Chronologie, frei von den Zufällen des Fleisches, den Schrecken der Verwandlung nicht mehr ausgesetzt" (47). While both Merteuil and Valmont move quickly from one lover to the next in order to remain in the moment, Merteuil plans to collect and archive these lovers. Still, even the memory of the lovers is one in which they have become abject corpses, which Merteuil can only take sadistic pleasure in seeing before her. Alone and perhaps even anticipating Valmont's semi-murderous death, she is more aware of the value in remembering the past, but can only show this in images of decomposition and abjection.

Missed moments are represented by Merteuil playing Valmont as well. This past is represented not by Merteuil/Valmont's own memory, but by that image which she/he imagines from Tourvel's past. As Merteuil plays Valmont in his encounter with Tourvel, she/he laments:

Blut. Das grausame Los, nicht der Erste zu sein. Machen Sie mich nicht daran denken. Und wenn Sie Ihre Adern öffneten für mich, all Ihr Blut könnte die Hochzeit nicht aufwiegen, die ein anderer mir vorwegnahm und für ewig. Der unwiederbringliche Augenblick. Die tödliche Einmaligkeit des Lidschlags. Undsoweiter. Machen Sie mich nicht daran denken. (53)

While we can here no longer say whether this is Valmont's thought coming from Merteuil or her projection onto his character, the focus is on the bloody image of a past that can no longer be regained. Like the penises that the Marquise cannot remember and like the dilapidating lovers' bodies that cannot successfully be

collected, the physicality of the virginal blood is represented as violent and as more reminiscent of murder than lost virginity. Even the fantasized past is abject.

Robert Wilson's direction of the drama in the original performance draws this emphasis on memory and mortality to the fore. Wilson "erfindet drei echoartige stumme Figuren dazu, die aus dem Erinnerungsleben der beiden Protagonisten auftauchen und wieder verschwinden — sozusagen die ratlose Jugend wortwörtlich verkörpernd [...]" (Christoph Müller 22). These three new characters represent Volanges, a "Jugendebengebilde Valmonts" and the "gehörnter Gatte der Marquise" (Müller 22), and thus highlight the past, while not giving it voice or forcing the protagonists to interact with it explicitly.

While these images connoting memory show both protagonists attempting to reject and remember the corporeality of their past, the image of waste and excrement enacts the extreme of complete rejection. Excreted waste marks that which one rejects completely in order to move on. Valmont draws out the significance of the image in his first monologue: "Ich hasse Vergangenheiten. Der Wechsel akkumuliert sie [...] Und stellen Sie sich vor, wir müssten wohnen mit dem Abfall unsrer Jahre. Pyramiden von Dreck, bis das Zielband reißt. Oder in den Ausscheidungen unsrer Körper. Nur der Tod ist ewig" (50). The most horrific torture is represented as living in one's physical waste and excrement, having to acknowledge the past and to interact with that which one has abjected and expelled in Kristeva's sense in order to move on into the present.

This focus on diachronic abjection explains *Quartett's* obsession with the aging and decomposing body.¹⁶ Valmont reminds Merteuil of her aging body by telling her to look in the mirror: "Denken sie manchmal an den Tod, Marquise. Was sagt Ihr Spiegel" (50). Furthermore, Valmont and Merteuil repeatedly highlight each other's aging (e.g. 47, 48, and when they play Valmont, both use the threatening topic of aging to lure Tourvel and Volanges into what they portray as immortalizing sex). Merteuil's last remark in an early dialogue, that Valmont can see her niece "morgen Abend in der Oper" (52) indicates that the seductions and murder scenes are fantasies of the future. The violent nature of these seductions, in particular the interrupted attempt at murdering Volanges, indicates the disgusting representation of the future as well as the past. Following the seductions, these final attempts at living purely in the present, Valmont finally gives himself over to Merteuil and death. Merteuil later hands Valmont the poisoned wine, but in the time between drinking and to death, Valmont/Tourvel describes his/her own future decomposition with particular fantasy, giving details on how the body will dance, "schaukelnd am Strick," the face will become a "blaue Maske" (64) with the tongue hanging out after the gas explodes the lungs, and even the dead body will masturbate with worms (64f.). Such extended references to future decomposition reflect a clear revulsion against thinking of any other time but the present.

Kristeva's theory of the abject does include analyses of the decomposing abject and of physical waste, but it refers only to the way in which these are pushed away

for the subjective recognition of the individual, not to ways in which the individual rejects the waste of the past temporality specifically in order to exist in the present. Kristeva comes closest to this when she discusses the juxtaposition of Auschwitz images and children's shoes:

In the dark halls of the museum that is now what remains of Auschwitz, I see a heap of children's shoes, of something like that, something I have already seen elsewhere, under a Christmas tree, for instance, dolls I believe. The abjection of Nazi crime reaches its apex when death, which, in any case, kills me, interferes with what, in my living universe, is supposed to save me from death: childhood, silence, among other things. (*Powers* 4)

Here, Kristeva interprets her disgust, and the intensification of disgust at Nazi crime that she feels in light of this juxtaposition, as an inappropriate pairing of physical destruction and childhood. It seems that the repulsion might, however, also be felt because the juxtaposition brings the most abject of all historical crimes and memories so concretely into the present. Kristeva's "living universe" is thus not only the universe of those who are alive, but also the world of those who have pushed away memories of the abject past, specifically the haunting memory of National Socialism, in order to live. If one reads Kristeva's experience in this way, its relation to Müller's East German context becomes more explicit, suggesting the importance of diachronic abjection to the contemporary individual, where the challenge of recognizing, working through, and always remembering both Nazi crime and GDR oppression are paramount to existence.

In *Quartett*, religion plays into this constellation as much as libertine lifestyle does, since both of the imaginary objects of Valmont's sexual desire, that is, both of the women that Valmont and Merteuil themselves represent in the orgiastic game, use religious grounds to reject his advances at first. Moreover, the seduction scenes are in fact largely arguments about temporality and mortality. This is more than the simple corporeal seductions one might expect of libertines, were they not protagonists of a Müller drama. Merteuil/Valmont convinces Valmont/Tourvel to sleep with 'him' with the two-pronged argument that her body is wasting away here on earth and that she will, by sleeping with him, save Volanges' soul and thus her own: "Die Rettung Ihrer unsterblichen Seele ist, was mir am Herzen liegt, Madame, bei jedem Anschlag auf Ihren leider verweslichen Körper" (54, also 57). Valmont/Volanges' capitulation is a response to Merteuil/Valmont's maxim, "KURZ IST DER SCHMERZ UND EWIG IST DIE FREUDE" (61), as well as to his gruesome description of her aging mouth, breasts, and womanly *Schoß*. Both of these women fall for Valmont in part based on their Christian beliefs in their souls' immortality. Religion is represented not only as the logical system against whose laws Merteuil and Valmont need to compete, but as a system whose greatest flaw consists in misleading people into believing in the future of their soul more than in the present or the past. In typical Müllerian fashion, *Quartett* shows no character

who finds balance between recognition of the past and present corporeality, and a larger picture of history; rather, the flaws of Merteuil, Valmont, and Volanges as played by Merteuil and Valmont present themselves only as negative examples without tenable synthesis.

III. The Angel's Abyss: Memory, Gender, and Abjection

Müller's previous drama, *Der Auftrag*, first performed only one year before *Quartett*, presents a similar challenge of recognizing past obligations while living in the present. Most significant to this philosophy of history are the complementary images of the *Engel der Verzweiflung* and the final scene of *Der Auftrag*.¹⁷ *Der Auftrag* opens with a sailor's search for a former French revolutionary. Antoine, now a bourgeois living in France during Napoleon's reign, receives a letter from his former revolutionary partner, Galloudec, but he repeatedly denies knowing anyone by that name (14) or even recalling an *Auftrag* that he was asked to complete during the revolution. After finally admitting his acquaintance, the retired activist dreams that the angel of doubt visits him and explains herself in conundrums and paradoxes:

Ich bin der Engel der Verzweiflung. Mit meinen Händen teile ich den Rausch aus, die Betäubung, das Vergessen, Lust und Qual der Leiber. Meine Rede ist das Schweigen, mein Gesang der Schrei. Im Schatten meiner Flügel wohnt der Schrecken. Meine Hoffnung ist der letzte Atem. Meine Hoffnung ist die erste Schlacht. Ich bin das Messer mit dem der Tote seinen Sarg aufsprengt. Ich bin der sein wird. Mein Flug ist der Aufstand, mein Himmel der Abgrund von morgen. (16f.)

A more problematic image than its obvious model in Benjamin's *Engel der Geschichte*, this angel enables forward movement in part by acknowledging the present. Benjamin's angel is torn away from the 'single catastrophe' that is the past, and the 'violence' of the storm of progress can only rip it away, but for Müller, both the present screams and the future *Abgrund* are always already part of the angel, which embraces the present and future more actively than the *Angelus novus*.¹⁸ The necessity of progress that for the *Engel der Geschichte* consists of a violent but vital break, is an integral part of the process of survival in historical memory for the *Engel der Verzweiflung*.

While the *Engel der Verzweiflung* is the psychological tool that brings Antoine out of his denial and back into recognition of his responsibility to the revolutionary *Auftrag*, the angel that appears at the drama's conclusion does the opposite. Debuisson, whom Arlene Teraoka suggests is even the same person as Antoine at the beginning of the drama, and who certainly shares the same intellectual rejection of the revolution, needs a psychological explanation for entering into the denial that bourgeois life requires.¹⁹ The abject feminine image of *Verrat* overtakes him as he hallucinates into his death:

Vielleicht hatte der Tanz schon aufgehört und es war nur noch sein Herz, das dröhnte, während der Verrat, die Arme vielleicht über den Brüsten verschränkt oder die Hände an den Hüften oder schon in den Schoß gekrallt, mit vor Begierde vielleicht schon zuckender Scham aus schwimmenden Augen ihn, Debuissou, ansah, der jetzt die Augen mit den Fäusten in die Höhlen drückte aus Angst vor seinem Hunger nach der Schande des Glücks [...] Der Verrat zeigte lächelnd seine Brüste, spreizte schweigend die Schenkel, seine Schönheit traf Debuissou wie ein Beil. (41)

As *Verrat* takes over, Debuissou forgets his revolutionary actions, from the “Sturm der Bastille” to “das zerbrochene Kinn Robespierres,” and after his memories are erased, the female personification of betrayal throws herself upon him “wie ein Himmel, das Glück der Schamlippen ein Morgenrot” (42). Betrayal seduces Debuissou and does the opposite of the *Engel der Verzweiflung*, bringing him into the denial from which Antoine exits at the beginning of the drama in order for the problematization of *Verrat* to take place.

Debuissou in *Der Auftrag* and the characters in *Quartett* share a core trait in that they must all find ways to deny memory in order to live in the present. Debuissou's fate is similar to that of Valmont, for at the end of *Der Auftrag*, Debuissou disappears as a subject, and the final encounter with the angel of betrayal is told in the third person, no longer by the revolutionary himself. Valmont's suicide/murder is similar, resulting from his confusion and from a destructive sense of guilt for his betrayal against the two young women he has just seen himself ruin in the role-play with Merteuil. This is the mechanism of the diachronic abject: memory causes thoughts of *Verrat*, and is therefore distasteful, shameful. The solution is to purge memory and guilt through forgetting, but the paradoxical destruction of the individual that also takes place shows that this is not a solution either. For the complex action of Benjamin's *Engel der Geschichte* to take place, Müller's two angels, seductive *Verrat* against the past and the painful *Engel der Verzweiflung*, must stand in constant tension as well. Thus, the *Engel der Verzweiflung* is not an alternative to the *Engel der Geschichte*, but a focus on one of the two mechanisms *within* this continued coming to terms with history.

It is no surprise that *Verrat* is portrayed in feminine abjection in *Der Auftrag*, as it represents the general revolt of that which has been repressed. Indeed, the explicitly feminine form of the abject in both *Der Auftrag* and *Quartett* is particularly striking. Merteuil's aging body, the decomposition of the female body, and the bloody loss of Tourvel's virginity are all part of the feminine abject, as are the references to the bestial taking of the woman's body on several occasions and the final suicide image (the reader realizes only later that the death refers also to that of Valmont). Kristeva's description of her use of the word 'feminine' can clarify Müller's use of feminine images to represent *Verrat* and abjection in these works. Kristeva notes, “What we designate as ‘feminine,’ far from being a primeval essence, will be seen as an ‘other’ without a name, which subjective experience confronts when it does not stop at the appearance of its identity” (*Powers* 54). Drawing some

of her explanation for this focus on the feminine from psychoanalysis, Kristeva also notes the political and anthropological grounds for the coincidence of the feminine and the abject. Kristeva cites anthropological studies that have indicated that societies in which there is a strong logic of prohibition and taboo are the same societies in which the separation of the sexes, and thus the hierarchical dominance of men, structures social forms (*Powers* 64f., 70f.). The prohibition of the abject and the feminine thus overlap. This phenomenon of othering against both the feminine and the abject sheds light on Müller's broad use of abject feminine images in revolt to represent not only the *Geschlechterkampf*, but also the importance of bringing memory to the surface.

A similarly radicalized abject feminine image, related to that of *Der Auftrag* and *Quartett* also culminates Müller's *Bildbeschreibung*.²⁰ The subject, who has become the focal point toward the end of the text, strangles and slits the throat of a woman, and this violence causes an explosion of subjectivity. Suddenly, "MORD ist ein Geschlechtertausch." The subject becomes first a stranger to himself and then to all of the objects around him: "IM SPIEGEL WOHNEN, ist der Mann mit dem Tanzschritt ICH, mein Grab sein Gesicht, ICH die Frau mit der Wunde am Hals [...] ICH der Vogel, der mit der Schrift seines Schnabels dem Mörder den Weg in die Nacht zeigt, ICH der gefrorne Sturm" (119). Though the woman does not take over the subject *per se*, the murderer becomes that which he has oppressed and abused, confusing the positions of actor and victim, much in the way this takes place in *Quartett*. The connections among Müller's *Bildbeschreibung* (significantly bearing the alternative title *Explosion einer Erinnerung*), *Der Auftrag*, and *Quartett* form a matrix through which Müller problematizes memory through the images of abjection and femininity. Within this matrix, *Quartett* explores these issues most thoroughly and bears the most profound reflection of this problematization in the drama's aesthetic.

It is only after understanding this matrix of memory, gender, and abjection that the "Ewigkeit als Dauererektion," one of the pithiest statements in *Quartett*, can be fully understood. Valmont's monologue describes a temporal challenge: a person who has the power to bring clocks to a standstill, and thus to cause immortality, would inadvertently cause the unbearable stagnation of "Ewigkeit als Dauererektion" (49). He continues, "Die Zeit ist das Loch in der Schöpfung, die ganze Menschheit passt hinein. Dem Pöbel hat es die Kirche mit Gott ausgestopft, wir wissen, es ist schwarz und ohne Boden. Wenn der Pöbel die Erfahrung macht, stopft er uns nach" (49). Alexandra von Hirschfeld has called this the "immergleiche Wiederholung eines geschichtlichen Zeitraums" (107), but this description underestimates the role of the abject feminine body for Müller's work. In the challenge of endlessly repeating time, the church has, with its belief in immortality of the soul and with the image of a timeless God, artificially covered the hole (or vagina) that is all time, threatening to spread stagnation and leaving only the atheistic libertines aware of time's monumentality. In Luce Irigaray's terms, we can see this as the

threat of the coherent *solid* and immobile male subject of phallogocentrism dominating over the fluidity of the feminine non-subject.²¹ This static state takes over western society, leaving it without destruction of masochistic sex, but also without the relief of time's and life's passing. Though Müller's images remain too complex to be explained completely through feminist theory or any other system of theories, feminist thinking can help connect the image of the female with that of diachronic abjection and Müller's text's nuanced exploration of historical discussions.

In *Quartett*, characters are placed in a position of limbo from which they must acknowledge both the past and their mortality. Not surprisingly, neither of them succeeds, as Valmont playing Merteuil, perhaps knowingly, takes a glass of poison from Merteuil playing Valmont and is left to die: "Tod einer Hure. Jetzt sind wir allein / Krebs mein Geliebter" (65). Far from offering a solution to the conundrum of living through socially repressed memories, in *Quartett*, Müller focuses on placing the reader inside of the problem of living in the present, which has political as well as theatrical importance. In 1988, the year that *Quartett* was first performed in the GDR, Heiner Müller was asked the question: "Warum gibt es in der BRD so wenig Theaterautoren?" Müller responded:

Es gibt im Westen allgemein eine totale Besetzung mit Gegenwart. Das ganze ökonomische Potential geht auf Besetzung mit Gegenwart. Das heißt: Auslöschen von Erinnerung und von Erwartung. Es gibt keine Vergangenheit und keine Zukunft, nur Gegenwart, man braucht nur über die Straße zu gehen, überall Gegenwart. Das ist eine absolut kunstfeindliche Situation [...] *Theater kann nur existieren als etwas Heutiges, wenn es auch Vergangenes transportiert und auf etwas Kommendes guckt.* [emphasis added] (*Gesammelte Irrtümer II* 154)

Müller thus makes the temporal dynamics explicit which *Quartett* performs. He describes the importance of representing both the past and the future in the theater's present. It would be harshly reductionist to read the drama as a mere insult on capitalist thought, however, and Müller's earlier comments about *Quartett* suggest the drama's much larger scope:

Hier hat mich interessiert, die Struktur von Geschlechterbeziehungen freizulegen, wie ich sie für real halte und die Klischees, *die Verdrängung zu zerstören*. Auch wenn ich selbst, in meinem Sexualleben von Illusionen lebe, kann ich, wenn ich darüber schreibe, diese Illusionen nicht berücksichtigen. *Mein Hauptimpuls bei der Arbeit ist die Zerstörung. Also anderen Leuten das Spielzeug kaputtmachen. Ich glaube an die Notwendigkeit von negativen Impulsen.* [emphasis added] (*Gesammelte Irrtümer* 124)

While Müller clearly has an intent of stirring up debate on gender roles, his goal of destroying the social and historical *Verdrängung* of taboos is undoubtedly at the center of this drama and his work. The negative impulse of exposing this abjection might be painful, but Müller sees it as necessary for historical consciousness. In *Der*

Auftrag, Müller displays the role of memory and betrayal in the historical context of the French Revolution. In *Quartett*, he dramatizes the psychological challenge of exposing the diachronically abject, revealing the repression of the feminine, but also that of individual and collective memory in society.

Quartett continues the aesthetic and sexual destabilization of Sade and Laclos, so that the implications of Müller's literature for political memory are certainly as relevant in contemporary society as Sade's and Laclos' statements were for the French Revolution. *Quartett* has great significance to Heiner Müller's later thinking about both gender and memory. The aesthetically abject reflects both the challenges to identity and to subjectivity in history. Kristeva's theory describes the abject as that which crosses boundaries, violates, and plays with the rules that structure society and Western philosophy, but Müller takes Kristeva's theory to another level. Müller's aesthetic violates boundaries of propriety in literary image and plays with the definition and nature of the theatrical subject. The shock and confusion that the exposure to abjection causes, reveals and destabilizes the system. Müller's dramatic achievement lies in this destabilization and the political questioning from which it is inseparable.

Notes

¹ Heiner Müller, "Quartett" in *Werke*, ed. Frank Hörnigk (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2002). The drama was written in 1980/81, published in 1981 and first performed in 1982 at the Schauspielhaus Bochum. (Bibliographische Notizen: *Quartett*, 315ff.) Further references to this drama and *Der Auftrag*, which appears directly before *Quartett* in the same volume of the *Werke*, appear as parentheticals with page numbers only.

² Hans Christoph Stillmark, "'Quartett' ein Vorspiel zur Revolution. Bemerkungen zu einem Stück Heiner Müllers," *Germanistisches Jahrbuch DDR-UVR*. 8 (1989) 97.

³ Indeed, it is the *text* of the drama that Müller finds most important, and the performances Müller finds most pleasing are those that do justice to the complexity of the here distinctly abject text on stage. Müller formulates this in his praise of the 1986 Cologne performance of the drama. The performance was pleasing, "Weil sie nicht auf Psychologie setzte, sondern den Text in spannendes Theater übersetzte." Friedemann Krusche, "Bestien im freien Fall," *Theater heute* 40.3 (1986) 41. Such non-psychologization challenges actors and reflects the Müllerian complexity and cynicism as it is written.

⁴ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* (New York: Columbia UP, 1982). My reading of Kristeva concentrates on the first essay in the book, in which she lays out an overview of her theory of the abject.

⁵ Julia Kristeva, *La révolution du langage poétique* (Paris: Seuil, 1974) 21f.

⁶ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 243.

⁷ Cf. Heinz Klunker, "Erfolg mit 'Quartett'," *Theater heute* 39.4 (1998) 45; and specifically on Robert Wilson's work with the drama, Christoph Müller, "Elektronische Mysterienspiel. Robert Wilson inszeniert Heiner Müllers 'Quartett', Glucks 'Alceste' und Euripides 'Alkestis'," *Theater heute* 28.8 (1987) 21ff., as well as other reviews on both East and West German performances, which appeared almost annually throughout the 1980s in *Theater heute*.

⁸ Cf. for instance Christian Klein, "Müller lecteur des 'Liaisons Dangereuses' de Choderlos de Laclos," in *Reécritures: Heine, Kafka, Celan, Heiner Müller. Essais sur l'intertextualité dans la littérature allemande du XXI^{ème} siècle*, eds. Lucien Calvé and Christian Klein (Grenoble: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 1989) 159-186.

⁹ Stillmark concludes his argument: "Deutlich wird an diesen wenigen Beispielen, daß Partnerschaftsbeziehungen durch gesellschaftliche Zustände der kapitalistischen Warengesellschaft und durch jede der Barbarei charakterisiert erscheinen" (96).

¹⁰ Stillmark offers such an interpretation, making the rather facile argument that this switch is directly aimed at showing the "Emanzipation der Frau" (91). This is overstated, for though Müller is clearly playing with gender power roles and *exposing* the conflict, it is by no means clear that Merteuil gains the upper hand, as by the end of the drama, she has contributed to Valmont's death and is left with only her sickness as company. Moreover, Stillmark fails to recognize the relevance of the *mixing* in the gender roles, referring to the roles played by Valmont and Merteuil with only the name of the character played. He thus simply states that Valmont attempts to choke Volanges, ignoring the purposeful ambiguity of the subjects brought up by Müller (97f.).

¹¹ Jan Berg, "Heiner Müllers 'Quartett,'" in *Deutsches Drama der 80er Jahre*, ed. Richard Weber (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp) 1992, 213.

¹² Kiebuszinska's analysis exaggerates the confusion and fragmentation of the drama, concluding, "What is inscribed in Müller's *Quartet* as it divides itself, breaks up into little bits, and regroups itself is the mingling of roles into a 'precession of simulacra,' since in the doubling and redoubling of man/woman/woman/man it is frequently difficult, or at times impossible, to determine who is speaking" (98). This analysis neglects the fact that there are indeed characters who deliberately take on roles and come back out of them, and though they do become increasingly carried away with this, this process is always clear to the reader and never dissipates into the chaos Kiebuszinska suggests. The speaker names, which remain "Valmont" and "Merteuil" throughout the drama, and even the presence of specific direct address in most enunciations, do keep clear who plays whom throughout the drama. Christine Kiebuszinska, "The Narcissist and the Mirror in Les Liaisons dangereuses: Laclos, Hampton, Müller," *The Comparatist: Journal of the Southern Comparative Literature Association* 17 (May 1993) 98ff.

¹³ Alexandra von Hirschfeld, *Frauenfiguren im dramatischen Werk Heiner Müllers* (Marburg: Tectum, 1999) 106.

¹⁴ Heiner Müller, *Gesammelte Irrtümer. Interviews und Gespräche*. 2 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag der Autoren, 1990) 167.

¹⁵ One is of course reminded of Hegel's designation of drama as a representation of collisions between the particular and the universal, as well as the momentary and the eternal. Much more could be said about Müller's implicit reactions to the comments Hegel makes on the dialectics of drama in the *Aesthetics*.

¹⁶ This is highlighted in performance, as in the review of a 1998 performance in Magdeburg, Heinz Klunker even describes Merteuil as being "greisinnenhaft" as she stretches out on a divan (45). Neither this review nor other critical articles, however, have acknowledged the abject element of this portrayal of physical decay, or its link to Müller's philosophy of history.

¹⁷ Heiner Müller, "Der Auftrag," in *Werke*, ed. Frank Hörnigk (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2002). *Der Auftrag* was written in 1979, published in the same year, and was first performed in 1980 in the Schauspielhaus Karl-Marx-Stadt. (Bibliographische Notizen, 315ff.)

- ¹⁸ Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968) 257.
- ¹⁹ Irene Teraoka, *The Silence of Entropy or Universal Discourse* (New York: Peter Lang, 1984) 125.
- ²⁰ Heiner Müller, "Bildbeschreibung," in *Werke*, ed. Frank Hörnigk (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2002).
- ²¹ Cf. Luce Irigaray, *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* (Paris: Les éditions de minuit, 1977) 107ff.

Works Cited

- Benjamin, Walter. "Theses on the Philosophy of History." *Illuminations*. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken, 1968. 253-266.
- Berg, Jan. "Heiner Müllers 'Quartett'." *Deutsches Drama der 80er Jahren*. Ed. Richard Weber. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992. 210-221.
- Brenner, Eva. "Heiner Müller Directs Heiner Müller." *TDR: The Drama Review: A Journal of Performance Studies* 36 (Spring 1992): 160-68.
- Butler, Judith. *Bodies that Matter*. New York: Routledge, 1993.
- Hirschfeld, Alexandra von. *Frauenfiguren im dramatischen Werk Heiner Müllers*. Marburg: Tectum, 1999.
- Irigaray, Luce. *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un*. Paris: Les éditions de minuit, 1977.
- Kiebuszinska, Christine. "The Narcissist and the Mirror in Les Liaisons dangereuses: Laclos, Hampton, Müller." *The Comparatist: Journal of the Southern Comparative Literature Association* 17 (May 1993): 81-100.
- Klein, Christian. "Müller lecteur des 'Liaisons Dangereuses' de Choderlos de Laclos." *Reécritures: Heine, Kafka, Celan, Heiner Müller. Essais sur l'intertextualité dans la littérature allemande du XXIème siècle*. Eds. Lucien Calvé and Christian Klein. Grenoble: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 1989. 159-186.
- Klunker, Heinz. "Erfolg mit 'Quartett'." *Theater heute* 39.4 (1998): 45.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror*. New York: Columbia UP, 1982.
- . *La révolution du langage poétique*. Paris: Seuil, 1974.
- Krusche, Friedemann. "Bestien im freien Fall." *Theater heute* 40.3 (1986): 41.
- Müller, Christoph. "Elektronische Mysterienspiele. Robert Wilson inszeniert Heiner Müllers 'Quartett', Glucks 'Alceste' und Euripides 'Alkestis'." *Theater heute* 28.8 (1987): 21ff.
- Müller, Heiner. "Bildbeschreibung." *Werke*. Ed. Frank Hörnigk. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2002.
- . "Der Auftrag." *Werke*. Ed. Frank Hörnigk. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2002.
- . *Gesammelte Irrtümer. Interviews und Gespräche*. 2 vols. Frankfurt am Main: Verlag der Autoren, 1990.
- . "Quartett." *Werke*. Ed. Frank Hörnigk. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2002.
- Stillmark, Hans Christoph. "'Quartett' ein Vorspiel zur Revolution. Bemerkungen zu einem Stück Heiner Müllers." *Germanistisches Jahrbuch DDR-UVR*. 8 (1989): 91-105.
- Teraoka, Arlene. *The Silence of Entropy or Universal Discourse*. New York: Peter Lang, 1985.