

THE FORM OF LEARNING IS THE LEARNING OF FORMS:  
MODELS OF SOCIALIST AESTHETIC EDUCATION IN  
GORKY, HACKS, AND MÜLLER

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THE FORM OF LEARNING IS THE LEARNING OF FORMS:  
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Most readers of politically committed literature dismiss it either because they disagree with the content presented in it or because its ostensibly crass instrumentalization of art in the service of a socialist program negates its aesthetic value. In the 20th century, these views were more often than not borne of a prejudice against Socialist Realism, the official method for producing art in the Eastern Bloc, which relied on a didactic relationship between art and its message in order to communicate with and educate its audience.

The socialist literary and theoretical works by Maxim Gorky (Russia/USSR), Peter Hacks (East Germany), and Heiner Müller (East Germany) stand in stark contrast to this didacticism of Socialist Realism, as they are underpinned by philosophical and aesthetic commitments drawn from romanticism, classicism, and avant-gardism, respectively. In the works I examine, artistic form is embraced as the quality that makes art a vehicle uniquely suited to the political education of its audience. The authors' depiction (Gorky), description (Hacks), and staging (Müller) of

the aesthetic theories upon which their pedagogical artworks depend do not aim to reduce those literary works to the communication of a specific socialist message; rather, the audience arrives at a more general and truthful way of thinking principally by engaging with the form of the artwork. As in Socialist Realism, the radical education promoted by Gorky, Hacks, and Müller has political consequences, but for them, this education takes place both as readers and audiences assimilate the tendentious content of the texts *and* as they engage with the artworks' formal structures.

For these authors, art has the capacity to inspire spiritual (Gorky), ontological (Hacks), and behavioral (Müller) exercises that in turn enable readers (Gorky), viewers (Hacks), and participants (Müller) to participate in and create new forms of thinking. In the process, they become agents, creative producers of thought who have received a more sustainable and liberating education than the didacticism of Socialist Realism could ever provide. What these works share is a commitment to teaching how to think over learning what to think.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Sarah Pickle earned her Bachelor of Arts in Comparative Literature from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2005, and, as a member of the first class of Robertson Scholars, she received a certificate of concurrent enrollment from Duke University. She received her Master of Arts in Comparative Literature from Cornell University in 2009.

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Dr. Pickle's dissertation, *The Form of Learning Is the Learning of Forms: Models of Socialist Aesthetic Education in Gorkey, Hacks, and Müller*, was supervised by Dr. Jonathan Culler.

To dad

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Mom: It's far from an embarrassment to be the only Pickle without a doctorate. In the end, we all have pieces of paper, but you've made a much greater contribution to the world through your work. You have inspired not only your children, but hundreds of others in your classroom to be better citizens and neighbors. Dad: you did the very same in your community. You were a model of hard work and responsibility, and I carry you with me in all I do.

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## INTRODUCTION

Literature has no necessary imperative to be anything more than an end unto itself. Nevertheless, the twentieth century was a site of unprecedented drives to productively instrumentalize the arts in the service of political programs. While reasons for the opportunity and prevalence of such tactics range from the technical (the advent of relatively inexpensive reproductive equipment and distribution strategies) to the cultural (rapidly proliferating literacy and increasing leisure time), less clear are the methods of the appropriation of literature *as a form and method of art* for political ends. Deservedly or not, politically committed literature is often dismissed as mere propaganda—as that which offers little more than an external didactic content—and one of the greatest offenders in popular opinion is the method of Soviet Socialist Realism.

Although it will serve as the common point of reference for all of the discussions that take place in the following pages, it is not the intention of this project to rehabilitate socialist literature for modern readers by convincing them of the quality of the art produced according to its methods, that is, in line with its practices and goal-oriented procedures.<sup>1</sup> My focus is neither evaluative nor confined to Socialist

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<sup>1</sup> Boris Groys is one example of a critic whose work has sought to make Socialist Realism more acceptable to contemporary audiences. In *The Total Art of Stalinism* (1988), Socialist Realism is presented as the inheritor of the premises of the early twentieth-century Russian modernist avant-garde. This argument is extended in a later essay in which Groys argues that Socialist Realism's "modernist ideal of historical exclusiveness, internal purity, and autonomy from everything external"

Realism. Instead I will describe and reveal the consequences of the poetic and philosophical aesthetic commitments of various methods of (explicitly or implicitly) socialist literature from Russia and East Germany, beginning with the proto-Socialist Realism of Maxim Gorky's *Mat'* (*Mother*) and moving on to Peter Hacks' theory of Socialist Classicism and Heiner Müller's avant-garde dialectical theatre. The work of these three figures share an attempt to raise the consciousnesses of their readers and viewers by bringing together in the artwork a politically beneficial socialist education, whether or not it was in line with the official Party line, and the means to gain access to Truth with a capital "t." While these aims are also at the heart of the official Socialist-Realist method, the distinguishing feature of the individual works I analyze by Gorky, Hacks, and Müller is that they take art itself seriously in these endeavors.<sup>2</sup> Their depiction (Gorky), description (Hacks), or staging (Müller) of an aesthetic theory in the service of socialism does not simply subordinate the artworks and the artistic experience of them to their political import, but rather complements it. Again, just as in Socialist Realism, in the works to be analyzed by these three figures, a radical education has political consequences, but for the latter group, this education takes

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is serviced by a "proto-postmodernist strategy of appropriation" and that this combination classifies it as a "Style and a Half" (79). Groys' work is often very exciting and convincing; it simply a different project than this one.

<sup>2</sup> I make no claims to be communicating the intentions of the authors, nor do I mean to speak for their entire oeuvres. The scope of my project is limited to a handful of pieces, not because they represent the broader agenda of a single author or cadre, but because the aesthetic claims and assumptions patterned in the fabric of the individual texts are powerful rejoinders to critics, then and now, who reduce committed Soviet-era literature to its message and ignore its status as an art object.

place both as readers or the audience assimilate the tendentious content of the texts and as they engage with the artworks' formal structures. Whereas this type of *content* is a familiar account of the operations of didactic literature, the implication that the *formal structures* of art have potentially powerful educative effects is radical for its place and time.<sup>3</sup>

As will be demonstrated in the course of the following chapters, the critical assimilation of leftist political art from the Eastern Bloc to Socialist Realism is not sufficient to describe all activity in some of the less routine, yet still politically committed, literary projects from the region. The field is far more varied and complicated. In Gorky's canonized—if not appropriately canonical—novel *Mat'*, the book itself is didactic, but the model depicted for radicalization is not a didactic experience in the sense that it an external, inorganic truth is assimilated by the title character; instead, “mother” is radicalized via experiences that resemble German Romantic theories on the education of the subject and, perhaps ironically given the heavy-handedness of the novel, the autonomy of art. Additionally, Hacks' essays from his collection of literary criticism *Das Poetische* (1966) describe the revolutionary potential of a classicist form of aesthetic experience, which he argues best reflects the harmony, order, and greatness that resulted from the realization of actually existing

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<sup>3</sup> There are, of course, other artists and critics who tout the revolutionary potential of artistic form, from the contributors to the Russian journal *Levy Front Iskusstv* (*Lef* or *Left Front of the Arts*, published in the 1920s) to Brecht and Adorno in Germany. After the articulation of the Socialist-Realist method, however, a radical content was championed before all else.

socialism in his day. And Müller's play *Mauser* (1970) builds off of a Brechtian avant-garde aesthetics that insists on the inherent potential in the dramatic work to provoke radical and dialectically open forms of thought through its performance.

The following chapters will not be concerned with whether or not the image of reality presented by these texts is accurate. On the contrary, this project seeks to tease out the underlying assertions or assumptions made by a particular group of works about the nature of the relationship between art and truth when the former is put in the service of a socialist politics. The unabashedly didactic aesthetics at the heart of the Socialist-Realist method is founded upon the belief that art can serve a specific program because it can educate the reader through the imposition and consequent transmission of an external message that, here, is Marxist-Leninist. One major point that the texts discussed in the subsequent pages will reveal is that this was not the only school of thought being experimented with in the Eastern Bloc. Just because these aesthetic theories are politically committed and pedagogical does not mean that they are also didactic in the sense that they serve a truth outside of themselves, a la Socialist Realism. As will become clear, revolutionary truth need not be imposed on the artwork; it can instead develop in relation with its target audience. Art itself has revolutionary potential, and it is the form of that potential that is of interest here.

The implicit or explicit claim of the texts that are the subjects of this analysis is that the artwork can be a heuristic. When the reader or audience engages with it,

there are/should be pedagogical consequences that at the extra-textual level may be harnessed for a political effect. With each author a different angle of this claim will be analyzed. For example, in *Mat'*, Gorky *models* for his readers the process of consciousness raising in the figure of his destitute titular character, Pelegea Nilovna, who is being pressured by her son to join the struggle for the revolution. While she is initially incapable of grasping the platform of the struggle from an intellectual angle, the truth of that platform eventually discloses itself to her as she listens to music (the chorus of a protest song; a piece for piano by Grieg). Hacks' literary theoretical essays on the so-called "play of tomorrow" and the "poetic" *describe* the emancipatory potential of theatre when it aims to indirectly reflect the historical process—i.e., what could be—through the staging of great ideas and great men in a unified, well composed, and well balanced classical form. The process of imagining a possible world free of contradictions and contrasting it with the actual, still flawed (but improving!) world is liberating for both the playwright and his viewers because it reveals the truth to each of them by engaging their critical faculties as they try to figure out why the latter is not yet the former and, consequently, by working to close the gap between them. Finally, in *Mausier* Müller revises the Brechtian conception of a *Lehrstück*, or teaching play, into what I will call a *Lernstück*, or learning play, which, in its *staging*, seeks to provoke in the minds of its own actors a form of dialectical thought that can have radical consequences. Unlike Brecht's *Die Massnahme*, which was the inspiration for Müller's play and concludes by covering over the

contradictions its author had worked so hard to flesh out, *Mauser* refuses to teach or resolve any of its tensions, and this forces the actors as well as the audience to think for themselves within the terms given to them by the artwork and confront the ugly truths of their still unequal society.

All of these pieces either portray or describe the potential for art to function as a method of education or teaching for political ends; but while there are similarities in the basic content of the truths communicated by them and by works of Socialist Realism, the process required to access the truth in these texts is remarkably different from that in didactic Socialist Realism. For Gorky, aesthetic experience is the catalyst for the emergence of the uneducated Pelagea Nilovna's intellect, which eventually joins with her intuition to create a unified figure in a good position to serve the revolutionary cause; and for Hacks and Müller, aesthetic experience compels the comparison of what is presented (aesthetic appearance) with the actual world, and this analysis of what is and what could be inspires truly dialectical, radical thinking. Although the content of the texts described may still be tendentious and even didactic at times, their status as works of art grants a pedagogical potential to the experience of art that does not—or does not merely—issue from their content, as in didacticism, but rather arises from the development of certain forms of dialectical thought that can also be liberating. Committed art does not have to serve solely as a vehicle for a lesson; the mere experience of some provocative art may have its own political potential.

### *Socialist Realism: Background*

At this stage, it is worth taking a step back to review the so-called “method” of Socialist Realism and even to note that it is alive and well today in East Asian and post-colonial literature, in particular. Critic Xudong Zhang has published on the ubiquity of its master narratives in the Chinese variations (“The Power of Rewriting” 1997), and scholars M. Keith Booker and Dubravka Juraga have traced its theoretical principles through the works of certain African writers in the second half of the twentieth century (“The Reds and the Blacks” 2005). In the West, however, Socialist-Realist literature has long been out of fashion. Ever since the break-up of the Soviet Union, artists from the Eastern Bloc are, of course, no longer required to produce art according to the Socialist-Realist method, and most experiment far beyond their previous confines. Similarly, literary critics also tend to condemn most of what appeared between 1934 and 1989 as having ostensibly arrested the development of an otherwise remarkable literary tradition. Many find absurd the fact that a writer like Alexander Fadeev (*The Rout* 1927) would have been asked (or would have claimed) to pick up where Tolstoy left off, and in so doing they wrongly judge Socialist Realism according to a value system different from the one that spawned it. For the original theorists of Socialist Realism, the literary merit of a work is measured by its truthfulness, not its artfulness.

During the Soviet Era, the Socialist-Realist method was mandatory for artists



in the Eastern Bloc, and because of this, all artistic works from there—particularly those that shared the aim of melding truthful representation (broadly defined though it was) with radical consciousness-raising efforts—must inevitably be compared to the tenets of Socialist Realism. In order to best understand the context in which Gorky, Hacks, and Müller were writing and their work was consumed so as to appreciate the boldness of their own undertakings, it is important to understand that Socialist Realism’s major themes and supposedly realist style had been taking shape for decades before it was officially legislated. Prominent philosophers and literary critics like V.G. Belinsky, Nikolay Chernyshevsky, and Friedrich Engels had been calling since at least the 1830s for writers to “show society in its development” (Belinsky 192).<sup>4</sup> While Gorky’s *Mat’* (*Mother* 1907) and Fyodor Gladkov’s *Tsement* (*Cement* 1925) were consistently named as forerunners, a loose theory of an explicitly Socialist-Realist method, style, and content for literature was not codified until the 1934 Writers’ Congress in Moscow. Gorky himself presided over the proceedings, while party functionaries like Andrei Zhdanov explained to these “engineers of human souls” (author Yury Olesha’s term) that their charge was to “[know] life so as to be able to depict it truthfully.” They were not to mirror the “objective reality” of life, but “reality in its revolutionary development,” with the “tendentious” aim of the “ideological

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<sup>4</sup> For more, see Belinsky’s various articles on Alexander Pushkin, his letter to V.P. Botkin from September 8, 1841, and his essay, “A View of the Principle Aspects of Russian Literature in 1843”; Chernyshevsky’s novel *What Is to Be Done?* (1863) as well as his self-review of his dissertation, *The Aesthetic Relation of Art to Reality* (1855); and Engels’ letter to Margaret Harkness from April 1888.

remoulding and education of the toiling people in the spirit of socialism” (21).

This pedagogical demand is what Zhdanov called “the method of socialist realism,” and it speaks more directly to the belief he shared with many other writers and functionaries at the Congress regarding what should be the relationship between art and truth in Socialist Realism than it does to an artistic process that his audience of writers could follow when they picked back up their pens (21). When Zhdanov demanded that Socialist-Realist literature present “reality in its revolutionary development,” he correspondingly implied that its function is merely to serve a truth that exists outside of art, and, not coincidentally, a truth that will serve the interests of his political party by convincing readers that the country was headed in the right direction.<sup>5</sup>

One of the primary goals of this dissertation is to argue that Soviet Era socialist aesthetics are worthy of attention and far more complicated than Zhdanov would have wanted. This is not a commonly held belief, and that is largely due to the critical reception of Socialist Realism, whose poor reputation has been over-generalized to virtually all leftist literature: its didacticism is typically blamed for its alleged lack of literary merit (a focus on content over form), or, still worse for party functionaries longing for an extensive and captivated readership, its banality. Yet, as stated, it is not my intention to appraise the literary value of this socialist literature;

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<sup>5</sup> The content of the Truth here is Marxist-Leninist historical materialism, but because the substance of this Truth is not the focus of the present study, it will not be discussed further.

rather, I will argue that, despite what sometimes appears to be a facile instrumentalization of art, socialist literature from the Eastern Bloc deserves a prominent place in the broader tradition of thought about the problem of the relationship between aesthetics and politics. In the Soviet arena, this issue is nowhere near as black and white as it is often assumed to be. Socialist literature of this period is an extraordinary site for examining how problems of aesthetics and politics can be worked on and worked out: it is expected to completely subordinate art to the political, as Zhdanov encourages writers to do, but I wish to strongly qualify that all-too-easy reduction by describing and contextualizing how certain literary works and theories, one of which is even a much-modeled work of Socialist Realism, portray, define, and act out other non-exclusively didactic ways of locating and making use of the pedagogical potential of art and of aesthetic experience.

The aesthetic problem of the relationship between truth and art was of paramount importance for the theorists and practitioners of the Socialist-Realist method, and it was a, if not the, big issue steering the discussions at the 1934 Writers' Conference. During the meetings, the participants sought to articulate what came to be identified as the undergirding purpose of Socialist Realism, namely the employment of literature in the effort to radicalize readers "in the spirit of socialism." This endeavor was thought to be legitimated by a pledge among willing artists to be truthful to life and to work in a realist style and with a realist content, and they defined this in a way that was contrary to conventions of the day, claiming that

realism reflects life as it is and where it is heading, which for this group was towards socialism.<sup>6</sup> Of course, this definition stands in stark contrast to more popular descriptions of the realist style as the objective and faithful representation of reality. But the definition of “realism” provided by proponents of Socialist Realism was often defended by the philosophical concept of necessity: this method of art is realist because it provides a truthful presentation of the movement of life both as it is and as it will necessarily come to be. Andrei Sinyavsky (writing under the pseudonym Abram Tertz) calls this principle concept of Socialist Realism “Purpose with a capital P” in his essay “On Socialist Realism,” and he adds that “a tendency toward purpose”—a tendency to see all events as “subject to a higher destiny”—“is part of human nature.” It provides the story in a Socialist-Realist work as well as its reader (or better, pupil) with a direction or even a telos, with the aid of which she can “transform nature into [her] own image” and see the world as she wants it to be (150-1).

Interestingly enough, Sinyavsky’s characterization of the “realism” of Socialist Realism as a kind of master narrative perspectivism is not all that distinct from contemporary criticism on literary works more broadly accepted as either fitting or demanding a place in the more conventional definition of “realism.” As recently as

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<sup>6</sup> Gorky: “‘realism’ would cope with its difficult task if [...] it depicted man not only such as he is today, but also as he must and shall be tomorrow” (“Talks on Craftsmanship” 179). Karl Radek: “Socialist realism means not only knowing reality as it is, but knowing whither its moving. [...] And a work of art created by a socialist realist is one which shows whither that conflict of contradictions [in capitalism] is leading which the artist has seen in life and reflected in his work” (157). Zhdanov on the duties of Soviet writers: “it means knowing life so as to be able to depict it truthfully in works of art, not to depict it in a dead, scholastic way, not simply as ‘objective reality’, but to depict reality in its revolutionary development” (21).

2005, Peter Brooks has argued in a study of 19th-century Victorian literature that realism derives from mankind's playful interest in making models, which are exciting because they "give us a way to bind and organize the complex and at times overwhelming energies outside us" (1). Novelists like Balzac and James "play with the world seriously," because it provides them and their readers with a sense of having "master[ed] the world," but, Brooks warns, it can get out of hand (5, 2). If they close themselves off too much, fantasies can end up taking the place of reality ("the fantastic represents a labyrinth plotted by men, a labyrinth destined to be deciphered by men") and become totalizing myths (214). Such is often the fate of Socialist Realism.

The coimplication of Sinyavsky's Purpose-driven theory of Socialist Realism and its contention that it is indeed a type of realism returns the focus of this discussion to the question of aesthetics. In the chapter "Art and Philosophy" from his *Handbook of Inaesthetics* (1998), Alain Badiou offers concise, generic schemata for discussing the truth-art relation, the first of which would locate Socialist Realism under the heading of "didacticism," as that which subscribes to the "thesis that art is incapable of truth, or that all truth is external to art" and thus not immanent to it. Didactic art is controlled by something outside of itself—its "public effect" or educative role—which renders gratuitous any search for truth in the artistic work. Above anything else, a work of art that operates according to a didactic schema is a means to an end and is experienced "not so much as an imitation of things, but as the

imitation of the effect of truth” (2-3). (Credit is given here to Plato’s writings on mimesis in Book X of *The Republic* in which he correctly identifies art as aesthetic appearance and not actual reality.) The same holds true for Socialist Realism, for which the Purpose is right on the surface and plays a more important role than any reported faithful reflection of (the appearance of) the outside world. Consequently, what is really at stake in a discussion of the method of didactic and allegedly realist art is not the believability or coherence of its depiction of the outside world or even the content of the message it desires to convey, but *how* reality is presented as truth. The issue of “how”—the method and the form—is what reveals the aesthetic theory governing a work of art and uncovers what the artwork implicitly or explicitly professes to be the relationship between art and truth. Moreover, this provides the critic the opportunity to take committed socialist literature in general more seriously as art and find a place for it in the long tradition of aesthetics, rather than simply dismissing it because its purported all-determining didacticism runs contrary to our collective modernist tendency to value artistic autonomy.

### *The Matter of Realism*

Whereas the aesthetics of the Socialist-Realist method is unquestionable and uncompromisingly didactic, critics have long identified a lack of consistency and logical unity elsewhere in its theoretical underpinnings. This is an intriguing accusation against a method deeply committed to the promotion and dissemination of a singular

way of understanding the world. In its most typical manifestation, this argument takes the form of a complaint not just about individual works that are representative of the style of Socialist Realism, but also, more generally, about its theory and practice. Almost any study or review of this style, by armchair and professional critics alike, features the specific objection that the content of the artwork produced according to the Socialist Realist method is, contrary to its name, far from realist in any customary sense of the term.

The cynicism about the ostensibly fake-looking realism of Socialist Realism might even be a major factor in turning Soviet Literature into the pariah that it became in the West long before 1989. Realism itself, however—or at least the pretention to it—has experienced a resurgence in the past twenty years in the United States, most prominently in the visual medium of television. Debates about the cultural stakes of realism now extend beyond the academy and are being negotiated in popular culture.<sup>7</sup> As the novelist Jonathan Franzen explains in a 2011 article in the *New Yorker*, ours is an age defined to a large extent by simulacra of reality on the internet and in reality television. It is virtually impossible for us to tell fact from fiction when we are constantly bombarded with different versions of our world, all presented simultaneously, all impossible to untangle (“Farther Away”). According to

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<sup>7</sup> For more on scholarly discussions about the return of realism, see Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981, trans. Sheila Glaser 1994), Guy Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith 1995), Fredric Jameson’s *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1990), and Slavoj Žižek’s *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (2002).

Franzen, “there’s no end of virtual spaces in which to seek stimulation, but their very endlessness, the perpetual stimulation without satisfaction, becomes imprisoning.” Because of this, actual fictions that are designed to look and feel like reality are more important and satisfying than ever because they alleviate our anxiety about what is real and what isn’t. They focus our attention on one world. In our search for truth and meaning, Franzen says we turn to realism: he reads *Robinson Crusoe*, while millions of viewers watch television shows like *Law and Order* (franchise run, 1990-present) and *The Wire* (2002-2008). In its various incarnations, the former show has been on for more than twenty years and has produced almost a thousand episodes in the United States alone. The latter, which follows the “kitchen sink” realist style of filmmakers Ken Loach and Mike Leigh, was created by the former journalist David Simon. In a 2010 *New York Magazine* article, Simon explains that he left journalism behind to create “drama, not documentary” because realist art can share more about humanity and “fundamental truths” than historical reports can: “We know more about human pride, purpose, and obsession from *Moby-Dick* than from any contemporaneous account of the Nantucket whaler that was actually struck and sunk by a whale in the nineteenth-century incident on which Melville based his book” (qtd. in Nussbaum “Pugnacious D”).

The way realist fiction helps us focus on the truth of just one world is only part of its power today; at the same time, it is both publicly available and widely circulated. As Franzen observes, realism gives us a “way off the island[s]” that we



each create for ourselves when we retreat into ourselves to try to make sense of all that is around us. It allows us to experience the “urgent and fresh and honest news” and truths of a single world we can actually share, which in turn establishes a network among individuals.<sup>8</sup>

The desire to build a community around a common understanding or world view has been at the heart of many the realist projects over the past two centuries. That this is also the core of the Socialist-Realist method is, I think, what makes it such an attractive and easy target for so many people today who were brought up in a world increasingly dominated by visual culture. Unlike the critical darling *The Wire*, which can largely rely on the camera to record life as it is, realist literature has to *feel* true to life without relying on the seemingly innate realism of photographic technology, and for many readers now and in its heyday, Socialist Realism does not.<sup>9</sup> What exactly this means can be examined and more clearly fleshed out through the case of Gladkov’s *Tsement*.

Even though it was published before the term was ever coined, Gladkov’s *Tsement* was celebrated and canonized as a model of Socialist Realism, and it will serve as a test for the charge that the mode of the Socialist-Realist method is not genuinely

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<sup>8</sup> The core of Franzen’s essay is a meditation on his relationship with the late David Foster Wallace and his perspective on the latter’s troubled inner life and suicide. While the quotation above is from a comment about why the lonely Wallace wrote fiction, the allegorical layers of Franzen’s essay, which also deals with his travels to an actual island and the metaphorical existential “islands” on which all individuals occasionally find themselves living, sanction the extrapolation of this image beyond its specific object of description.

<sup>9</sup> Roland Barthes’ *Camera Lucida* (1980, trans. Richard Howard 1981) is a classic text on the relationship between realism and photography.

realist.<sup>10</sup> It is easy to find fault with several aspects of the book that would appear dramatically out of place next to the 19th-century Realist novels of, for example, Tolstoy or Dickens. However, I will begin with an even more generous description of realism and note what the novel shares with its predecessors, namely, its “attempt to come to grips with the fact that we live in a historical world,” which critic Harry Shaw identifies as a criterion of realism in *Narrating Reality* (1999). For the sake of contextualization and further elaboration, it is noteworthy that Shaw’s claim draws on his discussion of Georg Lukács’s *The Historical Novel* (1938), in which the philosopher and critic also labors to define the character of “good” 19th-century literature. Here Lukács asserts that the great Realist Balzac’s work was able to “achieve representations of ‘the present in history’,” or, as he puts it in a later preface to his collection *Studies on European Realism* (1948), Balzac’s fiction is capable of illustrating the “purposeful development” of historical materialism (5, 2). Accordingly, to the extent that Gladkov’s novel intricately describes the dire conditions of the protagonist, Gleb’s hometown after the Russian Civil War (destroyed homes and businesses; a dearth of manpower) as well as the deep social structures and activities that necessarily lead to its precipitous decay (class conflict) and eventual renewal (community organization and activism), it is a realist work.

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<sup>10</sup> Despite the security of his place in the canon, Gladkov drastically revised the prose of *Tsement* several times in order to strip it of any latent experimentalism or ornamentation and to conform it more to the style of Socialist Realism codified under Zhdanov. For a detailed discussion of these changes, see Robert L. Busch’s essay, “Gladkov’s *Cement*: The Making of a Soviet Classic” (1978).

Yet Lukács's criteria for properly realist subject matter reach far beyond the demonstration of the effects of history on the present. To this he adds the following two attributes: (1) the "type"—not as a "lifeless average," but as that which "binds together the general and the particular in both characters and situations"; and (2) the three-dimensionality of presentation—that totality of which Adorno is so critical and to which Jameson offers his qualified support, as it "depicts man and society as complete entities" and "endows with independent life characters and human relationships" (*Studies* 6).<sup>11</sup> Gladkov's Socialist-Realist novel falls short of satisfying each of these principles. It is heavy on history, to be sure, but it is also heavy on stereotypes drawn from oversimplifications and prejudices, i.e., what Lukács calls in "The Ideology of Modernism" the "outer world" of characters, or their social being (25). Gladkov flattens out the supporting cast of *Tsement* to the extent that they have no depth and neither the ability nor the opportunity to develop further. Take

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<sup>11</sup> In "Reconciliation under Duress," which is his a counter-argument to Lukács's *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (1962), Adorno rebukes the latter for creating a false homology between what is presented in the artistic work (aesthetic appearance) and actually existing reality. This, he believes, is a conflation that unwittingly cancels out the true source of art's critical power—that is, not the straightforward reflection/disclosure of the totality of life in the artwork, but rather the aesthetic distance afforded by the contradiction between the object in the artwork and the actual object. Later, in the essay "Commitment," Adorno altogether rejects popular faith in "realism" and the idea that it offers any kind of liberating potential in the education it provides. Any call for art to be faithful to reality by illustrating the "totality" of society or by "spotlighting alternatives" to the dismal status quo is, for Adorno, a "conservative authoritarianism": "within a predetermined reality, freedom becomes an empty claim" (179-80). For Jameson's support of Lukács, see "On Interpretation" in *The Political Unconscious* (1981) where he defends Lukács's use of totality. Jameson writes that this concept is primarily a "critical and negative, demystifying operation" that serves to expose ideology as comprising "strategies of containment" in the "confrontation with the ideal of totality which they at once imply and repress" (52-53). It quickly becomes clear that this theory takes center stage in Jameson's own model for interpretation. For a perspective from intellectual history on this debate, see Martin Jay's *The Dialectical Imagination* (1973).

Comrade Badin, who is the Chairman of the Executive Committee in the town and is a caricature of a relatively powerful, upper-level provincial bureaucrat. Badin ignores the ideas and opinions of everyone below him, procures whatever or whomever he wants for his own use, and is repeatedly described as “cold and reserved.” Moreover, Gladkov’s protagonist is larger than life; mythical, even. At one party meeting, Gleb rips off his shirt to exhibit the physical scars he bears from fighting in the Civil War. This explosion of brute force is precipitated by the friction he feels between himself and those around him. He is committed to do everything he can to revive his town, including rebuilding and reopening the local factory that is the isolated community’s life force, but his neighbors—whom he straightforwardly and publicly shames for their impotence—lack motivation. In this moment, this act, which superficially appears to be a raw expression of Gleb’s inner life is, more accurately, just a performance for others and for the benefit of the movement. Readers never have more than an inkling of who Gleb is as an individual, but they certainly know him as a hero, a status conferred upon him by the external world in the novel’s final scene: perched high above the masses while they celebrate the factory’s resurrection, Gleb brandishes the Soviet flag and is lavished with admiring gazes and wild cheers from the crowd below.

This quick discussion of *Tsement* helps to illustrate the most apparent problems (atypical heroics; one-dimensional characters) with Socialist Realism’s assertion that it presents content that is explicitly realist. In the end, however, the

substance of these disparities is only superficially related to a supposed infidelity to the generic conventions of Realism with a capital R, that is, 19th-century Realism. As Shaw puts it, “The term ‘realism’ resists the status of the purely descriptive” (6). A piece of Realist literature carries with it not just the epistemological and moral claims subsequently described by Shaw, but, as a work ostensibly devoted to the presentation of what is actual and real, also certain beliefs about the communication of truth in art, even if they are only implicit. For Socialist Realism, this relationship is didactic, in that its art is tasked with communicating a truth external to it, which in turn allows for that art to be used as a vehicle for political ends in this case. With this in mind, it would seem that what bothers most critics of Socialist Realism who harp on its unrealistic content is the fact that the legitimacy of Socialist Realism’s entire project is asserted on the grounds that it provides an allegedly realist and truthful content. What makes these complaints more common among critics of Socialist Realism than those of bourgeois 19th-century Realism is the manifest and unequivocal fidelity of the former to an extra-literary political program, i.e., its unflinching rejection of artistic autonomy, which is itself ostensibly underwritten by a commitment to presenting the truth.

In “On Socialist Realism,” Sinyavsky offers one solution to Socialist Realism’s publicity problem: rebrand. Doing so would allow the actual truth of the text—the Purpose—to shine through and not be weighed down or distracted by weak attempts to negotiate with so-called realist content. “In its content and spirit, as in its central figure,” he explains, “socialist realism is much closer to the eighteenth century,” that

is, to Neo-Classicism and early Romanticism, “than to the nineteenth[-century]” Realism (195). Sinyavsky’s solution for this supposedly bogus claim to R/realism is to drop all pretense of verisimilitude, for only then “will [Socialist Realism] be able to express the grand and implausible sense of our era,” namely, a purposefulness that is radically different from the “superfluousness” he identifies as the defining quality of the characters and events of 19th-century Realist fiction (215).

Sinyavsky’s suggestion opens a chapter in his essay which aims to draw a connection between the author’s subject and the 18th century by demarcating what Sinyavsky sees as two relatively distinct stages of Socialist Realism prior to his writing. The first is the romantic period (1917-1930) of novels like *Tsement*, which is characterized by the presentation of “the seeds of the future” that everyday life contains; it “affirms an ideal,” but does not idealize or embellish. Its failure as realism, according to Sinyavsky, is that “it takes the wish for the reality,” unable to distinguish between what is and what is desired (200-206). The second period is classicist (1930-1953) and is presided over by Stalin’s imposing, “disciplined rationali[sm]” and high ideals. It indicates a modal shift from the stage before it, because rather than mistaking the ideal for the real, the ideal is simply presented as what is (200-201, 206-208). The period following the romantic and classicist eras (1953-Sinyavsky’s present) is one of suffering in the wake of Stalin’s death and is akin to the death of God, of the Purpose that had sustained the nation and given meaning to everything its people had sacrificed for so long. Sinyavsky says that, at this moment, art finds itself between an

“insufficient realism and an insufficient classicism” because the people of the Soviet Union (lead by Khrushchev) “blew up the foundations of that classicist colossus” created by Stalin’s cult of personality and the unambiguous direction it provided and thereby destroyed any possibility of a future with Socialist Realism as it had hitherto been defined and practiced (216-217).

For Sinyavsky, the name is the problem. Rebranding Socialist Realism as something other than “realism” will finally relieve it of the burden of struggling to “combine the uncombinable,” that is, the ideal and the prosaic. The grandness of the former cannot help but overshadow the latter, and a mockery is always made of this unhappy couple’s pretensions to verisimilitude (214). Such an effort would have effectively solved the political problem Sinyavsky identifies in the content of Socialist Realism by allowing the ideal to be labeled as such. It would still give the people a Purpose to strive for and towards, all while acknowledging that the goal is, in fact, just a goal and not yet a reality.

Sinyavsky broadens the discussion of the content of the Socialist-Realist method—of what is being communicated or taught by this didactic literature—to include the issue of form, and two of the most recent and most popular studies of this aspect come from Katerina Clark in *The Soviet Novel* (2000) and Régine Robin in *Socialist Realism: An Impossible Aesthetic* (1986). Each critic discusses what the former calls a “modal schizophrenia” or “fatal split” between the presentations of what is and

what will or ought to be (37).<sup>12</sup> For Robin, this is representative of a kind of confusion in Socialist Realist literature where the matter of “epics, heroic narratives, [and] legendary verse-chronicles” masquerades in the “forms of verisimilitude, realism and representation.” This is the “impossible aesthetic” of her title, impossible because, logically, it would seem that the promised ideal would cancel out the real and vice versa; but she is quick to point out that, for her, impossible does not mean “ineffectual” with respect to the work’s pedagogical and political intentions (xxiii). Clark would agree with this assessment, as she explains that this is, in fact, the character of the successful and “particular Stalinist cosmology,” which relied on the simultaneity of “two diametrically opposed senses of reality” that mirror the generic definitions of epic and novel from Mikhail Bakhtin’s 1941 essay on the two forms (Clark 39, 38). In the latter’s analysis, the epic is a “genre that has not only long since completed its development, but [...] is already antiquated,” closed, and sacred; it is situated at an “absolute epic distance [separating its] world from the contemporary reality,” and it portrays what ought to be (Bakhtin 3, 13). Opposed to this is the genre of the novel, which is open to all possibilities, in that it “continues to develop, [and] is as yet uncompleted”; it is future-oriented, and, contrary to the epic, its style is not

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<sup>12</sup> For an earlier identification of this same problem, see Edward Mozejko’s *Der sozialistische Realismus: Theorie, Entwicklung und Versagen einer Literaturmethode* (1977). In it, Mozejko notes that, were a Soviet writer to give a “fully objective picture of reality,” he would be reprimanded for “bourgeois objectivism,” which is an indictment Lukács levels against authors like Zola and Ernst Ottwalt. Mozejko continues, “the theory and practice of Socialist Realism is founded on two opposed theses of Marxism. Opposed because one postulates the dream of a happy *future* (and this is an ideological thesis *par excellence* [...]); the other thesis encourages the reflection of the present” (38).



poetic and its hero is not heroic (3, 10). A work of Socialist-Realist literature makes the effort to somehow meld these diametrically opposed forms and worldviews into an individual work.

The “modal schizophrenia” or “impossible aesthetic” of which Clark and Robin write is not just a commentary on the arguably inconsistent content or style of Socialist Realism as realism. On the contrary, it is the acknowledgement that the form that the Socialist-Realist content takes encourages competing ways of viewing and understanding the world. Yet, as noted above, for Gorky, Zhdanov, and others, the inconsistent ontology and *Weltanschauung* of the Socialist-Realist novel is neither a secret nor, apparently, a problem. This “impossible” combination is intentionally built into the very first articulations of its aesthetic theory. Zhdanov even goes so far as to declare that Socialist Realism should actually be a “romanticism of a new type, revolutionary romanticism,” which Gorky also coins as “essentially a pseudonym for socialist realism” (Zhdanov 21, Gorky qtd. in Becker 487). Here “revolutionary” denotes a critical understanding of reality *qua* historical materialism as what is and must be, and “romanticism” connotes its future orientation and the part it plays in the struggle for socialism.<sup>13</sup>

Interrogations and evaluations of the realism of the Socialist-Realist method often dwell on and limit themselves to criticizing its atypical content or to interpreting

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<sup>13</sup> Gorky continues, writing about “revolutionary romanticism”: “the purpose of [it] is not only to depict the past critically, but chiefly to promote the consolidation of revolutionary achievement in the present and a clearer view of the lofty objectives of the socialist future” (487).

its form, coherent or not, as the direct extension of that straightforward, didactic content. They mull over the possible consequences of the paradox of its revolutionary/realist romanticism and interrogate its lack of a unified world view. But in doing so, they miss the more salient and primary avenue for critiquing Socialist Realism as a theory and practice of art: its aesthetic assumptions and underpinnings, what it presupposes to be the relationship between art and truth. For all committed art, the matter of *how* truth is experienced must precede the concern for *what* is experienced, as this speaks to the very inception and intention of its entire project and ultimately its political potential.

### *Socialist Literature*

Insofar as Socialist-Realist theory avers that the purpose of art is to serve a particular external Marxist-Leninist conception of truth—and thereafter a particular Soviet communist politics—it is didactic, presenting an external truth or content. Yet, as already noted, this term is insufficient to describe other Eastern Bloc leftist political literature tackled in the present project.

One way of further refining the key differences between the works to be discussed here and Socialist Realism is with the help of the chapter “Revolutionary and Socialist Art” from Leon Trotsky’s *Literature and Revolution* (1924) in which he

distinguishes between “revolutionary literature” and “socialist literature.”<sup>14</sup> The aspirational themes of Socialist Realism as “socialist literature” can only mimic the “disinterested friendship, love for one’s neighbor, [and] sympathy [that] will be the mighty ringing chords of socialist poetry” one day down the road once socialism is becomes a reality. But that time had not yet come when Trotsky was writing, nor had it arrived in East Germany when *Mauser* was written. Consequently, in scenes like the one described in the final chapter of Gladkov’s *Tsement*, the Socialist-Realist method presents an image reality that is premature; it is a non-contradictory reality that has achieved the harmonious realization of its revolutionary development, which is to say, an illustration of what will be, masquerading as what already is. Gorky, Hacks, and Müller, however, portray or champion art that is appropriate to their historical moment by “reflect[ing] the contradictions of a revolutionary social system” and by being “thoroughly imbued with it, [...] colored by the new consciousness arising out of the revolution” (188, 187). It is their presentation of the form of the contradiction as opposed to the content of the equal relations between individuals that distinguishes the subjects of this study. Of greatest importance to their transitional societies was the truthful replication of the contours of the tensions that persist, as they are what can set the minds of individuals, not just their hearts, in motion. The aim of truly “revolutionary” art, then, is to educate by supporting the development of the

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<sup>14</sup> My use of the term “socialist literature” as a catch-all for the works discussed in this dissertation, including Socialist-Realist ones, is not related to Trotsky’s; mine is merely shorthand for Eastern Bloc literature that is committed to the socialist cause.

revolutionary consciousness, not by forcing truths into them and willing them into completion, but by re-forming the operations of consciousness to match the contours of life as it is.

Through this educational process—and it is significant that it is, indeed, a process; one that can take many forms—those who engage with art are encouraged not just to think critically about their own world, but to envision a new one with the aid of the artwork. This practice is liberating for the mind and could even be called a worldbuilding exercise. It taps into and fosters the readers’ or audience’s most human qualities: their position not only as thinking beings (*homo sapien*), but as creative ones (*homo faber*). The activation and development of their imaginations through the academic dialectical exercises they experience with the artwork reveal in each individual the “intellectual,” who, in Antonio Gramsci’s formulation from the *Prison Notebooks* (written in the 1930s), is a philosopher as well as an artist. An intellectual is a conscious participant in a “particular conception of the world” and either works to keep the world as it is if it suits him, or, for those like Gorky, Hacks, and Müller’s intended revolutionary audiences, to change it by “bring[ing] into being new modes of thought” (9).

Accordingly, for the individuals who actively and consciously interact with it, the committed “revolutionary” work of art thus conceived facilitates an approach to learning that is guided by the artwork, not determined by its message. The consequence of this is that art can help to assist in the achievement of freedom in its

audience members, even as they take the position of students, because it can work according to a method of autonomous learning or self-directed education through art. This facility of aesthetic experience as portrayed, described, and staged by the authors discussed here stands in stark contrast to the didactic educational style of Socialist Realism. Works of Socialist Realism can only hope to produce an audience who will swallow and later regurgitate its platform in the service of politics. Artistic works as conceived by the latter may hold the same intentions regarding the dissemination of their radical content; but thanks to the formal “training” the audience members receive in their individual aesthetic experiences, the artworks also help to set in motion minds that will develop the ability to draw their own conclusions about the world (by fitting a given content into one rubric of understanding) as well as generate their own ways of changing it. The mostly non-didactic socialist literature discussed in the following pages thus functions according to aesthetic theories that promote the reader not simply as a knower of a certain content, but as an agent in line with the Gramscian intellectual who is also a “philosopher’, an artist” of new modes of thought (9).

The epigraph to this introduction comes from Gramsci: “to discover a truth oneself, without external suggestions or assistance, is to create—even if that truth is an old one” (33). His statement that both creativity and agency are products of autonomous learning emphasizes further the emancipatory promise of the pedagogical artistic methods of Gorky, Hacks, and Müller and stands as a reminder of

the investment this committed and educational art has in the truth. At its most fundamental level, this is less a concern for content than one for form, because the sustainability of the lesson depends on the audience's ability not to just reproduce information, but to recreate the path that led them to that conclusion; the audience must know how to think properly before they can get a handle on what they should (or do) think, and the cognitive and creative labor involved in honing their faculties to this end is meaningful regardless of the novelty or uniqueness of the truths discovered in that process or as a result of that education.

*Recurring, with a Difference*

Gramsci helps to make it clear that the topic of sustainable and politically consequential education is, at its core, a concern of form, and when this theory is applied to pedagogical literature, it becomes a concern of the form of aesthetic experience as education. In the cases of Gorky, Hacks, and Müller, investment in the pedagogical and political import of art does not mean that the committed work simply serves as an instrument or a convenient package for the propagation a specific message. A work of art—and precisely because it is art—has a greater radical potential than a message alone (or even dressed up) does.

As previously mentioned, each of the methods and authors to be discussed in the subsequent chapters is affiliated with a different theory of how committed art can educate, that is, what the structure of the revelation, communication, or experience of

truth in art is and how these different forms can lead to political outcomes. Socialist Realism, for instance, is didactic and claims to be the highest form of art. As the reflection of a world in the process of development and culminating resolution of every social contradiction, proponents of the method maintains that Socialist Realism itself also sublates all tensions in the art that came before it.<sup>15</sup> Although its didactic aesthetic is far from novel, Socialist Realism insists that it is a new art for a new time.

Counter to this are the texts of Gorky, Hacks, and Müller to be discussed here, whose formal models for radicalization through art are reminiscent of romantic, classical, and avant-garde philosophical aesthetics, respectively. Rather than professing that they had overcome all that had preceded them, the authors explicitly place themselves in close contact with the greater tradition in their reappropriation of these older forms. Similar to the way that dialectical materialism conceives of socialism as a necessary stage that is a higher and qualitatively better version of the more primitive phase of tribal communism, their work does not try to erase the fact that it is historically figured; it initiates a recursion of forms and concepts from older generations, though always with qualitative differences attentive to the historical

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<sup>15</sup> As Karl Radek notes, “The methods of Soviet art [...] are commensurate with the tasks which revolutionary literature sets for itself” in the same way that the proletarian revolution overcomes the reality of capitalism in order to “oppose it by another reality” (155). Moreover, “If we praise our literature as first in the world, we realize at the same time that our literary successes represent not only the merit of our literature, but are first and foremost a result of the fact that we have built the foundation of socialism”; “our literature reflects the idea of a new, socialist society” (160, 161).

situation of each cohort.<sup>16</sup>

Examining these texts in light of their relationships to the broader traditions of literature and of philosophical aesthetics has two major benefits. First, it makes an even stronger case for taking seriously committed art, in general, and committed literature from the Eastern Bloc, in particular. It shows that, even though several major proponents of the Socialist-Realist method arrogantly dismiss all that comes before them and show little concern for the status of their literature as art, there are indeed others who are also invested in producing tendentious socialist literature but who are at least sensitive to and at best deeply engaged with the philosophical *and* artistic traditions that they insist on participating in. Gorky, Hacks, and Müller's radical lessons are built into the structure of their artistic creations. The forms of their works are not merely convenient and entertaining channels for the dissemination of their politics; they are useful tools in their own rights. Secondly, any investigation that wishes to situate these authors in the tradition undertakes an immanent analysis that respects the works of art as art and as players in the wider field of the arts, rather than an analysis that dismissively filters out all of the artistic qualities in these works and thereby instrumentalizes committed art just as much as the Socialist-Realist method

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<sup>16</sup> It is worth remembering the irony that, despite the willful forgetting of the architects of Socialist Realism and their claims to have invented a thoroughly new method, the literature produced according to that method, like the historians who spun their own narratives beside them, were strictly bound by a Marxist materialist conception of history. In fact, the imperative to “society in its revolutionary development” (Zhdanov), as it is and as it will be (Gorky), was such a ubiquitous and rigid feature that Andrei Platonov's *The Foundation Pit* (1930), a satire of Socialist Realism, was set in a seemingly isolated and never-ending present.



has long been derided for doing.

Approaching the work of Gorky, Hacks, and Müller from this perspective is also to engage in a Gramscian-style self-education. While it is true that there is nothing new in the critical approach of identifying homologies across time, this process will create an alternate and far more open understanding of the place of Eastern Bloc literature than that which was held by their own critics. It will refute the thesis that post-revolutionary committed literature only negates and sublates all that comes before it, and it will also reject efforts that seek to understand these works and theories or justify the study of them through either a linear conception of evolution or a passive conception of heritage. I will instead locate these works in the philosophical and literary tradition in which they prove themselves to be willing and active participants through their appropriation of earlier theories of non-didactic aesthetic education. Accordingly, in contrast to critical narratives that relegate committed literature from the Soviet Union and East Germany to one of a variety of inconsequential positions, I seek to identify and articulate the ways that this literature puts itself in contact with the greater tradition of literature and of philosophical aesthetics and to make sense of these gestures not as conservative retreats into the past, but as recursions with a qualitative difference, respectful of the historical specificity of each period and the specificity of the artwork as a work of art.

## CHAPTER 1

### GORKY'S LATENT ROMANTICISM AS *MOTHER'S* AESTHETIC EDUCATION

Although their methods vary, tendentious narratives of any kind rely on models for instructing their readers/pupils. This holds true for the stronger (fables, the gospels) or relatively weaker (19th-century Realism) varieties alike. In the following chapters on Peter Hacks and Heiner Müller, these models will appear in the formal descriptions of intellectual operations (i.e., what should happen in the mind of the audience as they experience a play) and in the staging of a play (i.e., in the experiences of the actors as they perform), respectively. In their most simple incarnations, however, these models are positive characters whom the audience is encouraged explicitly or implicitly to mimic. From the determined tortoise to feminist icon Vera Pavlovna, authors like Aesop and Chernyshevsky depict the journeys and conflicts experienced by their protagonists and carry their narratives through to their ultimate successes, which then serve as justification for their particular perspectives. The illustration of one character's path thus becomes a model for receptive readers: we remind our children to be more patient and persistent like the tortoise, while we aspire to boldness in the face of a judgmental society like Vera Pavlovna.

Maxim Gorky's early novel *Mat'* (*Mother* 1907) falls unmistakably into the category of tendentious literature that depicts aspirational characters, or characters whom they wish to emulate. Based loosely on events leading up to and including the 1902 May Day celebration in Sormovo, near the author's hometown of Nizhny Novgorod, *Mat'* will be the primary site for this chapter's examination of an aesthetic theory of committed socialist literature and, to some extent, that of Socialist Realism.<sup>1</sup> It was first published in 1907, almost three decades before the 1934 Writers' Congress in Moscow, during which the Soviet method of art was first fully articulated and essentially legislated; nevertheless, it has been embraced widely as perhaps the earliest example of literature exemplifying the style and content of what was later coined "Socialist Realism," which was designed chiefly after Gorky's work.<sup>2</sup> A variation on a Bildungsroman, *Mat'* is less of a coming-of-age story than one which narrates the coming-to-consciousness of a middle-aged mother, Nilovna, as she is radicalized "in the spirit of socialism" (Zhdanov) over the course of the novel. The journeys of other characters are also included, but it is clear that Gorky expects his readers to follow the mother most closely down her path to enlightenment. As an impoverished and uneducated woman, she, like most of her author's undereducated Russian readership, must "travel" much further than the others. Gorky makes it easy to identify first with

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the connection of *Mat'* to Sormovo, see Freeborn (1982), pp. 42-44.

<sup>2</sup> Katerina Clark discusses Gorky's privileged position in the development of a Socialist-Realist aesthetic theory and style in the first chapter of her well known study, *The Soviet Novel* (2000, 3rd ed.). Because of this close relation, I will refer to *Mat'* as a work of Socialist Realism.

her struggles and measured growth and in due course with her grasp of and commitment to the greater Purpose (Sinyavksy) or direction of life, as the forward, revolutionary movement of History (the theory of dialectical materialism) and in history (the actual organized masses).

As a kind of Bildungsroman, the novel focuses on the topic of growth, which, in its variation here, is illustrated by a character's progress toward the comprehension of the Purpose, and it takes place on two different planes: at the descriptive level, or in the accounts of how characters search for and arrive at the truth; and at the performative level, or in the operations of the novel itself as it guides the reader along the same path. The import of *Mat'* for the purposes of this chapter is that the novel makes certain implicit claims both about the aesthetic assumptions that fall under the method later labeled Socialist Realism, in particular, and about aesthetics, in general. In its presentation of the search for truth, not only does it describe the status of art relative to the truth, but, as a work of art, it also illustrates this relationship.

Like the Socialist-Realist works that followed it, *Mat'* is unambiguously didactic (Badiou) in its ambition: its characters and readers are to straightforwardly accept the greater Purpose or truth that has been imposed on the work, and, at the same time, the latter are expected to pattern their own development on that of the former as they read, because they are in positions similar to the book's characters and

the novel offers them an alternative to the only path they have ever known.<sup>3</sup> But while the commitment to a didactic thesis holds true for the experience of the majority of the characters in the novel and for Gorky's audience in the education they are expected to receive, it appears to fall short in the title character's portrayal.

For Nilovna, radicalization takes place not when art is put in the service of an external truth, but rather when Nilovna experiences art *as* truth and achieves a higher self-determination. A brief detour to discuss Chernyshevsky's remarkable protagonist Vera Pavlovna in *Chto delat'?* (1863) will help to make the case that Nilovna's experience and education has the character of a theory of art thoroughly different from a didactic education; it is instead romantic. If, for Badiou, didactic aesthetic theory subordinates the artwork to a truth always external to it, romantic aestheticism endorses the thesis that "art alone is capable of truth," that is, it holds and reveals what philosophy and didactic education can only gesture toward and try to explain ("Art and Philosophy" 3). I will eventually turn from Badiou's schemata for various theses on the art-truth relation to writing on aesthetic experience and aesthetic education by the early German Romantics, or *Friihromantiker*, in order to tease out further the stakes of this distinction, for the latter's conceptual frameworks closely resemble Nilovna's process of coming-to-consciousness.

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<sup>3</sup> To review Badiou's definition provided in the introduction, didacticism is that which subscribes to the "thesis that art is incapable of truth" in itself, "or that all truth is external to art" and thus not immanent to it. It is guided by its public effect rather than its own laws and consequently demands no effort on the part of the reader searching for truth in it, as its truth is directly on the surface ("Art and Philosophy" 2-3).

The coincidence of the competing didactic and romantic theories in *Mat'* will be drawn out over the course of this chapter with the intention of exploring how Gorky's description of Nilovna's romantic aestheticism interacts with the didactic aims of the text. If the protagonist, in whom readers are expected to see at least part of themselves and after whom they are implicitly told to model themselves, is only radicalized by way of romantic experiences, what, then, is the status of the didactic project in Gorky's novel? Can these two fundamentally opposed theses about art and truth coexist in a work of art itself, or in any theory?

#### *Didacticism in Mat'*

The intended didactic aesthetic of *Mat'* as a Socialist-Realist novel is thoroughly intertwined with its status as a variation on a Bildungsroman in that it narrates the particular journey of a character. The two variations here are (1) that, instead of describing an individual's ascendancy from naïve youth to sophisticated, bourgeois adulthood, *Mat'*'s protagonist is already physically mature and must instead work towards radical intellectual enlightenment, and (2) that, "unlike a Bildungsroman hero," Clark explains, "her final incarnation has already been determined when she begins her progress to 'consciousness'" (57).

A brief comment on terminology: although both terms may sound patronizing, as they are typically used to describe novels about young people coming-of-age and Gorky's Nilovna is 40 years old, *Mat'* is best located somewhere between a

Bildungsroman and an *Erziehungsroman* (novel of upbringing or educational development). The primary difference between the two is that the Bildungsroman is usually confined to “a developmental process guided by educational authorities and oriented to pedagogical problems” during the protagonist’s youth, whereas the *Erziehungsroman* tends to follow the protagonist from naïve childhood through “intellectual and artistic” maturity in his active, self-driven integration into bourgeois society (Jacobs 230). Correcting for Nilovna’s age, both terms may be said to loosely describe the structure of *Mat’*, as, on the one hand, the novel is concerned with pedagogy and educational authority and, on the other, it depicts her self-directed *Bildung*, even as it takes place over a more condensed period of time and actively avoids integration into the bourgeois order, such as when she finds herself living with the well-to-do urbanite, Nikolai.

For the sake of simplicity, I will refer to the novel as a Bildungsroman, relying principally on the definition provided by Mikhail Bakhtin in his unfinished manuscript on the same topic. He writes that a Bildungsroman is a work which presents “an image of man in the process of becoming”; it is a “novel of human emergence” (“The Bildungsroman” 21). The term aptly describes Gorky’s protagonist’s own *Bildungsgeschichte* and the teleological structure of Nilovna’s story, and it also highlights the vital relationship between readers and the hero identified in 1819 by Karl Morgenstern, who initially coined the term “Bildungsroman,” whereby the former’s own development is fostered by their identification with the latter (Jacobs 230).

Perhaps even more significantly, however, Nilovna is like other Bildungsroman protagonists in that, even in her compressed storyline, “[s]he emerges *along with the world* and [s]he reflects the historical emergence of the world itself.” Not only is she on the path to her own revolutionary consciousness, but, as Gorky writing after 1905 knows, Russia is also on the path to revolution (Bakhtin 23).

Accordingly, neither of the two primary ways that *Mat’* differs from a traditional Bildungsroman is a problem for Gorky: Nilovna, no matter her age, has set out on a path to enlightenment, and just how she will reach that end has yet to be determined. The goal is known, but the path is unclear. And as in the typical Bildungsroman, readers following along experience everything through Nilovna’s eyes and thus have little choice but to identify with—and, it is hoped, eventually end up with the same raised consciousness as—Nilovna and the other less prominent characters, like her son Pavel and his friends, who undergo ostensibly similar, though importantly different, transformations. While the lives his readers lead and the environments they inhabit may differ significantly from what Gorky describes in the novel, the events in it and the experiences of his characters are so superficially portrayed that they can be easily abstracted and mapped onto virtually any modern experience of economic injustice and/or alienation.<sup>4</sup> The basic structure of the text is

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<sup>4</sup> As Mette Bryld details in a 1982 essay, despite Gorky’s massive popularity, early Russian critics condemn Gorky’s novel as ideologically suspect, as it focuses too much on the characters’ private lives and seems to end with the mother sacrificing herself for her son, rather than for the revolutionary cause. It is only after 1932, Bryld claims, that critics finally grasp the “mythical”



determined by the characters' mission to solve these problems and set the world right. This is what gives *Mat*'s Purpose. But unlike other canonical Socialist-Realist novels, like Gladkov's *Tsement* (*Cement* 1925), which focuses on the mobilization of resources, human and otherwise, and the bureaucratic legwork necessary to affect change in the hero's community, Gorky's novel is less concerned with what happens *after* the demonstrations in the factory around which the novel is set than what come *before* them. That is, he is more invested in the presentation of the process of education and consciousness-raising through the identification of what is wrong, understanding why it is wrong, and learning how to fix it.<sup>5</sup>

This is the form of the education undertaken in and provided by *Mat*'. It takes place on two different, though, as seen above, directly related planes—an identification that sets the novel firmly in line with the program defined later as Socialist Realism. Not only are Gorky's positive characters like Nilovna and her son Pavel radicalized, but his eager readers are, as well. Further more, all—at least initially—seem to be educated according to a didactic method, as the message in Gorky's work appears to be tethered to an external truth that can only be imposed on

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dimension of the novel whereby characters like Nilovna and Pavel become meaningful symbols for readers, seeing in them “more or less direct portraits of people from the evolution of the workers' movement” (“M. Gor'kij's *Mat*': Eine mythische Wanderung” 46-49).

<sup>5</sup> In their discussions of characters' rapid change throughout the novel, both Clark and Alyssa Dinega remark upon how seemingly uncomplicated their extreme transformations are. For her part, Clark draws a parallel between the descriptions of Gorky's characters and depersonalized and cliché descriptions of heroes in medieval hagiography. Following Clark, Dinega writes that both “are largely schematic and their personalities shallow and superficially drawn: two-dimensional icons rather than three-dimensional portraits.” “Both are malleable and manipulable,” particularly to an empathetic reader's particular situation (94).

the medium of transmission (the novel itself, the music that moves Nilovna), as opposed to one that is somehow embedded in the artwork itself. Given that the search for truth and the dissemination of it once found are precisely what structure the story of the novel and that this method also characterizes the experience of Gorky's truth-seeking readers, *Mat'* relies heavily on didacticism as an approach to both education through art and education as such. However, the extent to which this project is successful remains to be seen.

First on the matter of what works in Gorky's Socialist-Realist method of didacticism. The task he implicitly assigns to the characters and readers of *Mat'* is not unlike the philosopher and literary critic Georg Lukács's description of what the study of Marxism affords its students: "[It] searches for the material roots of each phenomenon regards them in their historical connections and movement, ascertains the laws of such movement and demonstrates their development from root to flower, and in so doing lifts ever phenomenon out of a merely emotional, irrational, mystic fog and brings it to the bright light of understanding" ("Preface" 1). At the opening of *Mat'*, this fog lies heavy and stagnant over the unnamed provincial settlement in which Gorky sets the first half of his story. Like Pavlov's dogs, workers rise each day to the sound of the whistle of the town factory, which is the single source of employment for men who have no land to till. Then, when work is over, they empty onto the streets. "The day had been devoured by the factory," Gorky writes; "Man had advanced one more step towards his grave. But now he was looking forward to rest

and to the delights of a smoke-filled tavern, and he was content” (10). The eyes of the workers are clouded by both the pollution of the factory and the smoke exhaled after drawing on their pipes. The combination of this cloudiness and the overwhelming “lurking sense of animosity” toward one another helps to perpetuate the unrelenting “malady of the spirit inherited by from their fathers” (11). Any newcomer who attempts to disrupt this routine and clear the air by “sa[ying] things that were new to the settlement” and by telling the workers that life need not be this way is listened to “skeptically [...] as if they feared he might upset the dull regularity of their lives” (23).

At least this is the case for the first few chapters of *Mat*, during which Gorky eases from this description of the average workers’ routine into that of one worker in particular, Mikhail Vlassov, and his son, Pavel, who takes after his drunken lout of a father in both occupation and recreation after the former dies. But young Pavel’s delinquency does not last long, as he quickly finds that he has neither the temperament nor the constitution to keep up with the other men of the town. This shift pleases his mother Nilovna, while also worrying her, as she is both happy and fearful that he has found his own path apart from the “dark stream of common life” (18). Pavel’s new course features sobriety and a voracious intellectual appetite, leading him to read a great deal and stay out late at discussion groups, rather than drink at the local tavern.

For Pavel, the fog is lifting, and he is finally able to see more clearly. The purpose of his self-driven education is not simply pleasure: he is seeking knowledge,

but, even more importantly, answers. “I am reading forbidden books,” he responds when Nilovna tentatively asks him what has been keeping him so intently occupied. “They are forbidden because they tell the truth about us workingmen. [...] I want to know the truth, do you understand?” (2). That she does not understand is evident in Nilovna’s reaction: “Opening her eyes, she looked at her son and scarcely knew him” (21). While she may be capable of seeing her son, she does not yet fully know him or comprehend his new mission. Thus, for one character, this personal quest is nearly complete, as Pavel’s studies have taken him far. When he talks politics with his mother in the statement that follows this heart-to-heart, it is “his first speech on the truth he had just come to know,” and it is a meaningful moment for him (*ibid*). For Nilovna, however, this journey—her desire not simply to see, but to understand—has only just begun, whether or not she knows it.

The novel is set principally around Nilovna’s own development, but for now this discussion will focus on Pavel and his fellow intellectuals and revolutionaries and their own process of coming-to-consciousness. So far I have framed his growth, which more or less mirrors that of his colleagues, in terms of a metaphorical journey, the destination of which is the “truth.” What truth do they seek? What questions do they want to answer? What problems do they want to solve? As Pavel states, he craves the “truth of the workingman”: “We must find out and understand why our lives are so hard” and why “people who, anxious to do good [and sow] the truth among the masses” are punished so severely for their honesty (22-23). In terms that often pop up

in their late-night conversations and that are beginning to gain more traction throughout the world Gorky's readers know, Pavel and the others want to comprehend the reasons for and means of the exploitation they and others around them have faced, as well as the nature of their alienation from themselves, from others, and from the state that should be their protector.

With what appears to be little effort, they quickly find what they are looking for in the doctrine of Socialism, and in their individual and collective agitation for and display of fidelity to revolution, now simmering before the events of 1905, they reveal their shared understanding of modern life's greatest ills (exploitation and alienation), the source of these problems (socio-economic inequalities), and the objective of their work as activists, which they declare in the following way: "Is it only a full stomach we want? [...] We want to live a life worthy of human beings" (34). They are aware that theirs is a slow and laborious assignment, yet "every gathering was one more step in the long stairway up which people were slowly climbing to some distant goal" (37). This journey would necessitate the gradual raising of their individual consciousnesses, the continuation of their educations, as well as the universal restoration of what they imply is the lost unity both internal to and between individuals. A "life worthy of human beings" demands that man no longer be alienated from himself and others; it demands that individuals form a community, but not one nostalgic for a totality allegedly in existence prior to the ravages of modern life, but rather one that would negate and transcend the problems and contradictions of the present day.

While this is clearly the greater aim of the principle characters in *Mat'*, the scope of the novel is limited to the period prior to the wide-spread upheaval of 1905, and it is a stage marked by personal education (reading, debating with the like-minded) and early agitation (production of propaganda and other literature, small demonstrations, actions of civil disobedience). The revolution has begun, but it is not yet in full swing. The powerful ideas and logical tools that Pavel and his co-revolutionaries cull from their readings and late-night discussions have not just provided them with answers to their initial questions about (in)justice. That is to say, their education is not simply negative, pounding away at the walls of ideology that are situated between their understanding and the hidden truth of it all. Rather, this work is also positive in the sense that it provides them with the Purpose, as Sinyavsky defines it: more than simply a goal to work towards, it is a blueprint for how to understand and then revise and eventually reconstruct what their studies have told them to demolish. Additionally, the truth they eventually grasp is presented to them by books and mentors. As the perspective of the narrator is largely limited to what Nilovna comprehends, readers are not privy to every step of the edification of Pavel and his comrades as they accumulate more and more information. Nevertheless, it is clear that they are undergoing a didactic education whereby they are given the answers to the questions they have been pursuing, the most inspiring of which is undoubtedly the idea at the root of their suffering—ills like poverty and hunger—are social and economic inequality and the contradictions therein, which lead initially to exploitation

and alienation and eventually to proletarian revolution. Even though the evening gatherings of Pavel's circle certainly feature debates and the working-through of various issues, most if not all of these moments are (1) predicated on a shared understanding of the problems of their day and the forces that produced them and (2) concerned less with what the future must look like and more with the negotiation of how and when that promised future should be realized, that is, how and when to agitate.<sup>6</sup>

The edificatory process of the group appears to parallel directly the experience of Gorky's readers: the opening of the novel provides them with the information they need to identify the troubles of workers in and beyond this town; then, in the Nilovna household and alongside Pavel's circle, they learn (and relearn, and relearn...) the root causes of and solutions for these problems; and, finally, in the last three-quarters of the book, various potential avenues for action (demonstrations, dissemination of radical literature) are tested and their likely positive (wide-spread consciousness-raising, labor reforms) and negative (unemployment, jail, exile) consequences are openly pondered.

In order to best draw out this parallel, the ways that these characters, and, if the novel succeeds in its self-given pedagogical task, Gorky's readers are radicalized

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<sup>6</sup> For examples of these discussions, see the following: Natasha examines the social origin of suffering (31); Vesovshchikov says, "If it's time to fight, why sit with folded hands?" (34); Vsovshchikov on Sasha's perspective: "for her it's a 'must'; for us it's 'can' and 'want to'" (40); and Pavel calls for the production of propaganda (43).

can be broken down into three aspects. First, the nature of *the education of the subject*. For both the characters and readers, the advancement of their radicalization is mostly dependent on teacher-student-like relationships. For readers, Gorky's narrator assumes the same role that various books and mentors play for Pavel and the others, namely, the didactic and authorial role of the one who possesses and discloses the truth. Moreover, while the characters all may read alone, the environment in which these ideas are cemented is communal, for it is in their discussions that they effectively pool the knowledge they have gained from the various texts they have read and people they have been in contact with. Finding agreement in the acquired information, they thereby confirm the accuracy of what they have been told. For readers, the communal aspect is located in the relationships they form with these characters. The novel itself serves as the pedagogical text that hands down truths, and its veracity is confirmed both in the discussions taking place around Pavel and in the greater narrative of *Mat'*. In her essay, "Maksim Gor'kij's *Mat'*: A Primer for Consciousness Raising" (1987), Virginia Bennett explains that even the structure of the novel is pedagogically calculated, starting with its division into two parts (before radicalization and after), each of which contains 29 chapters "meant to be read a few pages at a time and [...] intended for serialization in newspapers or for distribution in leaflet form [to be] easily assimilated by the unskilled reader in a relatively short period of time" (86-87).

Secondly, *the subject's grasp of the truth or Purpose*. For Pavel and his comrades,



the object of their studies is seized through the gradual process of reflecting on personal experiences of injustice and accumulating information by reading and then working through the connections presented in those texts. What results is an ability to mechanistically apply categories (labor, owner, exploitation) to explain the suffering they read about and endure personally. While the terms of political economy are, admittedly, never explicitly used by the group, they nevertheless help to illustrate how the characters come to see that their own dire situation (call it phenomenon C) results from, for example, the concentration of the forces of production in the hands of the minority class (condition A) and the government's oscillating indifference to and aggressive hostility toward the masses (condition B), where  $A+B \Rightarrow C$ . Of additional importance is that the group comes to find an explanation for this and all relations in the totality of capitalism, which they believe is more than just a personal nightmare, as it also holds the promise of something better, superficially, its eventual sublation through revolution emancipating all people and creating a "life worthy of human beings." And, once again, the didactic messages and Bildungsroman structure of the novel obliges readers to apply the same explanatory categories used by the characters in order to understand the events of *Mat'*. As Bennett notes along these same lines, each of the bite-sized chapters "ends with a provocative statement, a moment of suspense, or a link to the next chapter" so as to train readers and mold their understanding of causality, of the consequences of the past for what follows it, and, even more generally, of the way the world works (87). In so doing, readers finish the

novel with the same revelation of the Purpose as Pavel and his comrades: the totality of our historical moment is determined by capitalism, and although it has a plethora of negative consequences for both the individual and society, it also harbors a latent revolutionary potential which must be excited if it is to become manifest. According to Bennett, all of this is accomplished by using “simple language and striking, direct imagery” and “elements from oral traditions [that] are very skillfully combined with political and social terminology and with Party doctrines and slogans” (93).

Finally, *the status of politics relative to the subject’s education and knowledge of the truth*. The candid aim of all of the pedagogy of this text relative to the characters and the readers is not just to impart the truth, but ultimately to reveal politics as action—demonstrations, marches, strikes, etc.—which the characters expect will eventually result in the complete overhaul of the existing governmental and economic power and authority. And while this demand is for change on a grand, revolutionary scale, it starts at the grassroots, or rather, factory floor, where readers see that political action means more than just disrupting the authority of the state or managers in the workplace. It is also tied to the political power that ideas themselves have, and, consequently, the activity of real revolutionaries must also be devoted to educational campaigns, i.e., campaigns of political radicalization that drive to mold minds and behavior at the individual level, producing both the soldiers and the didacts of tomorrow. Once this message is clear to the characters of the novel, it takes Gorky’s readers no time to identify in *Mat’* the same connection between pedagogical text and

political engagement.

In their studies, Pavel and his circle seek explanations for the various ravages of modern life, and when they uncover them, they find that simply identifying the truth of the matter will not satisfactorily resolve these problems. They must also engage in meaningful political action by laying bare the truth for all to see and working hard to defeat and eventually overcome the status quo. Accordingly, the role of didactics is prominent in the narrative of *Mat'*, for it is the method by which Pavel and his comrades learn and also teach: the truth and greater Purpose is revealed to pupils, who understand by simply applying the categories given to them and then acting in accordance with what they have been told. The novel is also didactic: Even though readers do not necessarily pick it up because they want to know something specific, the text addresses something specific. It not only posits questions and problems to which particular answers and solutions are given, but it also teaches readers what to do with this newfound knowledge—and both of these activities are modeled by the characters discussed here as they blaze for their readers the righteous trail of intellectual development and political radicalization.

For Pavel and his comrades and for the readers of *Mat'*, the process of education is eclipsed by the truth it uncovers, and its work, while part of the struggle for emancipation, is considered superfluous once the revolution is successful. Even Gorky's own novel appears to be a mere means to this end, as it serves an external truth of an altogether external aim. A somewhat brief, though not entirely tangential,

interlude to this discussion of *Mat'* will help illuminate that this is limited reading of Gorky's novel.

*The Limits of Didacticism I: Chernyshevsky's Chto delat'?*

Before delving further into Gorky's novel—after all, his protagonist has largely been left out of the discussion thus far—I now turn to another classic radical Russian text which had, it would be easy to argue, a far more widespread impact than *Mat'*: Nikolai Chernyshevsky's *Chto delat'?*. While the consideration of these two novels side-by-side is nothing new, as critics like Bennett and Clark have aptly identified common feminist themes and hagiographic character descriptions, respectively, my aim in this comparison is to give Chernyshevsky the space to draw out the representation of an alternative radicalism, one which may seem akin to, but is in fact quite different from, the solely didactic approach to education provided in Gorky's description of the characters in Pavel's group (Bennett 91; Clark 59). In the end, this distinction will help to define the unique contours of Pavel's mother, Nilovna's own *Bildung*, or, otherwise defined for the aims of the Socialist-Realist novel, path to enlightenment and radical consciousness. As she is the principle character—the only one through whose eyes readers can see and try to understand the world presented to them—and thereby the one after whom readers are ostensibly expected to model their own development, the proposition that her journey is fundamentally and meaningfully different from the more traditional and ordinary one shared by her son and his comrades demands a

great deal of explication, especially because I have already shown how easy it is to see a close parallel development between these characters and Gorky's readers. A quick look at Chernyshevsky's heroine, Vera Pavlovna, as well as the author qua narrator's own literary-critical meditations in the text will help to open up this argument.

There is one principle aspect of Chernyshevsky's novel that will eventually facilitate the illumination of the hitherto ignored, yet certainly more provocative dimensions of Gorky's *Mat'*, and that is the status of education, which enjoys a broader definition in *Chto delat'?*, and its relationship to politics. First, a closer look at narration will provide a vantage point for closer attention to the intersection of these two concepts. The narrative modes of both novels is a third-person and limited omniscient point-of-view, and it is clear from their analyses of the events they recount, the scenes they detail, and the character commentaries they offer that each of them is well educated and that their presentations are equally tendentious. Furthermore, the way that education—less as the search for, and more as the uncovering and receiving of, knowledge and truth—and the propagation of the fruits of that learning via political agitation are not merely themes of *Mat'* but are actually intrinsic to its Bildungsroman form is another aspect of its similarity to Chernyshevsky's work, which narrates all of the twists and turns of Vera Pavlovna's *Bildung*. Both narratives are didactic, or instructional, and the truths imposed on the text must slowly be revealed throughout the course of the novel alongside their characters' development.

The most visible truths given to readers of both texts are not entirely alike, though they do rotate around shared arguments about modern economic exploitation and the necessity of emancipating and empowering human beings as individuals and as partners in a given collective effort. Gorky's narrator imparts these messages as his characters arrive at them in their own studies; the combination of his characters' virtually blind and fully embracing acceptance of them and his own preaching tone when describing scenes of abuse and dehumanization underscores their veracity. Chernyshevsky's narrator, on the other hand, propagates his messages even more directly. It is possible that he has to, given that the arc of his characters' growth over the course of the story does not have the same dramatic breadth or cover as much ground as those who inhabit Gorky's novel. Because of the formal (school, access to high culture) and informal (personal libraries, access to the elite of society) education the main actors in *Ch'to delat'?* already have access to, they start ahead of the game. In view of that, the fact that Vera Pavlovna's development from intelligent, self-driven petit-bourgeois girl to intelligent, self-driven emancipated woman seems less extraordinary and of less significance than Gorky's characters' movement from virtual ignorance to radical consciousness. If he were to rely only on his characters' development to model for readers the process of coming-to-consciousness and thereby reveal the knowledge he seeks to impart to both groups simultaneously in the novel, Chernyshevsky's narrator would likely leave a good part of his audience behind given that, when Vera Pavlovna and her friends are first introduced, they are already

at a relatively advanced stage in progress towards their goal. This fact is more or less acknowledged in the preface, where, in an address to his readers, the narrator declares, “Good, strong, honest, capable people,” that is, people like his characters, “you have only just begun to appear among us [...]. [...] But you’re not yet my entire audience, although some of you are numbered among my readers. Therefore, it’s still necessary and already possible for me to write” (49).

Because only a fraction of his audience would be capable of following alongside his remarkably advanced characters, the pedagogical method of Chernyshevsky’s narrator cannot rely solely on the Bildungsroman aspect of his novel to educate his readers. Consequently, his didactic approach depends far less than Gorky’s narrator’s on a parallel intellectual development shared by his characters and readers in order to reveal the truths he endeavors to convey. Instead, Chernyshevsky’s narrator typically states these truths outright and then offers supporting evidence in the way the narrative itself unfolds in accordance with his claim. In fact, he already begins to share what might be considered the great truth of the entire novel in the opening section of his first chapter when the largely self-educated protagonist’s ignorant and drunkenly rambling mother asks Vera Pavlovna about her studies: “[I]n those books of yours it says that in order not to live like this, everything has to be organized differently; now, no one can live any other way. So why don’t they hurry up and set up a new order.” Even though Marya Aleksevna’s monologue tapers off with her advocating for everyone to “live by the old” order because, as of yet, “there’s no

new order,” she has prepared readers to see the clear correlation the narrator draws between education and political action throughout his story (58-59). The remainder of the novel is quite simply a demonstration of what that new order will look like (a blend of cooperative business, like Vera Pavlovna’s workshop, and what Chernyshevsky calls in other writings “rational egoism”) and how exactly it will be manifested.<sup>7</sup> All along the way, this presentation is supported by a number of axiomatic statements by the narrator as well as references to truths imparted to Vera Pavlovna and her likeminded friends/lovers in their studies, both formal and informal.<sup>8</sup> But this display of the connection between demonstrative, didactic pedagogy and political action does not exhaust the educative function of Chernyshevsky’s novel, as his narrator strongly insists on the inclusion of a third

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<sup>7</sup> Intellectual historian Andrzej Walicki has defined Chernyshevsky’s rational egoism as an attitude that affirms the equality of all men as long as they act in accordance with egalitarian principles, which is a behavior justified by the belief that “Egoism that is truly rational makes men understand that they have an interest in the common and ought to help each other” (196). Readers of *Chto delat’?* recognize this as the code by which Vera Pavlovna and her close friends live. For a non-fictional account, see Chernyshevsky’s “The Anthropological Principle of Art in Philosophy” (1850).

<sup>8</sup> Often this formal education is signaled by the wide-ranging references included in conversations between characters and in descriptions of their interests. A selection from just the first half of the novel: Verdi (96), George Sand and Dickens (103), Feuerbach (112), Gogol (154), Archbishop François de Salignac de la Mothe Fénelon and Rousseau disciple Stéphanie-Félicité du Crest de Saint-Aubin, comtesse de Genlis (208), the journal *Revue étrangère de la littérature, des sciences et des arts* (209), the pathologist Rudolf Virchow, the physicians Claude Bernard, Hermann Boerhaave, Christoph Wilhelm Hufeland, William Harvey, and Edward Jenner (all 213-14), *The Thousand and One Arabian Nights* (230), and Harriet Beecher Stowe and John Howard (231). The narration of the story is also packed with references. Again, a selection from the first half of the novel: Hume, Edward Gibbon, Leopold von Ranke, and Augustin Thierry (all 76-77), various historians of Napoleon’s fall (83-4), the manufacturer Francis Gardner (98), various historical figures from the Near East (109), Louis Philippe and Metternich (*ibid*), Saxon the Grammarian (114), Baron Justus von Liebig (180), Feuerbach again (*ibid*), Comte (204), Voltaire (210), Aesop (232), and Gogol again (233). (This collection of citations is heavily indebted to William G. Wagner, whose excellent annotations are found in the Cornell UP translation of *What Is to Be Done?* (1989).)



element in this configuration.

Up to this point, Gorky and Chernyshevsky's novels have not differed greatly in their descriptions of and own attempts at presenting truths through an education that is didactic, but there is still a significant point of divergence between the two that has yet to be discussed. In *Chto delat'?* radical politics is not reduced to the mere outcome of a sufficiently agitating didactic education, which is what superficially appears to be the sole aim for the characters and readers of *Mat'*. For the latter, grasping at the answers provided in and by the novel equips them with a truth that can be mobilized in the service of revolution. As already shown, this line of causation is certainly not absent in Chernyshevsky's novel; relative to Gorky's novel, however, its use of didacticism is limited because it explicitly ruminates on the very medium through which these two authors choose to convey their own truths: literature. And in reading these two texts together, the definition of education operative in *Mat'* can be broadened by Chernyshevsky's narrator to also take into account the potential of the novel as a work of art.

The preface to *Chto delat'?*, which follows a short section called "Durak" 'A Fool' and precedes the novel's first chapter, is the first of many times the narrator speaks directly to the audience. In response to "the reader," who states that he has solved the mystery set up in the first short section, the narrator explains, "Why, you know nothing at all by yourself!" (47). The remainder of the preface and the numerous asides to and discussions with the reader in the nearly 400 pages that follow

seek to diminish that ignorance by “spell[ing] everything out” for Chernyshevsky’s audience, “since you’re merely amateurs, and not at all experts at deciphering unstated meanings” (48). In the moments dedicated to the elucidation of these supposedly veiled and difficult-to-grasp points and of the narrative and character choices the narrator makes while relaying the story, even more light is shed on Chernyshevsky’s own aesthetic theory, which weaves together the strands of education and politics already seen in *Mat’* with the concerns of fiction, particularly, and of art, more generally.<sup>9</sup>

First, the introductory short section appears to betray what literary convention encourages readers to take to be the climax of the novel (what seems like the suicide of one character and the reaction of another to it), but it does so with mostly anonymous characters and without plot exposition. The preface, which comes next, explains and justifies to readers the choice to divulge so much so early on in the book, a choice, they are told, that is pedagogically motivated. This decision, the

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<sup>9</sup> I do not intend to conflate carelessly Chernyshevsky’s narrator with the author himself, but even a cursory look at some of Chernyshevsky’s literary criticism demonstrates their virtually identical positions. The most productive text on this matter is a review (1888) the author wrote of his own dissertation (“The Aesthetic Relation of Art to Reality” 1855), in which Chernyshevsky clarifies, simplifies, and, when necessary, corrects his earlier text. The review begins with the assertion that literature must follow contemporary science in distinguishing between man’s true needs and his desires or dreams, because once his needs are met and life is satisfactory to him, he will find that “the dreams of the imagination are far less beautiful and attractive than what we find in reality” (388). Accordingly, the first purpose of art is “to reproduce nature and life” so as to “assist the imagination and [to] work with a real aim,” and this aim should be “a judgment [by the artist] on the phenomena reproduced” that allows readers to see “life as it should be according to our conceptions,” that is, a satisfactory and beautiful life (401, 404). For this reason art also has a practical purpose, namely, “its beneficial influence on life and education” (409). “[N]ature does not always correspond to [man’s] needs,” so art takes up the slack by “alter[ing] objective reality in order to adapt it to the requirements of his practical life” (410).

narrator argues, “reveal[s] that I have a very poor opinion of my public,” which is that “You have poor instincts that are in need of assistance.” He goes on to warn readers that they will have relatively little work to do as they move through the novel. In his words, “No mysteries lie ahead: you will always know the outcome of every situation at least twenty pages in advance. [...] I shall even tell you the outcome of the entire novel: it will end happily, amidst wine and song.” Thus, readers are expected to change their mode of engagement with the text so that they may pay attention to the narrative itself rather than merely anticipating big plot points.<sup>10</sup> The primary hope here is that this shift in attention will cause readers to more actively notice that which they could so easily gloss over in a plot-driven novel (and perhaps even in the world itself). In pointing this out, the narrator believes he is preparing his audience for more than just the shape of the novel to come, for, according to conventional standards, “I possess not one bit of artistic talent,” and this lack, he continues, must be compensated by serving the truth: “any merit to be found in my tale is due entirely to its truthfulness” (47-48).<sup>11</sup>

Despite this display of self-deprecation, the narrator makes this statement in

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<sup>10</sup> While his style varies greatly from that of Chernyshevsky, Brecht also discusses the benefits of “spoiling the story” for the audience. The essay “The Modern Theatre Is the Epic Theatre” (1930) in particular calls for a theatre that keeps the spectator’s “eyes on the course” (the process of how things happen) rather than the “finish” so as to educate and thereby arouse “his capacity for action” instead of merely “provid[ing] him with sensations” (37).

<sup>11</sup> As the musings of the positive, developed characters in the novel almost always run parallel to the narrator’s own stated beliefs, they provide even more explication of the aesthetic theory dominating the novel. From a statement by Lopukhov later on: “[T]heory is prosaic, but it reveals the genuine motives of life; poetry resides in the truth of life. Why is Shakespeare the greatest poet? Because his works contain more truth of life and less delusion than those of other poets” (116).

the subsequent paragraph:

When I say I have not one bit of artistic talent and that my tale is a very weak piece of work, you should by no means conclude that I'm any worse than those authors whom you consider to be great, or that my novel is any poorer than theirs. That is not at all what I mean. I mean that my tale suffers from imperfections when it's compared with the works of genuinely gifted writers. As far as the worth of its execution is concerned, you can confidently place my tale side by side with the most famous works of your well-known authors. Perhaps you'd not do wrong to place it even higher than theirs! It certainly contains more artistry—rest assured on that point. (48)

According to the narrator, “the worth of its execution,” the value of the labor that went into the novel, is—at least!—as remarkable as the greatest works of literature, and the reason for this is that it “certainly contains more artistry” than “the most famous works of your well-known authors.” His artistic ability secures him a position among the best of the best not because of the artistic quality or refinement of his work, which he acknowledges “suffers from imperfections,” but because he is capable of presenting truth and chooses to do so, and this commitment serves the additional aim of educating his readers, who, he claims at the end of the preface, are “on my side” (49). The significance of this truthfulness for the instruction of readers depends

on the situation.<sup>12</sup> For instance, in one scene the narrator points out that “Marya Aleksevna’s relationship with Lopukhov”—her son’s tutor and Vera Pavlovna’s eventual husband—“verge on farce and show her in a comic guise. Both of these outcomes are decidedly unintended. If I had wanted to concern myself with what we usually call artistic merit, I would have concealed” their relationship, as it “lends an air of vaudeville to this part of the novel.” He continues to say that his intention was merely to show what really took place and not what would have been most beneficial for his “artistic reputation” (119). The significance of his truthfulness in this instance has little pedagogical weight beyond characterization and validation of the narrator’s own artistic project.

A second example, however, will begin to tie together the three strands hitherto discussed. In the second half of the novel is an eighteen-page aside about the character named Rakhmetov, whose commitment to the truths he holds is unparalleled and, yet, whose function in the events of the main storyline is of virtually no consequence. Upon the completion of this aside, it is said that the reader must assume, given literary conventions, that this character will hereafter take the place of the protagonist, a shift in focus that the narrator resolutely rejects: “Rakhmetov has been introduced to fulfill the principle, most fundamental requirement of art, and

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<sup>12</sup> For more of the narrator’s claims to be devoted to distilling and presenting only the truth in his novel, see the following notable examples: attesting that Vera Pavlovna’s story is remarkable when compared to other girls of her station and that her story is being told “with her permission” (88-89); asserting that the only material included is that which describes thoughts, actions, and minimal additional information for the purpose of characterization (151); describing what he “could have and would have done” as narrator if he were less concerned with being truthful (163).

exclusively to satisfy it” (294). The exact nature of that principle is not spelled out until a later discussion between the narrator and the reader, which is also the most complete statement of the aesthetic theory governing the choices made in the production of the novel as a whole. Here readers learn that Rakhmetov’s role is to bring out the “true form” of Vera Pavlovna, because the “depict[ion] of objects so that the reader can perceive their true form” is the “first requirement of art.” And since the narrator “wanted to depict decent, *ordinary* people of the new generation” and not an “idealized figure” who might be “inconceivable in reality,” he explains that he had to contrast them with someone as extraordinary as Rakhmetov so that readers would not “look at a picture of an ordinary house and mistake it for a luxurious palace” (emphasis added, 311-13).<sup>13</sup>

Despite the fact that they are clearly much more advanced than the people they pass on the street and, likely, the readers of Chernyshevsky’s novel, the narrator insists that Vera Pavlovna and her friends are ordinary because he believes that his characterizations contrasting them with the mighty Rakhmetov give the audience the sense that they, too, can and should aim to be just as successful. He continues, still speaking to his audience:

[I]t’s not they who stand too high, but you who stand too low. Now you see that they’re simply standing at ground level; they appeared to be soaring

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<sup>13</sup> On the narrator’s claims that he does not depict “ideals of perfection,” see the discussion where he admits that, “Without feeling the least bit ashamed, I’ve compromised Vera Pavlovna many times form a poetical standpoint” (348).

above the clouds because you're sitting in some godforsaken underworld. [...] Come up out of your godforsaken underworld, my friends, come up. It's not so difficult. Come into the light of day, where life is good; the path is easy and inviting. Try it: development, development. Observe, reflect, read [...]. (313)

The narrator calls for his audience not only to be inspired by the story he is telling and the characters he presents, but also to spend time with them and meditate on the truths that are revealed through their development, that is, the way they cultivate themselves and their relationships (which, of course, are guided by the narrator's own pedagogical goals). At the point this call to advancement is made, it is clear to readers that there is a political plea behind it, as the plot of *Chto delat'?* focuses so strongly on the efforts of the characters to progress beyond the status quo of St. Petersburg and, if the narrator is to be believed, status of his readers, as well. Even though Marya Aleksevna is unable to see it, a "new order" is indeed forming, one in which businesses thrive when organized as cooperative workshops and romantic couples find their greatest happiness in respect for each partner's complete self-determination. These are the concrete political recommendations of the novel.

What Chernyshevsky's narrator explicitly discusses here is also, it could be argued, what is implied throughout Gorky's novel, and it has to do with the capacity of didactic art, not just didacticism as such, to inspire meaningful action.<sup>14</sup> In *Chto*

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<sup>14</sup> The closest Gorky comes in *Mat'* to acknowledging outright the potential power of the written word (in media other than a newspaper or brochure) is through the mouth of the character Rybin,

*delat'*? the political power of art is borne out of a truthful presentation of what is possible, as long as it is tempered by readers' ability to maintain perspective, that is, to keep their feet rooted firmly in reality while they learn to strive for a better life; not to mistake the real for the ideal or vice versa, but rather to see how, for instance, Vera Pavlovna's intelligence and many gifts are a result of her actualizing the latent potential in the culture of her time. The latter point has the additional significance of demonstrating just how much broader the concept of education is in *Chto delat'?* than in *Mat'*. Not only does it attend to the specificity of art for politics—what art in particular makes possible that other kinds of work can't—but it also communicates another possible role for art with respect to education and politics, namely, how self-cultivation as radicalization is itself an art.

This final point is no more apparent to readers than in the figure of Chernyshevsky's own heroine. Despite the narrator's claims to the contrary, Vera Pavlovna's is far from "ordinary," an assertion that is most persuasively corroborated by a dream she has near the end of the novel. In this scene, readers are told that a very happy Vera Pavlovna discovers that she is able to observe her true self for the first time, as this "true self" takes a form external to her, one that she can engage with and examine. In the exchange that follows, Vera Pavlovna is finally able to take in the magnitude of her development over the past several years (all documented in the

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who, after a long diatribe on everyday class warfare, exclaims, "Give me books, the kind that won't let a fellow sleep after he's read them. We want to plant a hedgehog under their skulls, with sharp bristles! [...] Let them write so's the letters sizzle! So's the people will die for the cause!" (152).



story), and she sees that she has turned into a goddess. As she talks with the goddess “Vera,” she gradually realizes that her satisfaction with and affection for the life she has created for herself makes her “lovelier than all the famous beauties known before,” and that, in the eyes of the man who loves her, “all ideals pale beside” her (366-67).

Accordingly, Vera Pavlovna comes to exemplify fully the values to which readers are told they should also aspire, and she represents the truth in the sense that she embodies the still quiet potential in all mankind. In her activation of that potential, she rises to a realm beyond the mere mortal, a domain where her relationships with others and her own faculties operate in such harmony that she, as the goddess Vera, can state, “I am freedom” (368). By the end of the novel, Vera Pavlovna is both emancipated and the figure of emancipation, the former an effect of her didactic education and the latter an effect of her own self-directed *Bildung*.

Vera Pavlovna’s ascendancy to the immortal stage where “all ideals pale beside” her offers and appreciably different method for conveying truth (as the cause of what is wrong; as what is possible for ourselves and the world; as what is needed and how to act) than the one illustrated by the development of Gorky’s characters and, for that matter, the statements of Chernyshevsky’s own narrator. Pavel and his cohort seek, are given, and latch onto truths that they then pass on to others in a similar fashion; this is also the approach advocated by Chernyshevsky’s narrator in his discussions of how truthful literature—literature that displays real artistry—must

operate if it is to be successful, that is, to have a genuine political impact. Admittedly, Vera Pavlovna's own approach to education is somewhat similar, in that she, too, spends a great deal of time looking for answers in books and in messages from other authority figures that she can then put in the service of her own agenda.

Nevertheless, this didactic method of learning is supplemented by what might be called a romantic education whereby Vera Pavlovna molds and reforms herself according to higher ideals and, through her efforts in the community, works to ensure that the same achievement be realized in the world around her. As the narrator writes in praise of her growth half-way through the novel, "Vera's development was not only moral. If a woman's beauty is genuine, then [...] such a woman continues to improve with each passing year. Yes, three years of life at such a period do a great deal to develop much that is good in the soul, in the eyes, in facial features, and in the whole person, provided that person is good and life is, too" (218). For Vera, the wholeness and goodness she strives for, as well as the immortality she eventually achieves, is also a kind of beauty in a romantic sense; her political action has an aesthetic character, as Vera Pavlovna turns herself into a work of art.

The benefit of reading Chernyshevsky's novel alongside Gorky's is that *Chto delat'?* brings to the fore problems that are merely implicit in *Mat'* and that may easily, though, I think, at great cost, go unnoticed. Chernyshevsky ensures that his decision to disseminate his message in an artistic work does not go unnoticed or unreflected, as he forces his readers to consider what fiction alone can contribute to the effort to

build a new world as Vera Pavlovna does. This greater attention to the specificity and unique strengths of art then shines a light on the way that, once they have reached their culmination, Vera Pavlovna's own political projects, be they personal (herself) or public (her workshop), are portrayed as works of art in their completeness and self-determination. In the end, the imperative of a didactic aesthetics preached by the narrator appears to be undercut, or at least challenged, by what readers come to see as the telos of his own protagonist's development. The question then remains: is it logically possible for a didactic path of education, dependent as it is on an externally imposed truth, to culminate in a romantic ideal of human perfection, for which truth (as balance, harmony, self-determination) is immanent? If possible, would it even be desirable?

*The Limits of Didacticism II: Gorky's Mat'*

In Vera Pavlovna's realization of her full potential as a human being and her continued striving to assist others in that same endeavor, she reaches the telos of the journey also embarked upon by Pavel and his circle, but with surprising and different results. Although all of them undertake a similar approach to self-education, Gorky's characters end up as radical didacts who are free-in-spirit if not in actuality, whereas Vera Pavlovna achieves self-determination. She *is* freedom. Interestingly, the development of Gorky's protagonist Nilovna more closely resembles Vera Pavlovna's own growth than that of her son.

Due to a lack of worldly experience and formal education, as well as the seclusion of her station as a homemaker, the mostly illiterate Nilovna does not and even cannot learn the same way that her son and his friends do. As the protagonist and thus model character of the novel qua Bildungsroman, her development is of central importance to both the narrative and the didacts of the texts, and readers follow her down a route that is an alternative to that of the young revolutionaries meeting in her living room. The latter educate themselves by forming intimate pedagogical relationships with books and with other individuals, and it is clear from the disproportionate attention these meetings are given in the novel that Pavel and his cohort are most engaged and inspired by their communal study sessions. Nilovna's comparative isolation, then—in her intellectual life and general day-to-day existence—signals that her emergence as a radical subject must be attributed to a self-directed pedagogy that is undertaken both consciously and unconsciously and is relatively private and individual.

Initially, she does not study, write, or even read fluently, though she can identify most letters, but she is motivated nevertheless by Pavel's friend Andrei to pursue some course of education. He encourages her formal studies by making such claims as, "The only people worthy of the game are those who devote themselves to freeing the mind of man" and declaring to Nilovna that "You've simply got to learn" to read. Her first response to his imploring is exasperation, dejectedly asserting that "Everything's simple when you're young. But when you grow older—so many cares,

so little strength, and no brains at all!” (103). Needless to say, influenced by the incessant studying of those around her, Nilovna’s opinion quickly changes, and she begins to re-teach herself to read. However, these moments are mostly left to the imaginations of Gorky’s audience, as there are only a couple of brief acknowledgements of the progress she makes in her self-directed sessions: one from Pavel, which is forgotten as soon as it is mentioned, and one in the narration in the second half of the novel where readers are told that, “She had by this time learned to read, but it required such great effort that she quickly tired and could not grasp the relation of one word to another” (126, 230). The parts are now recognizable, but the whole is still beyond her grasp.

For Nilovna’s son and his comrades, the highest level of education in preparation for revolution is to be achieved by working through written texts, that is, seeking out a didactic education often in the company of others, and then sharing what is gleaned from those activities with the larger group and society, more broadly. As Pavel succinctly puts it, “First study, and then teach others” (22). But for Nilovna, whether or not she gains anything from reading is ambiguous at best. This kind of intellectual labor exhausts her. What, then, does she find stimulating? Insofar as this novel chronicles one woman’s path to radicalization, what experience or engagement is to be credited for raising her consciousness? As far as Gorky’s readers know, Nilovna’s reading seems to have little impact on her. Additionally, the diatribes of Pavel and Nikolai, the teacher with whom Nilovna lives after her son is put in jail,

appear to move her, but little is shared about what exactly that means.

Only closer attention to the narration can reveal that the greatest influence of all on Nilovna is beauty or art, which, as far as readers can surmise, is absent from her life prior to living with Nikolai. Continuing the quotation about her difficulties understanding the “relation of one word to another” will underscore this claim: “But she took a childlike pleasure in looking at pictures. They revealed to her a new and wonderful world which she understood, and which she found almost tangible. [...] Life kept endlessly expanding, opening her eyes to one wonder after another, exciting her thirsting soul by an exhibition of its lavish treasures, its inexhaustible beauty” (230).

Before discussing the privileged status of beauty, in general, and art, in particular, additional comparisons of Nilovna and her son’s cohort must be made in order to best highlight the mother’s unique path apart from the agitators around her. Her goals—what she wants and seeks over the course of the novel—parallel those of the group, and, at least at the beginning of the novel when readers first see that Pavel and his friends have piqued her interest in these issues, she seems to set out on the same course to the same end as the comrades: she, too, has experienced the dark side of modern life and senses that there is injustice around her, but she, unlike the others, can neither see nor understand the sources of her society’s ills. In fact, she pursues them only once Pavel becomes interested in these very issues and problems that so deeply affect her; they are a “familiar truth” that she intuitively knows, yet never

“[seeks] an explanation for” (22). However, her lack of a conventional education as well as her initial timidity and fear (of the unknown, of stirring the pot) hold her back, and she eventually finds herself—not entirely consciously—on an alternative route toward radicalization and revolutionary engagement.

This failure to achieve the same successes as those in her midst via traditional educative methods could easily leave Nilovna feeling abandoned and resigned, which she does for a brief time. But mostly she is patient and remains open in the hope that one day she will be able to see what they see and grasp the truth they have already assimilated. To this end, she enthusiastically participates in their various actions, mechanically passing out pamphlets and attending stump speeches at the factory without fully comprehending the content of what is conveyed in either. In one telling scene, Pavel takes her hands in his and laments that she is still unable to “feel” (“Eсли бы ты почувствовала,” loosely translated as “If you could only see”) “how low and shameful” the state is in the way it wields power, for if she could, she “would understand the truth we are fighting for.” Nilovna pleads with her son to simply “Be patient. I’ll feel” (“чувствую”) (146). Soon after this moment, she overhears a colleague of Pavel explain what exactly is entailed by and in the activity of “seeing”: “I see how things are, how people are wronged, but I can’t put it in words. I’m like a dumb brute” (158). The latter qualification seems to be taken to heart by Nilovna, as she, like Pavel’s friend, comes to believe that seeing, that is, finally “felling” the truth in a way that is more nuanced than her initial intuitive hold in it, is only useful or

meaningful if that truth can be articulated. Only then is there a guarantee of not simply feeling and sensing what is wrong, but also understanding how and why such injustices happen and grasping the greater Purpose.

All of the elements begin to come together when Nilovna attends a May Day rally organized by her son and his comrades. After the speeches and after the march, after Andrei declares adamantly that “those who don’t see our goal mustn’t march with us” and the police try to break up the crowd, a collection of voices begin to sing “Vy zhertvoiu pali” (“You Fell Victims” by A. Arkhangelsky 1878) in unison, and, suddenly, “The mother’s gaze could not embrace all that she saw” (166, 176). This instance is meaningful not only because Nilovna can “see,” but also because she now sees more than she can take in, and her response to this experience is, for the first time, a “vague desire to tell [those around her] something,” to produce something (177). Eventually, she does speak briefly to the crowd, which is an emotionally and physically charged moment for her, but her words are only in defense of “Our children” and their struggle, rather than the universal struggle of which she rightly sees herself a part (180). To be sure, she is still struggling with the same issues as always; but her mouth and eyes are open.

At this moment readers can see that Nilovna is close to achieving the goals she has set for herself, and the point at which it all comes together for her arrives just after the May Day demonstration. Pavel is arrested for displaying a banned flag during the rally, and, because his mother must move in with someone who can support her,



Pavel's friend Nikolai, who lives in a neighboring city, takes her in. Upon meeting her host's sister, Sophia, Nilovna notes the personal changes she has been going through, admitting that "There was a time when I had to know a person through and through before I'd open my heart to him, but now my heart's always open, and I'd say things I never would have dreamed of saying before." She continues, "Looks as though that First of May had done something to me [...]. [A]s if I was going down two different roads at once. Sometimes I seem to understand everything, then again everything's a fog" (198). Nilovna recognizes the progress she has made, which she attributes to her experiences on May Day, but she also acknowledges how much still lies before her.

The real turning point comes almost immediately after this in yet another conversation. This, like the last, is also with Sophia (as well as Nikolai), and it is a discussion that Nilovna patently does not want to have. Yet she feels as if she is drawn continuously into it despite wanting to recede into the background and simply passively listen to a piano piece by the Romantic composer Edvard Grieg that the sister is playing while the siblings talk. The music has a crucial role in this scene, as it "unnoticeably reach[es] the heart of the mother" and evokes in her difficult and painful memories that appear in "bitter clarity" (200). When she suddenly finds herself "at the edge of consciousness," she has a remarkable insight: "There *are* people who live together in a friendly, peaceful way," a reference to her present company. As Sophia continues to play, she insists that Nilovna "understand" the music she is producing, and, immediately following this demand, the mother hears in the hard

striking of the keys a “loud, wrathful cry” and “[f]rightened young voices,” followed by “a strong voice” that she finds “persuasive and alluring” (202).

Sophia’s music has two remarkable effects on Nilovna: (1) the mother grasps for the first time the message that the newcomers in her village have always failed to successfully transmit, namely, that life can be otherwise and that it can be good; and (2) her intuitive understanding of this general truth, which will guide her until her death, is the result of an attempt to understand a particular work of art, that is, it emerges from within an aesthetic sense experience. The gravity of this moment and the truth delivered in it is indicated by Nilovna’s reaction, which follows the description of her immediate impressions: the mother wants to speak; “To say kind words to these people”; “[I]o do something for them [...] as though consoling her heart with words meant as much for herself as for them.” She begins by explaining to Nikolai and Sasha that people like her, “people from that dark life—we feel everything, but it’s hard to put into words [...]—we understand, but we can’t say it” (202). As “The chords merged softly with the simple, heartfelt words in which the mother was giving expression to her feeling,” she affirms that “Now I can say something about myself and about all people because—I begin to understand and am able to compare” (202-03). She goes on to share her life story with the siblings, who are enraptured by what she has to say, despite, readers are told, already knowing the essential content of what is so new and exciting for the mother to articulate. As she opens up, the narrator notes that, to the attentive Sasha and Nikolai, “It seemed that

thousands of people were speaking through” Nilovna, and thus “her story assumed the status of a symbol” (203).

In this moment, Nilovna is forever changed. Her consciousness is been raised, and she comes to stand for something greater than her finite self, for her self-narrated story takes on a near universal quality in the eyes of her audience and Gorky’s readership. That she not only can, but also wants to articulate what she has hitherto known only intuitively to be true is testament to the fact that now she can both see *and* understand, and it is worth remembering that these are her own criteria. After May Day and after her afternoon with Sasha and Nikolai, Nilovna devotes her time, her energy, and her voice to the campaigns of Pavel and his circle. She even helps to print propaganda that she later distributes during secret trips to the countryside and in public places around town. But unlike her meek participation in actions prior to May Day, her engagement is far more active and productive, and she comes to propose and initiate a great deal of the group’s political activity. Furthermore, as she works, she discovers that she has “no difficulty finding words” when she is asked or feels compelled to speak about their cause, for now it is a campaign that not longer belongs to “our children,” but to her, as well (296).

Consequently, this closer look at the way Gorky depicts Nilovna’s personal journey to radicalization reveals just how drastically her path differs from that of her son Pavel and his friends. The latter begin by submitting themselves to a mechanical, didactic education controlled by authorities, both living and textual, that provide them

with the truth that they seek through an understanding of the relations of different phenomena within and the governing dialectic of the totality of capitalism. Grasping the greater truth and Purpose, i.e., the promise of what can and must arise from the devastation caused by the current system, is the prerequisite for their political activity, which involves engaging in a didactic pedagogy of their own by parroting back and forth to each other and out in the world all that they have been told and accept as true. The novel's own didactic tone and structure aim for the same result with the reader: truth, as such, is sought in the text; the text presents seekers with what it labels as truth; that truth is grasped through a series of demonstrations, both performative and descriptive, of how the world works; and then (Gorky hopes) that truth is spread by the former seekers in various political activities.

For Nilovna, however, this series of steps (learn it, understand it, spread it) is interrupted early on. She begins on this path by re-teaching herself to read, but she finds it exasperating and discovers that she would rather engage with beauty. And it is indeed with in particular aesthetic experiences—the joining of defiant voices in chorus at the May Day rally; Sophia's playing through a piece by Grieg—that the truth is somehow revealed to her, and she seizes it. She can finally articulate what she has always known intuitively to be true but could neither see nor understand and thus could never put into words.

In stark contrast to the didactic education pursued and received by her son and his friends, Nilovna undergoes what I will call a romantic education. Turning

from the Badiouian vocabulary employed above to that of the early German Romantics or *Frühromantiker* will more clearly elucidate the unique character of this distinction. As both Nilovna and the *Frühromantiker* know, in the drive to create a life “worthy of human beings,” it is not enough to “see the way” leading toward the goal; one must also “know how” to reach it (302).

Consulting selections from *Frühromantik* philosophy (roughly 1797-1801) on the relationship between aesthetics and politics will make clear the fundamental and perhaps even irreconcilable differences in the foundations of Nilovna and Pavel’s radical consciousnesses. Doing so will thereby refine further the distinctive contours of the mother’s unusual (given the context) development, with the aim of evaluating its impact on the novel and its status as an archetype of the Socialist-Realist project. Her unique path to radicalization is significant not only because it emerges in the midst of so many other more traditional ones, but also because it is experienced by the protagonist of what is effectively a didactic Bildungsroman and through whose personal narrative readers are expected to learn.

The *Frühromantiker* arrive early in the modern tradition of philosophical aesthetics, which is initiated by Immanuel Kant in the *Critique of Judgment* in 1790, less than a decade before key figures like the brothers August Wilhelm and Friedrich Schlegel begin publishing. One of the basic problems motivating the work of the young Romantics resembles the major question driving the characters in the novels

discussed above—modern man’s alienation from himself, or how to reunify man with himself—and they find a solution in *Bildung* as an “ethics of self-realization” which they conceive of in aesthetic terms (Beiser 26-28).<sup>15</sup> As Frederick Beiser summarizes, *Bildung* functions as the “highest good” for the Romantics in that it aims to (1) “unite and develop all the powers of a human being” such that “all his or her disparate capacities [are forged] into a whole” and (2) “develop not only our characteristic human powers [...] but also our individuality” (93). The aesthetic dimension of this concept is worked out most thoroughly by Friedrich Schiller, who was much older than the Romantics, but to whose ideas they were greatly indebted. His work *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters* (1795) is especially influential in its proposition that mankind must turn to art, rather than to the state or to nature, in order to overcome the alienation of the modern world (Letter VII).

Schiller begins his treatise on *aesthetic education* by identifying the major problem of his day as man’s estrangement from himself, defined as man’s over- or exclusive cultivation of either his reason (a holdover from the Enlightenment) or his sensibility. The “art of the beautiful” is uniquely suited to serve as a model for overcoming this estrangement because art is both an “object of the form-drive” (it

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<sup>15</sup> Frederick C. Beiser’s exceptional book *The Romantic Imperative* (2003) serves as my guide through the early period of German Romanticism. Unlike some other work on the same period that is read more widely in literary-critical circles, Beiser is both more attentive to the explicit role of politics (both actual and theoretical) in the early Romantic program and advocates for reading their various fragments and letters as pieces of a greater unified system partly engaged in the promotion of natural and universal laws and values. Contrary to the arguments of scholars like Jean-Luc Nancy and Phillipe Lacoue-Lebarthe (*The Literary Absolute* 1988), the *Frühromantiker* were not proto-postmodernists.

has shape or form) and an object of sensibility (it has sensual content) (101, Letter XV). To the extent that the beautiful artwork represents the bringing together of form and content, the individual who strives for beauty also “links the two opposite conditions of feeling and thinking,” or reason and sensibility (123, Letter XVIII). Moreover, in the same way that the unity of form and content in the artwork is what is distinctive about its beauty, the unity of a person’s reason and sensibility in his quest to overcome alienation, that is, his private quest for perfection, is what makes a man himself like a work of art. As Beiser puts it, “aesthetic education does not consist in having our characters formed by works of art but in making our characters into works of art” (96).

As Schiller explains in “Kallias or Concerning Beauty” (1793), the beauty of the artwork is not simply a subjective quality determined by the viewer; it is also an objective feature that, as Beiser writes, “depends on whether it is *self-determining*,” or free from external pressures and controls. Beauty is comparable to freedom; it is “nothing more or less than *freedom in appearance*” (99). Furthermore, it is precisely this self-determination, as Schiller argues in Letter IX of the *Aesthetic Education*, that makes the art an ideal and vital instrument for “improvement in the political sphere.” Given that progress in the latter must “proceed from the ennobling of character” and that the “barbarous constitution” of the state cannot carry out this task successfully, the autonomous work of art must assume the function of a symbol of freedom in the aesthetic education of man (55).

The overall concept of aesthetic education is encapsulated by Beiser when he writes that, “to become an aesthetic whole, to make one’s life a work of art, it is necessary” not only to achieve perfection by unifying the form of one’s reason and the content of one’s sensibility, but also “to realize one’s nature as a spontaneous and free subject” (100, 96). But this only attends to one branch of early romantic aesthetic theory that is primarily concerned with describing the formation of the ideal romantic subject, or how the beautiful character of art can motivate the subject to strive for perfection and freedom (i.e., beauty) by showing that such an effort can yield aesthetic pleasure. The early Romantic concept of *aesthetic experience* extends their aestheticism in its explanation of how the subject gives shape or meaning to the universe. Fundamental to this theory is the belief that reason aims to grasp the whole, which it equates with truth. It wants to find what Beiser calls a “holistic explanation—which would understand each part by its place within a whole.” To this end, art must serve a primary role in reason’s quest, because, as demonstrated above, it is through aesthetic intuition that the subject grasps the whole. Thus, the subject who understands the universe holistically must “view it as a work of art,” he must “romanticize” it (61-62, 101).

As Beiser explains, the call for “the primacy of the aesthetic” is really “an argument for the priority of holistic explanation” (62). And since the subject’s reason is incapable of actually seeing the whole as a whole, it harnesses the power of the intellectual intuition of aesthetic experience in order to “romanticize” all that it



encounters by giving “a higher meaning to the ignoble, a mysterious appearance to the customary, the value of the unknown to the known, and an infinite appearance to the finite” (Novalis 545, §105). When the senses are romanticized, the particulars of their experience come under the banner of truth, Purpose, or whole, and poetry can aid in this romanticization. Per Friedrich Schlegel, romantic poetry “is capable of the highest and the most comprehensive education (*Bildung*), not merely from the inside out, but from the outside in”; for everything that “should be a whole in its effects,” it “organizes organizing all parts similarly” (90, §116). This education has an additional political significance discussed at length in, for example, Schiller’s *Aesthetic Education*. Like the formation of the subject in the aesthetic education, community and state politics are dependent on the truth/Purpose of the holism modeled by the aesthetic, which also makes it secondary to the aesthetic. A change in the political sphere from “the rule of mere force to the rule of law” is, for Schiller, first dependent on a change in individual morality, and because a lawgiver has no influence over a free individual, the latter’s moral character must be shaped instead by “sense-impressions” that can model “a morality yet unseen” through their harmonious, balanced presentation (15, Letter III).

In sum, *Frühromantik* philosophy offers an argument for seeing truth as immanent to art. The ability of aesthetic intuition to perceive beauty or perceive objects as beautiful is responsible not only for the subject’s grasp of the whole (or truth) of the universe, but also for providing him with an image of unity and freedom

off of which he can model his own reunification (as well as the reformation of relationships within the community and the form of the state). This aestheticism offers readers of Gorky's novel a template for interpreting Nilovna's unique path to radical consciousness and, indeed, Gorky viewed the "social romanticism of Schiller" to be "one of the most beautiful achievements of the West-European soul" (qtd. in Kostka 284). Like Vera Pavlovna, Nilovna becomes a figure of freedom and unity modeled on the aesthetic, as she fashions her sensibility (seeing/feeling) and reason (understanding) into a holism.

It is worth mentioning here that Nilovna's journey has never before been described as a process of aesthetic education or even one of *Bildung* in the sense discussed above. The closest critics have come is to call it a Bildungsroman, as Clark does with qualification, or, as in the case of Eric J. Klaus, to identify what Nilovna and Pavel go through as an educative process notably distinct from *Bildung*. To Klaus, the latter stems from an 18th-century bourgeois humanism unlike the proletarian humanism of *vospitanie*, which "nurtures a feeling of self-worth as well as a feeling of community among the working class." Gorky's readers are expected to mirror the actions of a given character, who "absorbs all that is good and positive in humanity[,] then acts on those impulses to better his fellow citizen [and] to educate others in the spirit of socialism" (81). I concur that this kind of radical "spiritual awakening," as he later calls it, is the end result for Nilovna, that its *content* is the content of her radicalization, and that, as Klaus argues, readers first see this blossom in the mother

during the May Day rally. However, I disagree with his assertion that this is more or less the end of her development and that she need only agitate and organize from then on to feel fulfilled and do her duty.

Klaus' argument hinges on Nilovna's lack of—and lack of interest in—formal education, as he reminds us that “throughout the novel the mother remarks time and time again that she cannot grasp the abstract, philosophical arguments brought forth by her son and others.” This is certainly true, but his conclusion is not. He continues: “In the end, however, the words [of Pavel, et al.] are not important [to Nilovna], because the feeling of community that binds them extends beyond and speaks more directly to humanity than intellectual reasoning” (82). As I have already shown, though I hope not at the expense of recognizing the great relevance of the sense of community Klaus emphasizes, words and their production are of enormous importance for Nilovna. Articulation of the truth she knows intuitively, if not by reading Marx and Engels, is the great task she sets out for herself in the first half of the novel, and it is a skill that she utilizes to great ends promoting, for example, the ideals of *vospitanie* throughout the second half. Nilovna's newfound facility is a direct consequence of overcoming tremendous obstacles with respect to the movement, namely her inability to understand their work and her inability to see/feel it at a deeper level. The great change she undergoes takes place not on May Day, but a short

while later after her profound experience in Nikolai's living room listening to Grieg.<sup>16</sup> I might say, then, that the *form* of Nilovna's private and individualized radicalization—in its aesthetic holism, in its ultimate precipitation by a personal aesthetic experience—is romantic and much closer to a bourgeois aesthetic education or early Romantic *Bildung* than a politically correct and ritualized proletarian *vospitanie*.

How curious to find a romantic logic of aestheticism at work in Gorky's model for radicalization, in a novel with such a clear didactic purpose and from an author who, as Alexander Kaun already notes in a 1933 essay, is actively promoting a strictly didactic, “aggressive Realism” at the time he writes *Mat'* in 1906. Kaun claims that Gorky, like many other radicals of the time, is merely reacting to the defeat of 1905. “Romanticism,” Kaun writes, becomes for the author “synonymous with Reactionism, as a mood resulting from weariness and despair, and as an escape from contemporary reality”; but it had not been and would not always be that way (434). In an essay on his relationship with V.G. Korolenko, Gorky recalls that, upon reading one of his early stories, “Chelkash” (1895), Korolekno notes, “I said you were a realist. [...] But at the same time you're a romantic” (*Literary Portraits* 239). The elder

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<sup>16</sup> Seemingly every critic who is also concerned with Nilovna's path to consciousness (e.g., Clark and Dinega) also remarks upon the singular significance of the May Day rally, and their arguments are almost always supported by the shared and ritualized tenor of the event—bringing Nilovna into the fold. In my research, Bryld is the only other critic to highlight the importance of the scene in Nikolai's living room, but her reading focuses on “mythical” results of this change—namely, how Nilovna thereafter finds her calling in activism and comes to symbolize “each and any” woman—rather than that which precipitates it. As Bryld puts it, “it is on the heels of Pelegea's development into the mother of society that the book turns into the miraculous realization of utopia: the ascent of the people to a new life” (44).

author's comments are mostly limited to Gorky's style, and he is certainly not the last to remark upon this amalgamation in Gorky's work. As Kaun explains, other than the years from 1906 and 1916 (i.e., between the revolutions of 1905 and 1917), the combination and collaboration of realist and romantic styles in a single work of art is something that Gorky actually embraces. But whereas the young Gorky was keen to limit his romanticism to "dressing up" the realist material he writes about in order to reflect the richness of life, the latter, post-1917 Gorky—the one who was a major public figure, the one who chaired the Writers' Congress—saw great political potential in so-called "active romanticism," which depicts reality in accordance with the Purpose, i.e., in its revolutionary development, and strives to "enrich an *oppressively drab life*" and prepare it for political action by revealing the potential latent in the everyday ("How I Learnt to Write" 10-11).<sup>17</sup>

Despite the anachronism, there is something to be gained in looking at Gorky's later writings, such as "Talks on Craftsmanship" (1928) and "How I Learnt to Write" (1930-31), alongside my reading of the much earlier *Mat*.<sup>18</sup> Comparing the romantic aestheticism of Nilovna's radicalization with the explicitly romantic artistic

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<sup>17</sup> Opposed to active romanticism is "passive romanticism," which is individualistic and solipsistic. It distracts man from the outer world.

<sup>18</sup> One example of the forward-looking Gorky in "Talks on Craftsmanship": "'realism' would cope with its difficult task if [...] it depicted man not only such as he is today, but also as he must and shall be tomorrow. This does not mean that I advise 'inventing' human character, but simply that I think the writer is entitled, and moreover is in duty bound, to 'amplify' man." And soon after grounding the previous statement: "ideas cannot be extracted from thin air in the way nitrogen, for example, can be; ideas are created on earth, spring from the soil of labor, and use the material of observation, comparison and study, and, in the final analysis, facts and again facts!" (170).

style of late Gorky, whose investment in that style is both political and philosophical, reveals the two ostensibly competing aesthetic theories in the novel—romanticism and didactic realism—as mutually constituting for Nilovna. In Gorky’s theoretical writings, romanticism is viewed as pedagogically (didactically) useful because it illustrates for readers the richness of life and the direction of history. But whereas this kind of romanticism is valued only for the external truth it can convey, a *philosophical* romantic aesthetics modeled on the aesthetic and striving for the truth is fully embraced in *Mat’*. The fact that the curious Nilovna cannot learn from books and mentors as the others (and her readers) do means that her radicalization, which readers know is coming from the moment she is introduced, must take a different form. She needs the form of a romantic aesthetic holism to give shape to the truth she knows in her heart but cannot verbalize prior to the living room scene, just as she needs the didactics of Pavel and his comrades to provide a content that first intrigues her and encourages her to open herself to new ideas, even when she cannot yet understand them. After Nilovna’s consciousness is raised, this new content melds with her personal experiences and produces the eager, confident, aggressive, and well spoken activist readers follow through the second half of the novel.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> It may be possible to draw a parallel here to one of the most common themes of Socialist-Realist literature: the hero’s struggle to balance his spontaneity and consciousness. Doing so would open up a discussion far beyond the scope of this project, but for more information, see Clark’s *The Soviet Novel*. The spontaneity-consciousness dialectic, which has deep roots in the Russian literary tradition, has an analogue in Marxists debates on freedom and determinism and takes on an especially heavy political significance around the time of the split of the Marxist Russian Social Democratic Labor Party into the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks.

Badiou's "Art and Philosophy" helps to show that the combination described above is far from unusual for its time. After he presents the three schemata for explaining the three primary ways (didactic, romantic, classical) philosophers have articulated the relationship between art and truth over the years, he claims that, in the 20th century, these doctrines are taken to extremes ("Didacticism is saturated by the state-bound and historical exercise of art in the service of the people [and] Romanticism is saturated by the element of pure promise—always brought back to the supposition of a return of the gods") and an attempt is made to bring didacticism and romanticism together into a single aesthetic theory (7). While Badiou identifies this effort (and eventual failure) with the greater avant-garde project (more on this in Chapter 3), it is also a perfectly reasonable description of the pedagogical convictions underlying Gorky's protagonist's education. It is didactic in its "desire to put an end to art" once the truth is grasped, but romantic in its reliance on art as "absolute," as "its own immediately legible truth" (8).

While Badiou contends that this paradox spells the end of the early 20th-century avant-garde, Gorky takes it head on and, in the education of his character Nilovna, portrays not just a satisfactory, but a productive and necessary balance between content of didactic realism and the romantic aesthetic form. For orthodox Socialist Realism, the political and pedagogical is always prioritized over the aesthetic and art itself is never more than a means to an end. It is always working towards its own insignificance and expected erasure. While the political is also certainly the

eventual goal for Gorky's *Mat'*—didactic as it is for its readers—art itself is not portrayed in the novel as a medium like any other for the propagation of slogans and demonstration of truths; it is not incidental to the process of radicalization. For Nilovna, the holism of art is a model for her own education towards self-determination and freedom, and in the activation and eventual realization of her own intellect and all that it comes to produce, she becomes a creator or artist. As with Vera Pavlovna, Nilovna herself is her first and greatest work of art.



## CHAPTER 2

### CLASSICISM, UTOPIA, AND THE SOCIALIST EXCEPTION: HACKS' THEORY OF DRAMA

After emigrating from West Germany to East Germany in 1955, the playwright, literary theorist, author, and poet Peter Hacks became one of the most performed dramatists in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). But with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 signaling the ostensible failure of the socialist experiment in the Eastern Bloc, Hacks' oeuvre—literature explicitly written for an emancipated socialist society—fell into relative obscurity. It was simply overshadowed by the work of playwrights like Heiner Müller and Peter Schneider, whose output was viewed in the West as more removed from the Socialist Party line and thus more favorable in orientation.

It is not the purpose of this chapter to return to Hacks merely to give him his due, but rather because his dramatic method of Socialist Classicism (*sozialistische Klassik*) entails a politics of aesthetics that is not strictly historicist. Unlike the official aesthetic method of the Soviet Bloc (Socialist Realism), Hacks' Socialist Classicism not only does not demand that the content of a play conform to the laws of historical-materialism, but it also does not even call for the reflection of Marx's master narrative in the events of a given dramatic plot.

Both the Socialist-Realist and the Socialist-Classicist methods and theories share a commitment to the production of tendentious, pedagogical art that can serve the Socialist state via the education of the audience of the work. To this end, both also prescribe ways that art can represent life so that it may serve or reinforce the greater Truth of this world, namely, the laws of historical materialism. However, the significant difference between these two theories is that Socialist Realism champions a didactic relationship between truth and art in that it calls for the content of the work to conform to/replicate a single Marxian perspective on the revolutionary development of history. In faithful Socialist-Realist novels and stories, no matter when they are set, the major conflicts are all concerned with the struggle to move from the realm of necessity into the realm of freedom; this message must then carry over to its audience, whose radical consciousness should be raised as a result of its encounter with and necessary acceptance of the truth communicated by the Socialist-Realist work.

The method of Socialist Classicism, on the other hand, is founded on the premise that the advancement from necessity to freedom is well underway in the GDR of the 1960s and that the East German society is just around the corner from achieving complete, full-blown emancipation. In Hacks' thinking, his audience no longer struggles with kinds of antagonisms that result from an underdeveloped class

consciousness, so the didactic tactics of Socialist Realism are no longer useful.<sup>1</sup> Hacks' instrument is no less blunt than that of Socialist Realism, but its object is less the content of the artwork—almost any topic of social significance would do—than its form. For him, only the grand and unified style of the Classical artwork could detect and represent the great promise of his society, which he believes is close to complete liberation, accord, and equality following the sublation of the class antagonisms of capitalism.

Hacks' political commitments always compelled him to remain attentive to his concrete historical situation, and the advancements that he saw in his society provided the occasion for him to develop and articulate the far more important formal strategies for representation that are central to his conception of the Socialist-Classicist method. The Truth of historical materialism (i.e., the harmony and freedom that will soon be fully realized in his society of “mature socialism” [“Saure Feste”]) would thus be mirrored in the style of Socialist Classicism rather than in its content. For Hacks, only a grand and unified exaggerated representation of the world could challenge viewers to compare the staged idealized reality with their own and to thereby identify and seek solutions for the contradictions that remain in their everyday lives.

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, it barely needs to be mentioned that not everyone agreed with Hacks' evaluation of the current state of affairs in East Germany. Even literary historian and cultural critic Wolfgang Emmerich remarks upon the author's naiveté when he writes in *Kleine Literaturgeschichte der DDR* (*Concise Literary History of the GDR* 1981/1996) that “Against Hacks' promise of a fulfilled, successful culture there would be nothing to complain about, if [only] it weren't so infinitely far from the disdainful everyday reality in the GDR” (358).

Hacks' method is wedded to a classical aesthetic theory explaining the relationship between truth and art and the education that results from it. In this understanding, art and truth have no necessary affiliation, and the artist may merely choose to imitate truth in his representation of nature. Unlike in Socialist-Realist works, in which the audience must to some extent concede the historical-materialist logic determining the story in order to understand it, art in the classical vein can simply be enjoyed for its beauty, and its quality is not measured by the successful transmission of its message (if there even is one) to its audience. In Hacks' Socialist-Classical method, there is, in fact, no basic message to be communicated. Instead, the artwork is tasked with offering a heightened and honest representation of the potential Hacks believes is latent in his society. The great utility of this method and style comes from its capacity to confront its viewers with a vision of the future and activate and exercise their minds and imaginations.

Hacks' classicism harkens back not only to Aristotle's ruminations about the potential educative consequences of tragedy for its audience, but also to the *Weimarer Klassik* of Goethe's various and often fragmented literary theoretical writings prior to his publication of *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* (*The Elective Affinities*) in 1810. The latter was a contentious figure among the GDR intelligentsia, including Hacks.<sup>2</sup> He respected

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<sup>2</sup> For more on the reception of Goethe in the GDR, see Bernd Leistner, *Unruhe um einen Klassiker* (1978) and Patricia Herminhouse, "Trends in Literary Reception Coming to Terms with Classicism: Goethe in GDR Literature from the 1970's [sic]" (1983). Leistner's book also makes the case that Hacks may have manifested some of his ambivalence about Goethe in the cheekiness of his most

Goethe deeply, but felt some ambivalence toward the immense and unchecked praise he received in German culture. Unlike the parallel drawn between Maxim Gorky and the German *Frühromantiker* in the first chapter of this study, Hacks' relationship with the Classical tradition is explicit and is founded on his more general belief that his society had arrived in a classical period that only a classical style could capture accurately.

In the following pages, Hacks' proposed literary method will be synthesized mostly from the essays assembled in the 1972 compilation *Das Poetische: Ansätze zu einer postrevolutionären Dramaturgie* (*The Poetic: Approaches to a Post-Revolutionary Dramaturgy*) and later published as the second book of his collected writings, *Die Maßgaben der Kunst* (*The Stipulations of Art* 1977).<sup>3</sup> There are three reasons why the focus of this chapter will be his methodological and theoretical, rather than his dramatic, writing. First, the analysis of his essays allows for the examination of a fully articulated aesthetic theory and artistic method of drama from a practitioner, which provides a perspective distinctly different from those in my other investigations. Gorky's *Mat* illustrates and Müller's *Mauser* stages the aesthetic theories analyzed in their chapters; Hacks' essays, however, describe and prescribe how art can and should communicate truths in the service of the socialist project. In them we have the opportunity to

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famous play, "Ein Gespräch im Hause Stein über den abwesenden Herrn von Goethe" ("A Discussion in the Stein Home about the Absent Mr. Goethe" 1974), which claims that Goethe was impotent and that this consequently led him to channel his productive energies into all of his other immensely varied work.

<sup>3</sup> From this point on, *Die Maßgaben der Kunst* will be abbreviated to *MdK*.

explore his blueprints for textual construction and the pedagogical impulses that inspire them. Additionally, looking directly at Hacks' theoretical works provides direct access to the deeper matter of his model. As a Classicist, he is committed to the idea that, while the truth can be reflected in art, it originates outside of art. Conversely, Gorky's novel *Mat'*, which partly subscribes to a romantic model of aesthetic education, is examined precisely because it is a work of art, as art itself is the site of truth in the romantic aesthetic schema. Third, Hacks was clear that critics should not turn to his plays when looking for a coherent expression of his ideas, for "A theorizing author does not normally theorize about his own art, but rather against his art. [...] His theory and practice are in conflict [...]" ("Die Ästhetik Brechts" "Brecht's Aesthetic" in *MdK* 47). Accordingly, for details about Socialist Classicism—which, after all, only accounts for one period of his working life—we must turn to Hacks' theoretical writings rather than his dramatic work, all while keeping a keen eye on his historical context.

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Because Hacks develops Socialist Classicism in response to a supposed qualitative advancement in the society of East Germany in the late 1950s, it is helpful to know a bit about the cultural-political context leading up to this change as well as which of his own ideas Hacks was reacting against when he articulated his new method. After all, Hacks' commitment to the socialist project of the Eastern Bloc is the reason he

emigrated to the GDR in 1955, and by the time he moved, the Socialist-Realist didactic aesthetic program had already come to dominate the cultural sphere of East Germany. Originally articulated by literary figures and party functionaries like Gorky, Alexei Tolstoy, Karl Radek, and Andrei Zhdanov at the 1934 Writers' Congress in the Soviet Union, Socialist Realism was the only official and authorized method for the production of art in the Soviet Bloc. Briefly stated, its mission was to depict life in its totality and history in its dialectical-materialist development so as to educate and raise the consciousnesses of the public. Works in this mode were also expected to focus on where the vector of history was headed, that is, to anticipate the future and mold the new man whose job it would be to create the new socialist society. In order to accomplish this, it was said that authors should imbue their work with a heroic or "active romanticism" by portraying typical characters and situations with "conscious exaggeration," all according to the Communist Party's expectations of what the future will look like. These elements were expected to come together to produce a content that could inspire in the reader a new attitude towards life and a greater sense of purpose and dictate to them a supposedly more accurate explanation for the way the world actually works. The most important element of the Socialist-Realist method of artistic production was the matter of life "as it is [that is,] not only capitalist reality, but also that other, new reality—the reality of socialism" in accordance with the Party's world view (Radek in *Problems of Soviet Literature* 156-7, Gorky and Tolstoy in *On the Art and Craft* 10-11, 163-64).

Immediately following World War II, before Germany was divided, anti-fascist and humanist works dominated the art scene; but after the Russians began to close off their sector and eventually founded the GDR state in 1949, the Socialist-Realist program was taken up fairly faithfully in the East. With the exception of a brief period of relaxation around the time of Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin at the 20th Party Conference of the Soviet Communist Party, the obligation of artists to the Socialist-Realist method was firmly in place by 1957 and 1958 when the Central Committee of the GDR's ruling Socialist Unity Party declared that the role of art is to "treat the questions of culture as questions of the political work with the masses" (qtd. in *Theater in der Zeitwende II* 17). This statement of strong commitment was intended to remind artists that they had a key role to play in building the new society. The artistic visions behind their plots and illustrations were expected to aim to resolve lingering class antagonisms in East Germany, all while training all the hopes and dreams of their characters on the promised harmony and prosperity to come in the GDR's great socialist future.

Prior to 1958, Hacks is still in the early stages of his career, and, as critic Michael Mitchell has noted, his "theoretical writing was [still] very much determined by the debate going on between the literary establishment"—who promoted Socialist Realism—"and the supporters of Brechtian epic [or "dialectical"] drama" (28-29). Mitchell's monograph, *Peter Hacks: Drama for a Socialist Society* (1990), is a helpful companion through Hacks' oeuvre up until the fall of the Berlin Wall, and in it



Mitchell maintains that this double loyalty is apparent in Hacks' work even before he emigrated to the GDR. As a mouthpiece for the establishment, Hacks conceived of his early plays as "histories" that provided proper reflections of the historical-materialist process.<sup>4</sup> Even the essays he writes at this time on dramatic methodology call for art to focus on historical matters. So in both artistic and theoretical output, Hacks see his work as loyal to the official method of artistic production, at least at the level of content. As he later publishes in *MdK*, "In the beginning, in West Germany, I held the refutation of the class society to be an acceptable primary theme," and it permeates all his work for as long as he feels the topic of class struggle to be a relevant one for his society (qtd. in Mitchell 8).

In "Das Theater der Gegenwart" ("The Theatre of the Present" 1957), Hacks summarizes his position on what should be the object of the theater:

Socialist Realism is a dialectical realism. The 'Dialectic of the Theatre' entails the non-isolation of all phenomena, that is, [the dialectic's] diffuse dependencies and reciprocal cause. It entails the changing of the world and, especially, the world's mutability. Mutability of characters, of circumstances, of history. It shows the world as mutable, it speaks to the viewer as the agent of change. In dialectical theatre, the viewer is a man with the power of judgment, distance, worth; he is not driven to applause like lamb to the slaughter. (128)

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<sup>4</sup> The titles of Hacks' *Historien*, which were his first four plays: *Das Volksbuch vom Herzog Ernst* (*Herzog Ernst's Chapbook* 1953), *Eröffnung des indischen Zeitalters* (*The Opening of the Indian Age* 1954), *Die Schlacht bei Lobositz* (*The Battle of Lobositz* 1955), and *Der Müller von Sanssouci* (*The Miller of Sanssouci* 1957).

Of greatest significance here are Hacks' points about the role of the audience and the imperative to present an always changing world in which "all phenomena" are connected. The influence of his mentor and fellow writer cum theorist Bertolt Brecht is also noticeable in each of these arguments. Both writers agree that truly dialectical art, which Socialist Realism also claimed to be, must not only provide a picture of society's mutable, "causal network," but it must also demand the active participation of the distant, yet critical, spectator. This is where Hacks starts to find himself in hot water.<sup>5</sup>

Despite his clear and outspoken belief in the theory of historical-materialism and his commitment to conforming the plots of his artistic output to that theory, Hacks was still a controversial and somewhat suspect figure in the East at this time. To be sure, his work is didactic, for it principally served as a vehicle for that external truth that determined his content, but it also aimed to use artistic form to challenge his audience intellectually rather than just find the easiest and most effective package for delivering to them easily graspable truths. Although he places his work under the banner of "socialist realism," the young Hacks advocates for a style of drama that was similar to the Brechtian "Epic Theatre" in that it placed great value on the utility of abstraction in which "figures and situations present *models* of behaviour and attitudes

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<sup>5</sup> For Brecht's descriptions of his method of dialectical theatre, see Chapter 3 of this dissertation, or from his writings, "The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre" (1930). For a description of dialectical theatre in action, see "Indirect Impact of Epic Theatre" (1933). (English translations of the Brecht pieces mentioned here are all available in John Willett's *Brecht on Theatre*, 1964.)

[that are] based on historical models but with a relevance to the present” (Mitchell, emphasis added 11). Hacks believes that theatre is the domain of the general or universal; abstractions are better at illustrating and drawing out for the still alienated audience—and thus encouraging them to think more about—any broader issues and problems that are related to the historical specificities of the plot. In other words, he, like Brecht, strays far from the establishment’s accepted definition of “realism” by using his historical “material poetically, not sociologically,” as Mitchell puts it (10).<sup>6</sup>

The specter of formalism, the death knell of any artistic method or aesthetic theory in the Soviet Union after 1934 and for most of the existence of the Soviet satellites, hung ominously over Hacks’ abstract, “dialectical theatre.” A focus on form was thought to eclipse the all-important content of an artistic work and risk the dehistoricization of its real material issues. Hacks launches a defense against this accusation in “Einige Gemeinplätze über das Stückeschreiben” (“A Few Platitudes about Playwriting” 1956), asserting that artist need not focus exclusively on creating work that reproduces the stuff of reality as exactly he sees that stuff, because “Form comes from content” and “Form is a cipher for the social structure” (126, 120).

Another aspect of Hacks’ method that strays from that of the Socialist Realists is approach to presenting the content the two shared. While they are both committed to presenting reality in line with a historical-materialist understanding of

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<sup>6</sup> On Brecht’s broadening of the term “realism” contra those who are “bound by formal prejudices,” as he puts it, see his 1958 article “The Popular and the Realistic” (110).

the world, Hacks does not believe that artists should provide resolutions for the true-to-life conflicts they staged. As he writes in “Gemeinplätze,” “The contradictions [of society] are not overcome; consequently, there is no form that shows the contradictions as overcome” (120). This position puts him at odds with the theoreticians and practitioners of Socialist Realism, as the latter method relies on the presentation of tidy conclusions and often definitive resolutions that would, it is hoped, lend credence to the Party’s claims about the imminent arrival of socialism and freedom.

While he always intends for his underlying message to be clear, Hacks leaves his plays open to audience analysis, an approach that he justifies by gesturing to his historical situation. In the 1950s, the recently founded GDR is in a period of transition, defining itself as the utter negation of fascism as it works through the lingering socio-economic contradictions of capitalism. Hacks knows just as well as the Socialist Unity Party functionaries that East Germany is still in the realm of necessity and deep in the throes of class struggle; the individual is not yet emancipated. Consequently, for Hacks, who is steadfastly committed to allowing the socio-historical situation to determine his work, the neat resolutions offered in Socialist-Realist art have jumped the gun and are essentially lying to their passive audience. More work needs to be done before art can show everything wrapped up so neatly. Hacks’ investment is in a more humanist historical materialism (emphasizing the development of the present out the past for an audience whose minds he is helping to

liberate) than in the mechanistic one of Socialist Realism (anticipating the resolution of present contradictions for an audience that, per Hacks, is not quite ready for them).

*From Dialectical Theatre to Socialist Classicism*

Hacks' statement in "Gemeinplätze" about form functioning as a cipher for the societal structure means that he, writing in the GDR of the mid-1950s, is duty bound to both his own aesthetic commitments (realism) and his audience (still struggling) to call for art that reflects, but does not resolve, class antagonisms. The ensuing assumption is then that, were the state of society to change, so, too, would Hacks' method, responsible as it is to—or, contingent as it is on—the development of history. This is precisely what happens in the late 1950s, leading to the writing of the poetic *Die Sorgen und die Macht* (1962) and a number of adaptations of classical works, such as *Amphitryon* (1967) and *Die Vögel* (1973).

The literary theoretical texts cited in the previous section were released in 1956 and 1957, and Hacks marks a major advancement in his early method of drama just one year later with the publication of the essay "Das Poetische" ("The Poetic" in *MdK* 136-152), which later became part of the collection of the same name, and then again two years later with the publication of "Versuch über das Theaterstück von morgen" ("Essay on the Play of Tomorrow" in *MdK* 58-75). That this change amounts to the replacement of a modern "dialectical" and didactic method with what Hacks calls a "Socialist-Classicist" one could invite an interrogation of my claim that

the latter was an “advancement” of his earlier method of drama. From our present perspective, prim and staid Classicism likely may seem like a regression from the self-aware and playful Brechtian model. Neither their relation nor the supposedly superior status of the latter is manifest. There is, however, a clear and logical thread that can guide us through development of Hacks’ thought from one to the other, a thread that begins with Hacks’ already familiar insistence on the utility of abstraction—that is, a playwright’s attention to and portrayal of the general in the particular—in socialist literature and his attention to form, more generally.

Instead of gradually moving more in line with the state-authorized artistic mode the longer he lived in the GDR and the more pressure came down on artists from the upper echelons of the Party, Hacks binds himself even more strongly to the notion that there is radical potential and utility in the form of the artwork. The move even further away from the Socialist-Realist insistence that, above all else, art reflect the truthful content as defined by the Party ultimately pushes Hacks’ theoretical work from 1959 through the 1960s in the direction of utopia. It must be made clear, however, that Hacks insists that the reason for his shift from dialectical theatre to Socialist Classicism is founded on the concrete reality of his time. Even though it is an unrealizable (*unmachbar*) possibility, utopia is at that point in history actually conceivable (*denkbar*), he maintains, as his contemporary reality has liberated the individual and the imagination.

After Khrushchev’s denunciation of Stalin in 1956, several states in the

Eastern Bloc enjoy a brief moment of relaxation from the hard pursuit of transformation to a socialist society. But in the GDR, this respite lasts only until the 5th Party Congress in 1958 when the SED reaffirm their founding anti-fascist, supposedly democratic goals. Translated into the realm of the arts, this new policy draws an even firmer, harder line in terms of what it meant for artists to be accepted as politically sound—namely, the production of work that assists in the creation of the “new man”—and what it means for them to be rejected as ideologically pernicious to the Party’s aims. In a 1974 article on GDR cultural politics, Gerd Henning and Gunner Huettich call this development the “second phase of the socialist cultural revolution.” It is “second” because it comes after a period during which the GDR essentially mirrors the cultural policies of the early USSR, and they explain that the intent of the Party’s new strategies is the “re-educating the educators” and intellectuals by “reestablish[ing] cultural life and break[ing] the educational-cultural monopoly of the bourgeoisie” (42-43). As Mitchell also notes, the consequences of this renewed focus on complete overhaul of the economy and society are, for theatre, explained quite plainly by Siegfried Wagner, “the head of the Central Committee’s cultural section,” who in no uncertain terms dismisses the “theories and practice of young dramatists such as Hacks, Heiner Müller, Heinar Kipphard and Helmut Baierl” as “these erroneous (*falsche*) artistic methods” (35, Wagner qtd. in Mitchell 35).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The stress put on artists of this time to produce the “right” kind of work is far more extensive than just the statements of the 5th Party Congress. Two additional decrees brought enormous additional

Even though Hacks is on board with the spirit of the Party's project, he does not play along the way that party functionaries insisted artists should, which is to say, he does not simply fall in line with the Socialist-Realist program. Yet, alongside the reaffirmation of the Party's goal to advance into a fully realized socialist society, Hacks observes the greater pushes towards the collectivization of farms and the nationalization of businesses and interprets them heralds of the GDR's rapid progress towards completing its socialist transformation. The qualitative advancements in everyday living that, he believes, are brought about by this transformation are so meaningful and successful to him that they demanded a correction of his earlier method of dialectical theatre. The roles of various entities change as social relations change; a new society demands a new dramatic method and way of understanding the relationship between art and truth. If East German theatre is to remain responsible to the society in which it operates, it has to adjust to accommodate and reflect the revolution underway, i.e., the imminent arrival of actually existing socialism. Brecht's epic, didactic theatre, which influenced Hacks so greatly, becomes outmoded, according to Hacks. In "Die Ästhetik Brechts," he explains that his mentor's "reality was that of the first half of the twentieth century. Our reality is already different; our

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pressures: (1) the enacting of the so-called "Bitterfelder Weg" (Bitterfeld Way) of 1959, which seeks to elevate the ostensibly limited consciousnesses of and facilitate new experiences for writers and workers by sending the former to factories and encouraging the latter to write; and (2) the report given in 1965 by then Secretary of the Socialist Unity Party (SED) of the GDR to the 11th Plenum of the Central Committee rehearsing the state's commitment to Socialist Realism and calling for "a clean slate with unyielding standards" that would flush itself of any "negative" and harmful morality and adhere strictly and exclusively to SED's agenda (Honecker).



methods must look different than Brecht's if they want to be Brechtian methods" (*MdK* 76).

Hacks develops the dramatic method of "Socialist Classicism" in light of his belief that actually existing socialism would be achieved in the immediate future. Instead of defending this claim with the support of the economic details of East Germany's great socialist economic achievements, Hacks focuses on the qualitative differences he saw (or expected to see) by merely declaring that this young society is becoming a truly exceptional one founded on reason and equal relations between individuals. This is a position he maintains throughout *Das Poetische*, but one he espouses particularly forcefully in the preface, where he argues the following:

In history, there are no conditions equal [to these today]; what looks similar is actually something different. The fundamental difference between the present time and other art-friendly epochs consists in the fact that, in all previous social states, nonsense was the main side of the fruitful contradiction between reason and nonsense and that today reason is. (*MdK* 48)

Furthermore, the recent "success of the GDR, in connection with its greatly animated contradictions, made possible the *Neuentdeckung* of art and the reopening of the greatest aesthetic questions" (48). Appropriately for Hacks, who is engaged in the *Bearbeitung* (reappropriation and reworking) of old classical forms for what he believes was a new classical era, the word "Neuentdeckung" means a newfound discovery, as in the uncovering (*ent-decken*) of something already in existence, something found once

again. The advanced status of his society sanctions Hacks' return to and adaptation of a classicism style for the new era and supports his assessment of aesthetic questions as, if not above, then on par with, historical ones.

At this point, Hacks deems East Germany to be in a historical moment that is approaching harmony and stability. He tells an imaginary interlocutor in "Versuch" that "we find ourselves [...] in a period of the transition from the revolutionary tradition to the classical tradition," as in other times when classicism reigned, such as the periods of English and Spanish absolutism (*MdK* 72). There is, however, a qualitative difference between then and Hacks' present, for he believes the coming socialism will be the first "continuous synthesis of revolution and stability," and the form of any art that is committed to the presentation of the truth must adapt accordingly (73).

Representing a liberated society does not mean for Hacks that the picture art offers should be uncomplicated. Even though he believes that, at this time, his society has ostensibly sublated all lingering capitalist class antagonisms, art, "in order to be art," still needs conflict. In declarations such as these, Hacks is clearly at odds with GDR state officials, who, in light of the supposed resolution of class antagonisms, also declared the resolution of all conflicts arising out of capitalism and whose views Hacks correspondingly charges as ultimately undialectical and stagnant. The playwright's correction is to argue that, although significant conflicts have been overcome, it must be recognized that "even the best of all actual worlds must contain

a flaw: that it is worse than the best of all possible worlds” (48).

Hacks conceives of this remaining contradiction as one of the “relationship of utopia to reality,” i.e., of *das Denkbare/das Mögliche* (the thinkable or possible) to *das Machbare/das Tatsächliche* (the doable or feasible), and it is of paramount significance for Hacks’ method. It is, in fact, what he identifies in the preface to *Das Poetische* as “the object of young art,” for the possible, though not actual, reality of utopia is finally thinkable after socialism partly because the staging of that utopia requires an advanced audience capable of comparing it with the “ugly reality” outside of the artwork (*MdK* 47-48). This opportunity to present what he elsewhere called the “unity of action and plan” (of *das Machbare* and *das Mögliche*) is, Hacks believes, the great benefit of working “from a standpoint of mature socialism” (“Saure Feste” 137). Because his is a period of relative harmony, the artist is sanctioned and encouraged once again, as in other classical eras, to use art to depict mankind at its greatest, as long as his illustration remains attentive to the reality that gave birth to the possibilities he presents. For Hacks, this approach amounts to the “formula[ion] of a new grade of *socialist* classicism” that can reflect the totality of his progressive society by depicting both what was and what (now) could be (emphasis added, *MdK* 47).<sup>8</sup>

This great, unified, and liberated era calls for great, unified, and liberated form

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<sup>8</sup> Hacks is well aware of the threat of being labeled an idealist, so it is important to keep in mind that he views reality as approaching utopia asymptotically. As he writes in the preface to *Das Poetische*, “Utopia has no way to exist other than in a reality that develops towards it” (*MdK* 48). In his reasoning, utopia can never actually be achieved, but because the arrival of socialism makes it thinkable or possible, it is accordingly useful as a kind of thought exercise.

of art. With its progression from the realm of the necessary to that of freedom, society achieves a kind of subject-object unity that was missing under the exploitative and alienating conditions and relations of capitalism. For artists who want to dedicate themselves to reflecting at the level of form this material development, Hacks encourages the unification of *Haltung* (the subject/artist's attitude or mindset) and *Wirklichkeit* (the object/reality) in the work, represented by the organic whole of the work, its unification of form and content (*MdK* 113). Throughout Hacks' writing of this period, this relationship is articulated in a number of different ways: *das Denkbare-das Machbare*, *das Mögliche-das Tatsächliche*; the future/tomorrow-the present/today; what could be-what is; mind-nature. All, however, boil down to essentially the same point about subject-object unity. Unlike the scientist's attempt to separate these two domains in an effort to achieve objectivity, "the artist shows the world in his most personal way" (*ibid*). "The illustration of reality [in the artwork] is the means" that the artist uses to achieve his "aim," that is, how he communicates his point of view or way of viewing the world; consequently, the form that his mind gives to this matter is "for the artwork the principle political issue, and so the most interesting one" (*ibid*, 103). Thus, should a Socialist-Classicist author respond to reality by identifying progressive tendencies in it and portraying them in his work, he would no longer allow his object to define him as it did under the reign of the reifying Naturalism, for example. Rather, the artist would be exercising his intellect and giving his own shape to this matter as a free man.

The goal then for the Socialist-Classicist artist of Hacks' time is to use his advanced mind to mold the unformed matter of reality (*Wirklichkeit*) in accordance with the broader historical-materialist explanation (the proper *Haltung*) of that reality. In so doing, the artist endows his artwork with the utopian tendency already operative in his advanced, post-revolutionary consciousness, for he is already able to see the manifold possibilities (*Möglichkeiten*) available to him and his society. In order to communicate this in the artwork, Hacks explains that *das Mögliche* must take the form of *die Größe*, which entails the illustration of a person or situation in its full extent. All events, characters, and opinions have to be of great (*groß*) consequence and be presented accordingly, or their good characteristics need to be exaggerated to greatness. The purpose of this exaggeration is for artists to turn all of this content into symbols of the great potential of everything around and in them; the GDR society would be presented as a utopia and the everyman would be presented as a hero. At last, in the late 1950s, this greatness is "possible" to imagine and, for Hacks, still in the realm of the realistic precisely because the contemporary political subject and society have been liberated; there is simply no longer any reason to present man and his world simply as they are rather than what they can be. It is time to show them in their full potential, thereby allowing the artist to capture in his work what he sees as the *größen* (in "the double meaning of good and spread out") possibilities of the historical process (*MdK* 59-60).

Hacks also characterizes *die Größe* as a kind of "pomp," which he said is

defined by its ability to serve as a “means of illustrating intent” rather than an “aim” or final destination. Pomp would be “sensual and celebratory,” and it shows the “pride of men in themselves.” As a form of artistic exaggeration, it is the “celebration of human possibility” according to the mind of the artist and the audience. It is, Hacks stresses, the natural poetic form of theatre and “essential” to it. As he explains, because “The structural generic rules of art depend on the sociological structure of the audience” it is intended to affect, theatre, which was available to all classes in the former GDR, is the “most open and sociable” of all arts. Theatre is “not quiet”; it must play big. Its “emblem,” its “most human human being,” according to Hacks, is the “king with the purple cloak and his golden paper crown,” for on stage he, unlike a president or prime minister, symbolizes social power and becomes a “cipher for human greatness.” He “suffers and determines not only his fate, but that of his people” (*MdK* 150-152).

The pompous or *große* presentation of people and events according to Hacks’ grand stipulations is, he believes, a means of poeticization, and he contrasted this with the presentation of the “everyday,” which he unhesitatingly calls the “death of art.” Artists of the everyday, whom he implicitly likens to naturalists, “sit in their tree and chirp” and believe that “the wind that moves the tree is a characteristic of the tree.” They mistake appearance for essence (*MdK* 62). Artists of *die Größe*, on the other hand, have an imagination that allows them to identify and take hold of what they deemed most characteristic, good, and, as will be discussed, inspirational in a given situation or

personality.

Hacks aligns the form of *die Größe* with what he maintains is the “first criterion of art”: “perfection” (*MdK* 60). This term appears to have two related meanings in Hacks’ theoretical work. The first is that, insofar as the artwork is to offer a utopian image of the future, that which it presents has to be perfect. The second is that of great “ästhetische Vollkommenheit,” or aesthetic completion, which is telling of Hacks’ faith that, in his day, unity was not only achievable between the artist and his object, but also within the artwork itself (45). Implied here is that individual characters and situations, as well as their relations to one another, must all be presented in such a way that they form organic wholes at the various levels of the dramatic work. This “completion” can be achieved, for example, through the avoidance of mere contrariness or stereotyping of characters and, at the textual level, through the presentation of well-composed dialogue and, where appropriate, verse (“Poetische”).

The critiques that Hacks levels at artworks that are too factual or too emotional and at artists of the everyday seem to have come from the same source in his literary theory, namely, his concern with balancing the two aspects he believes are central to an artwork’s style: its “Unwirklichkeitswert” (*U-Wert*) or value of unreality and its “Identifikationswert” (*I-Wert*) or value of identification. The latter does not stem entirely from an emotional identification, but rather an intellectual one in which the reader or viewer is given the chance to “identify himself with [the] protagonist and

his circumstances” and thereby “apply it directly to his position.” In “Poetische,” Hacks offers an example to demonstrate that the success of his version of the folk ballad “Die Räuberbraut,” which is included in the essay, is directly related to its high *I-Wert*, and he sought to exhibit this success by “translating it, line for line, in the undisguised language of things,” for he believes this was what is fundamentally responsible for the poem’s *I-Wert* (*MdK* 139). While the story of the ballad, which deals with the themes of lost innocence and manipulation in love, remain in tact and meaningful after Hacks’ “translation,” the poem itself loses all of its charm and interest.<sup>9</sup> As Hacks notes, when “we reduced the poem to the basis of its success, we retain a poem that wouldn’t be successful” (*MdK* 140). Art requires more than the objective reporting of facts that appeal to the intellect; it also needs *U-Wert*, which can bestow it with a sense of the “unreachable,” “gushing,” “unbelievable,” or, quite simply, “ideal.” In a second “translation” of “Die Räuberbraut,” Hacks limits the ballad to the *Haltung* and feelings of the speaker. In so doing, the poem becomes “overwrought, romantic,” “incomprehensible,” and, as Hacks confesses, more or less

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<sup>9</sup> A sample stanza will help to illuminate the distinction Hacks is making. Original text: “Nimm diesen Ring, und sollte jemand fragen, / So sollst du sagen, ein Räuber hat ihn getragen, / Der dich geliebt bei Tag und bei der Nacht / Und der schon viele Menschen umgebracht.” Reduced to its *I-Wert*: “Hier schenke ich dir einen Ring (echt Bernstein und echt Silber). Wenn dich einer fragt, / Kannst du ruhig sagen, daß du ihn von mir hast, / Und daß wir uns umarmt haben jeden Mittwoch nach sieben, / Und daß ich weniger fad war als die, die ernstlich für dich in Frage kommen” (*MdK* 138, 140).



intolerable (*MdK* 141-142).<sup>10</sup>

In each of these “translations,” the content of the ballad remains the same. Only the style in which they are presented, that is, the form they take, changes. Hacks’ point is that the *Haltung* of the socialist poet, in its presentation of any given material, has to balance the objective with the subjective. Furthermore, both the poetic totality of the text and its political import inheres in the combination of these two values. Not only does it represent subject-object unity in the free society, but the artist’s poetic presentation of utopia—of man in his full development—can also confront the viewer with a fruitful contradiction between the best of all actual worlds—the *tatsächlichen* GDR—and the best of all *möglichen* worlds, the latter of which is only just becoming imaginable.

The achievement of the unity Hacks calls for does not offer the audience any “Endlösungen” or final solutions, but rather “a direction” (*MdK* 49).<sup>11</sup> As he observes in *Poetische*, “Utopia has no way of existing other than in a reality that develops towards it,” and the direction of this development is to keep the artist’s attention on what will be possible tomorrow. Of course, this is something that many could

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<sup>10</sup> The same stanza from fn. 10, now limited to its *U-Wert*: “Nimm dieses einmalige Kleinod; es wird Aufsehen erregen. / Sprich dann: ich schäme mich meines Herrn nicht. / Sprich: seine liebe war groß wie die Welt, / Menschen, mich ausgenommen, waren wie Ungeziefer vor ihm” (*MdK* 141).

<sup>11</sup> The rhetorical force of the word “Endlösung,” an allusion to Hitler’s “final solution,” is surely not accidental. Although Hacks believes his method and theory of art to be political through and through, he certainly does not want to be understood as totalitarian. In fact, unlike Socialist Realism, which Hacks views as a self-confined, single vision of the future, the Socialist-Classicist methodology was designed to open the audience’s mind to the host of ideas about what might come to pass.

speculate about: the sociologist and the weatherman, for instance, can follow the “lines of progress” or metrological developments; but they are not “prophets” and cannot “draft vivid images of the particular appearances of future life.” Artists, however, can. This is their unique talent. In this way, Hacks presents his method of Socialist Classicism as a means for artists to offer a vision of “tomorrow” and his dramatic theory as an explanation of the “play of tomorrow” (a response to his 1957 proposal of the “play of today”) (58-59). “The art of tomorrow,” he emphasizes, “will be made today [because] tomorrow” now bears all the utopian possibilities ushered in by socialism and, for that reason, “has a greater effect on artists than yesterday.” Unlike the sociologist and the weatherman, only artists have “the passport to the future” and can therefore make predictions about the various forms that the promised utopia can take, for only they have the imagination—“the medium of tomorrow”—to do so (59, 66). Only those with such imaginations can also communicate what they predict by illustrating their image in the idealized and pompous form of *die Größe*, of mankind and society in all of its great potential (58-59). “The greatest poets,” Hacks affirms, “abstain from the bickering of today and anticipate the clear, secure, and great human viewpoint of tomorrow” (71).

Hacks fully admits that an artist who predicts what might happen tomorrow from the possibilities latent today will run the risk of being wrong: “There is a sufficient danger of error, and when I write here how it will be, I confess at the same time that it can also not be that way.” “Why then,” he asks, “do I write at all? Because

I hope that it will be that way” (*MdK* 59). Such prophesying would help to increase the possibility that the artist’s hopes and dreams, thought to be the hopes and dreams of all people, would come true. It would create a “thought-path in the thicket of all that is coming” by offering suggestions to the audience that could motivate them to make an effort in that direction (*ibid*). With this we arrive at the educative value of Hacks’ Socialist Classicism and the special role that art and theatre, in particular, are granted.

For Hacks, the value today of the play of tomorrow is not merely that it is enjoyable in its grand and unified style. The play of tomorrow is also pedagogical, in that it can encourage the audience to think a certain way and perhaps even to act a certain way in order to affect change. But the Socialist-Classicist artist would not be a didact; he would not impose a particular circumscribed truth on the text the way that Socialist-Realism does or even the way that Hacks views Brecht’s epic theatre (as well as the younger Hacks’ own dialectical theatre) as doing. Hacks does not necessarily dismiss either of these approaches, but merely explains that they were borne of and responded to a different era with different needs. “Such an attitude is not wrong; it is historical,” he insists. Brecht’s period, for instance, was “wissenschaftlich,” or scientific, according to Hacks, and so Brecht’s role as a leftist artist had to be focused on teaching his less-educated audience the way the world works, which is to say, the doctrine of historical materialism (*MdK* 54-55). The imbalance between the knowledge of the artist and that of the audience at the time demanded that the former directly

instruct the latter.

The artist of the Socialist-Classical period also has to have command of all that which was *wissenschaftlich*, but he “no longer needs to simply propagate it.” His audience is already educated in the ways of Marxism; they are approaching, if not already on, on the same level as the artist and will soon stand right next to him (*MdK* 54-55). Because they are a “public with socialist consciousness, socialist past, socialist habits,” a public whose consciousnesses has already been raised, the “worldview of the classical play finds itself to be in harmony with the views of the audience” (71, 69). Accordingly, the truth that is to be communicated in the Socialist-Classical artwork can be less reliant on demonstrations of the operations of historical materialism and more concerned with the mere fact of actually existing socialism and all of its attending utopian possibilities. After all, the pedagogy behind the Socialist-Classical work has to be appropriate for the target audience. The artist of the new era “loves—perhaps too much—evidence, but hates proving premises,” which was Brecht’s vocation, and Hacks’ already or soon-to-be radicalized audience does not need to have anything explained to them (46).

Rather than commit his work to explanation, the Socialist-Classical artist should bet on the capacity of his hungry and intelligent audience to figure out the truth of the work (as *das Mögliche*) themselves: “The true will be graspable through the perfected tools of recognition (*Erkenntnis*) and through the demand for it” (*MdK* 73). Yet the purpose of the Socialist-Classical artwork is not merely to show them what

they already know. In their engagement with an abstract reality through the form of *die Größe*, they are expected to recognize the greatness of mankind and thereby confirm that the path their society is on was the right one. They are also expected to be encouraged to dream of all that may come and, in so doing, ask themselves how their lives then do not yet match what they see on stage. They are to identify differences between their world and the world “of tomorrow” presented on stage, mull over their similarities and differences, and thereby engage their critical faculties in an effort to figure out how what they are shown compares to reality. This necessitates that they tease out the *I-Wert* (or *das Machbare*) from the *U-Wert* (or *das Denkbare*) and labor to understand the relationship of the latter to the former, or “of utopia to reality,” as Hacks puts it in the preface to *Poetische* (*MdK* 48).

In Hacks’ thinking, all of the exercises above are possible because the audience of Socialist-Classicism believes themselves to be free. Because their advanced consciousnesses are aware of the fact that everything presented to them is mere appearance, they feel less threatened by the great characters and more emboldened and confident so that they can tap into the “inner possibilities” and abilities and confirm what they find (*MdK* 143). Nevertheless, in this process, *die Größe*’s activation of the imagination will not merely portray “the greatness of thoughts, feelings, volitions” with the expectation that the audience should simply fall into self-reflexive and passive enjoyment of the play in their recognition that the exaggerations presented are intended to be extensions of the best of what they and

their society have to offer; *die Größe* also “demands” the greatness of new thoughts, feelings, and volitions and “makes them possible” (61). This is to say that *die Größe* will also facilitate the production of even more greatness in the way that it inspires the audience to think more critically, feel more passionately, and act more steadfastly.

Viewers who observe and understand *die Größe* and thus respond and engage in the way that Hacks anticipates develop what he calls an “aesthetic consciousness.” Hacks illuminates the stakes of this advancement in self-admittedly grand fashion when he explains that this achievement will be nothing short of man’s awareness of the fact that he has arrived at himself. Although this experience may be confined to specific moments in a play, the audience will have been made aware of their completeness, their unity as a biological (in the sense of *das Tatsächliche*) and a spiritual (*geistiges*, in the sense of *das Denkbare*) beings: the “recovery of [an individual’s] natural being will remain, forever made richer from the giving of his entire humanity.” The greater significance of this will be, of course, that “both the natural man, just as the human utopia, will not be met in the historical reality. They exist in the past and in the future, perhaps also in memory and hope,” but certainly in Socialist-Classical art, in which “they are two imaginary, alternate drafts for the world” (*MdK* 146-147).

In this sense, one of the major and most interesting distinctions between Hacks’ method and that of Socialist Realism is where the imaginations of the former’s audience would take them: notably not to a circumscribed and necessarily socialist realm, but rather to a more generalized *human* utopia. Just as significant, however, is

Hacks' ability to craft an aesthetic theory and related method that is attentive to concrete reality without asserting its ultimate primacy over the poetic. The form may "come from" and respond to the content reality provides it, but it is still the form that has the greatest impact on audience through its encouragement of critical thinking and the imagination. ("Gemeinplätze" 125).

*The Classical Tradition: An Old Form for a New Era*

In Hacks' method, art mostly serves to confirm what he believed was already true, though perhaps not widely recognized, about the advanced and unified socialist society and socialist individual. In his Socialist-Classical method, truth and art have no necessary relation. Each can easily survive without the other. It is rather that art, though the presentation of the possible, can bring the truth of human potential to the fore, forcing the audience to confront it and enhancing their intellectual and emotional experience of it. Truth is not immanent to art (romanticism), nor does it submit the artwork to its ruling from outside (didacticism). It is recognized, experienced, and appreciated in the artwork. Hacks' aim is to show that art of this socialist era has a unique opportunity to illustrate all that is true and great about man and his world through the imitation and enhancement of reality and in so doing to encourage his audience to ensure that society would continue to move in the direction of harmony and freedom, which is to say, the direction of the never-actually-achievable utopia.

In “Art and Philosophy,” Alain Badiou outlines the three schemata he sees as governing the many theories proposed over the centuries to explain or sometimes delineate the art-truth relation. One of these schema is “classical,” whose practitioners or advocates he views as calling for peace between truth and art. Neither of them fights for dominance, as they do under the romantic and didactic schemata. The classical perspective is openly of the opinion that art is “incapable of truth” because “Its essence is mimetic, and its regime is that of semblance.” But, as Badiou explains, “This incapacity does not pose a serious problem (contrary to what Plato believed). This is because the *purpose* of art is not” truth, again unlike in the other two schemata (4). The Purpose (in Sinyavsky’s sense of aim or even tendency) of art is, rather, first the audience’s positive identification with what is presented, and second, the expectation that the desires and hopes that are transferred in this identification find themselves in a safe place to work through them cathartically and at a level removed from actual reality. As Badiou puts it, “In classicism, art captures desire and shapes (*éduque*) its transference by proposing a semblance of its object.” In this sense, art provides a “free service” for self-analysis via education and training (“Art and Philosophy” 3-7).

In Hacks’ terms, Badiou is explaining the power of the combination of the *Identifikations-Wert*, viable because the audience recognizes and understands the semblance of reality presented in the artwork, and the *Unwirklichkeits-Wert* in the pompous form of *die Größe*, viable because the audience is encouraged to invest in and



unload onto the artwork their own great desires and hopes for what is possible. According to Hacks and, Badiou believes, other classicists, the balanced combination of these two values yields the poetic totality of the artwork. What's more, the harmony that is achieved in the totality and unity of the artwork and in the truth-art relation more generally is, for Hacks and the likeminded, a direct consequence of the relative peace in their societies. Classical drama, for one, "is based on a more or less stable harmony of all politically weighty classes" (*MdK* 70). In a period like Hacks', "the beautiful will no longer be the form of the lie" when it is presented in the artwork, "but rather [the form of] the truth" (73). This is to say that Hacks believes that any well composed artwork from a classical period, even one from the GDR of the 1960s that is not even aiming for his Socialist-Classical style, will contain within its beauty the truth of its reality. (This is a far cry from the deceptive classical art of non-classical periods, which simply served to cover over the ugly reality.)

The fact that his method of Socialist Classicism (*sozialistische Klassik*) is based on an actually existing harmony between the classes is, in Hacks' opinion, what distinguishes it from the "Pseudo-Klassik" or "Klassizismus" of other periods. The latter is always based merely on an author's pious wishes, not reality, and it is a "fright" (*MdK* 70). Hacks admits that the hasty reader could accuse him, too, of *Klassizismus*. But, as he is quick to point out, theorizing about the play of tomorrow and its methodology is not the same as actually penning it; "One may just not write *the* play of tomorrow," he explains, for that would be to produce something before

society was ready for it (*ibid*). “Proletarian Classicism” is another title he gives to his method for “tomorrow,” because it, like “Socialist Classicism,” conveys the anticipated overcoming of an old opposition. His explanation is as follows: When King Servius Tullius divided the voting population of the Roman society in the 7th century BC, he dubbed the poorest division the “*proletarii*” and the economic upper crust “*die Klasse*,” the latter of which eventually became identified with excellence and good taste. In the centuries that followed, these two groups came to represent class conflict across the ages in the figures of the exploiters and the exploited, but this antagonism is being swiftly defeated in the period of socialism. Accordingly, Hacks’ proposal of a “Socialist-Classicist” *qua* “Proletarian-Classicist” art is the expression of the fact that he believes this “ancient wound is healed.” The “sublation of the contradiction of productivity and pleasure,” the respective domains of the proletariat and the ruling classes, have sanctioned the creation and enjoyment of grand (*groß*) and beautiful classical art (*MdK* 122).

The question that then remains is why Hacks returns to an old form to express the radically new events taking place around him, why he believes that “the classical mindset has greater chances than that of the innovators,” like Brecht (*MdK* 122). His response is that the great fidelity of the innovators to progress results in a kind of closed-mindedness that leads to the confusion of science and art, the dismissal of all that preceded them, and the crass desire to simply provide their audience with something new (*MdK* 68). The “classicist,” on the other hand, “has the world’s laws of

motion so comfortably under his belt that he is capable of recognizing all driveways to progress and of standing on the shoulders of his predecessors and even his enemies.” In this sense, the classicist learns from and then “improves” the tradition instead of dispensing with it (*MdK* 112). He undertakes a kind of *Bearbeitung* (often translated as “adaptation,” but better thought of as the process of working on and working over) of what precedes him in order to prepare it for a new generation so that they may have a sense of their own history and where they came from.

In the end, Hacks’ devotion to Classicism is not really about a commitment to ancient Greece or the Neoclassical period of the late 18th century; it is concerned with building a relationship to history and tradition and the author committing himself to the tenet that an understanding of what came before him can serve his future and that of his society. In this, Hacks sees himself to be following on the heels of authors like Shakespeare (an especially important figure for Hacks), Aeschylus, Aristophanes, Lope, Büchner, and Goethe, whom he aligns with the Classical tradition, and believes strongly that one must look back in order to move forward.<sup>12</sup> As Wolfgang Emmerich discusses in *Kleine Literaturgeschichte der DDR*, the East German playwrights of this period are deeply occupied with many of these same figures, which Emmerich takes as a sign of a search for “the exemplary cases that

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<sup>12</sup> For more of Hacks’ thoughts on what would count as a classical text and who was a classicist, see “Über das Revidieren von Klassikern” (“On the Revision of Classics” 1975), where, for example, he defines a “classicist” as “an artist who, calculating from his death on, survived a hundred years” (*MdK* 202).

were still topical, that is, for the basic problems of the occidental civilization.” Following this statement, Emmerich provides a list of long-respected authors whom he pairs with contemporary playwrights; Hacks is matched with Goethe (355).<sup>13</sup>

The German Classical tradition specifically is an important touchstone for both Hacks and many of his generation. In the 1983 essay, “Trends in Literary Reception Coming to Terms with Classicism,” literary critic Patricia Herminghouse provides a brief account of the various ways that German Classicism “has been drafted into the service of an ideology far removed” from its own. She goes on to use the great Goethe as a symbol for the mixed and strained relationship between the GDR state, its artists, and the figures of Weimar Classicism, and to detail the various “political uses made of this apolitical poet” (273). As she explains, soon after the founding of the GDR state in 1949, major figures in the Communist Party from Alexander Abusch to Walter Ulbricht and Johannes Becher began “advocating [for] a return to the values of classical German humanism [...] as the basis for the regeneration of a German national culture” in the wake of the horrors of National Socialism (274). In a gesture intended to discredit West Germany, the East German state eventually positioned itself as the “sole legitimate heir and perpetuator of Goethe’s work,” using his “‘classical realism’ [...] to fortify the narrow—and often insecure—dogmas of Socialist Realism against deviations in form and content” (275).

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<sup>13</sup> Other author pairings mentioned by Emmerich include recourse to “Schiller ([Volker] Braun), to Shakespeare ([Heiner] Müller) and Lenz ([Christoph] Hein), to Don Giovanni ([Karl] Mickel) and Chekov (Braun), to Seghers (Müller/Braun) and Alexander Bek (Mickel/Müller)” (355).

By the 1970s, however, this acceptance found itself on tenuous ground as writers and critics started to question the apparent equivalence between the terms “classicism” and “realism” and the use of the former “as a weapon against ‘unacceptable’, ‘unrealistic’ literature” that was viewed as too experimental (277).

The East German reception of the Classical tradition, in general, and Goethe, in particular, was complicated, a situation which, Herminghouse claims, plays a role of central importance in Hacks’ (whom she deems “Goethe’s major advocate”) 1976 play, *Ein Gespräch im Hause Stein über den abwesenden Herrn von Goethe*. In her estimation, Hacks “portrays Goethe not through the eyes of an artist who has suffered at his hands”—and it is true that many writers of the 1970s felt they had—“but through the eyes of a representative of the constrictive society at whose hands Goethe had suffered” (“Trends” 282). But Hacks is by no means uncritical of Goethe. If anything, he faults his predecessor for not being classical enough because the latter was too concerned with passing on a specific message. The best example of this comes from Hacks’ essay “Saure Feste” (1980), which was published as a companion piece to Hacks’ own *Bearbeitung* of Goethe’s *Bearbeitung* of a Greek myth about Pandora’s husband (Epimetheus), his brother (Prometheus), and their children.<sup>14</sup> Even though she never appears in it, Goethe named the play *Pandora*, and he wrote it between 1807

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<sup>14</sup> Despite the fact that Hacks produced his own *Bearbeitung* of Goethe’s *Pandora*, which he published in 1979, this analysis will only deal with the literary critical essay “Saure Feste,” because the focus of this chapter on Hacks’ theoretical writing and because, as Hacks freely admits, his two vocations of theorist and artist were always in conflict. Hacks published two other *Bearbeitungen* of Goethe’s work in addition to *Pandora: Moritz Tassow* (1961) and *Das Jahrmarktsfest zum Plundersweilern* (1973).

and 1808, only to be released before completion in the journal *Prometheus* in 1810. For this reason his publishers have labeled it a fragment.

Hacks' major censure of Goethe's play is that *Pandora* provided its audience with a clear *Lehre*, or lesson, rather than a provocation to think. Despite its unfinished status, Hacks feels the play is indeed complete. As he maintains, "All questions that the play raises are answered in the play" ("Saure Feste" 101). The primary conflict Goethe provides and eventually resolves is between the brothers Prometheus and Epimetheus who symbolizes "the life of action and the life of observation," respectively (*ibid*). The latter spends the majority of the play dreaming about the past and longing for the return of his wife, Pandora, who left him and took one of their twin daughters with her. He has cloudy vision of the present, because he is haunted by the ghosts of his loved ones, and he is virtually impotent when his daughter, Epimeleia's lover (Prometheus' son, Phileros) attacks her physically. Prometheus, however, exudes all the strength that his brother lacks. Much is made of the concrete payoff of his labor, of his leadership skills, and of his productivity. He is firmly rooted in the present and can assess any given situation thoroughly and with clear eyes.

Despite the fact that it is unfinished, Goethe's play appears to conform well to the main tenets of classical model of drama. It satisfies the neoclassical interpretation of Aristotle's dicta of the unity of action (it stages one primary plot), place (it takes place in a single—if divided—landscape), and time (it comprises fewer

than 24 hours) (*Poetics*).<sup>15</sup> The plot is straightforward and works through the abstract conflict between action and mere contemplation, practice and theory, in the figures of Prometheus and Epimetheus, respectively, and their different attitudes towards life and strategies for helping their children fix the misunderstanding between them. All the conflict is stirred up over the course of a single night, but it is eventually worked out in the final few pages of the play as dawn fast approaches and sheds proverbial light on the matter. At this point Epimetheus begins to let go of his hope that his wife will return and actually contend with the reality before his eyes. Some of this change comes at his brother's encouragement, for Prometheus is more pragmatic and has no fear of facing the present, that is, contending with what dawn's light will reveal. Prometheus does, however, have little interest in trying to imagine what tomorrow could be like. But by the end of the play, he at least recognizes that this narrow perspective is limiting, and he admires the two figures who come to represent the promise of the future: the young couple, Epimeleia and Phileros, who are united after divine intervention saves them from great tragedy and able to end their potentially fatal, but nevertheless minor, quarrel.

Hacks' major complaint with Goethe's play is that his sense that the great poet is overly concerned with proving a single point. Goethe depicts "only truths, no

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<sup>15</sup> The stage in Goethe's play represents one setting, but it is divided down the middle, with each brother assigned a "side" specifically designed for him. Prometheus' is craggy and mountainous, unsymmetrical and crude. Epimetheus' side wooden and hilly, "well-cultivated" and stocked with fruit-bearing trees (*Pandora* 3-4).

realities,” in Hacks’ opinion, and his figures are characterized only by predetermined desires and behaviors rather than the experiences they go through. (Prometheus is the one exception to this, as he opens his mind to the future at the end of the play; still, any active anticipation of or desire to “make” that future is left to the young people.) Developing the characters and situations more fully and presenting them with greater depth would have allowed them the opportunity to become conscious of their dreams or motivations and be self-reflexive in a way that would have also been encouraging to Goethe’s audience (“Saure Feste” 126-127). Goethe’s play is so burdened by its content and the point it wants to make that it can only “be thought with,” he explains, “not lived with” “Es läßt sich mitdenken, nicht mitleben” (127).

To buttress these criticisms, Hacks offers a few corrections for improving Goethe’s play. One suggestion involves the transformation of the groups of workers in Goethe’s play, who appear a few times to wildly praise Prometheus, into a proper and less obviously partisan chorus that would serve as a single-voiced commentator on and guide through the action of the text. The second recommendation is to develop further the potential struggle within Prometheus that appears at the very end when he first allows himself to look towards the future; Hacks reads this as the potential conflict between “constructive grasp (*Griff*) and potentially harmful anticipation (*Vorgriff*),” and delving deeper into it would have prevented Prometheus from serving as a mere bearer of a single meaning and return him to the status of a great mythical hero that he is, struggles and all (“Saure Feste” 135).



For Hacks, more attention to this latter conflict specifically would make *Pandora* more efficacious as a pedagogical play, which it clearly is, because it would allow for the “Mitleben” that he found sorely missing in *Pandora*. Because the more primary conflict of the play (between Epimetheus and Prometheus) is ultimately resolved and subsumed by a third term (Phileros/Epimeleia), as it were, the expansion of the different layers of Prometheus would permit the audience to experience his inner world more deeply and thereby enhance both the *I-Wert* of the play, in their understanding of his and their own private motivations, and the *U-Wert*, in his visions of that “potentially harmful” future. Doing so would also have the consequence of providing the audience with enough material for them to not only “live with,” but also make their own decisions about the character of Prometheus.

According to Hacks, improving *Pandora* in these critical respects would mean that the play would have to be turned into an “Ideendrama,” which he defined as a “drama that is allowed to put forth ideas.” Calling a play an “Ideendrama” does not mean that it simply presents of a “ton of ideas”; the label has to do with the *way* that ideas are presented, namely, as open and provocative questions rather than closed and predetermined positions. Hacks asserts that *Pandora* could advance in a more favorable and, frankly, useful direction if only the spotlight were put on Prometheus. The play would then have the capacity to dramatize and poeticize a “fight within a fable of the spirit” instead of in the actual words or other more heavy-handed plot points (e.g., the back and forth between the brothers) of the play. The audience of the

“Drama of Ideas” must be unencumbered and come to these thoughts on their own, “without letting actual events concern or strain them.” When such an execution is successful, the viewers “permit” the provocative issues latent in the play to come forward as the viewers recognize them. Because Hacks believes his audience to be advanced and well educated, he expects that, in his own *Bearbeitung*, they would grasp the form of the struggle between *Griff* and *Vorgriff* that Prometheus begins to grapple with at the end, and they would be able to do so without it being mentioned explicitly. This is because they would recognize it as similar to the higher-level struggles that they and their own society are also working to overcome. Now, for the first time and “from the standpoint of mature socialism[,] there is the possibility” both in the play and in society “to rewrite the unity between action and plan.” This is a unity Goethe fallaciously and prematurely imposed on his play in the figures of Phileros and Epimeleia and one that could be corrected by simply expanding earnestly on Prometheus’ various formal dialectical exercises (“Saure Feste” 136-137). (It is likely efforts like this that led Emmerich to label Hacks a “self-stylized socialist Goethe” (335).<sup>16</sup>)

To the extent that Goethe’s play answers all of the questions that it raises, it is a complete, unified, and balanced classical work. Yet, also to the extent that it answers

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<sup>16</sup> Hacks is certainly not shy when it came to comparing himself to Goethe. As Margy Gerber notes in an essay on his *Moritz Tasson*, “In a 1974 interview with Manfred Durzak [from the *FAZ*], Hacks compared the development of his own artistic style with that of Goethe from *Sturm und Drang* to *Klassik*.” Because “Tasso is a transitional figure in Goethe’s work, [...] Hacks’ latter-day Tasso was to do the same, marking his development from ‘revolutionary’ playwright to socialist classicist” (312).

all of the questions it raises, Hacks views *Pandora* as too didactic and thus not classical enough for its own good. Hacks believes that Goethe strayed from the imperative that, in classical art, including Socialist Classicism, “The artist should refrain from all contrariness, all antagonism and condemnation, anything which merely negates, because that is unproductive” (*Essays on Art and Literature* 210).<sup>17</sup> This quotation is actually drawn from Goethe’s “Noch ein Wort für junge Dichter” (“Further Advice for Young Poets”), and it implicitly addresses the important difference between an artwork that tells the audience what to believe by presenting its subject matter as black and white and one that stimulates its audience through the illustration of “productive” conflicts.

Like Hacks, Goethe believes that art should reflect not morality, but rather the unique and ever-developing intellectual and emotional attitude (*Haltung*) of the artist towards the outside world that inspires him to create something in the first place (*Essays* 210). He is able to bridge the “enormous chasm” between nature and art through the careful study of nature and the meticulous selection of the “best from [the] good” in it (81). His style, moreover, should be the concretization of this very

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<sup>17</sup> The most of the following citations of Goethe are from the John Gearey (ed.) and Ellen von Nardroff (trans.) English-language collection, *Essays on Art and Literature* (1986). In addition to “Noch ein Wort” (208-209), the essays cited include “Einfache Nachahmung der Natur, Manier, Stil” (“Simple Imitation, Manner, and Style” 71-74), “Einleitung in die Propyläen” (“Introduction to the Propylaea” 78-90), and “Über die Wahrheit und Wahrscheinlichkeit der Kunstwerke” (“On Realism in Art” 74-78). The remainder is made up of quotations from *Maximen und Reflexionen*, selections of which were published in English under the title “Aphorisms on Art and Art History” are taken from the volume, *German aesthetic and literary criticism* (1984). All of these German-language texts can be found in *Goethes Werke* vol. 12, Hamburger Ausgabe edited by Erich Trunz (1982).

point of view, i.e. of how he makes sense of the world and what he sees as true in it. After he “finally reaches the point where he becomes increasingly familiar with the characteristic and essential features of things,” the artist “will now be able to see some order in the multiplicity of appearances” that he encounters everyday, and then he will be able to capture the beautiful totality of life because he will be able to show how various parts of nature “fit” together (72). His unique talent is precisely that he is able to see reality as the organic whole that it is during a classical age (as Goethe and Hacks believe), and, accordingly, the art that he creates comes to stand for nothing less than the “highest achievement of mankind” (*ibid*). The moment he selects an object to represent, “he imbues it with a higher value,” for as he molds this raw material, “the boundaries of harmony, greatness, significance, and completeness are drawn” (84).

In Goethe’s understanding, which parallels Hacks’, the artist achieves perfection in his representation of a possible reality—possible because he knows it is merely his vision of the world’s harmonious operation—in the form of a unified, “organic whole” (*Essays* 81). This perfection could also be presented as the synthesis of the idea and nature, and it is what confers beauty on the artwork (“Aphorisms” 229). In order to experience this beauty, viewers allow the artwork to engage them for a time, for only then will they be available enough to be touched by it both emotionally and intellectually. This experience is akin to one of identification, and it can set the stage for the beautiful artwork to take the opportunity to encourage its viewers to aspire to greater things than they ever have before. “The great work of art,”

Goethe emphasizes, “restrains feelings and imagination, it robs us of our free choice, and so we cannot deal with it as we please. We are compelled to submit to it so that it can give us back to ourselves, elevated and enhanced” (85). The effect of a masterful work of art is thus that it prepares its audience to see all of the possible greatness and beauty in nature because the audience has been shown the artist’s great representations of these qualities in nature. Consequently, the artwork trains them not only to recognize that which is put before them as complete and perfect, but also to “perceive in the smallest fragment [in nature] the vanished splendor of the whole” (87). They can then carry this skill with them into the world, poeticizing (in Hacks’ term) all that is around them and imagining the great possibilities latent in the quotidian.<sup>18</sup>

Insofar as Goethe maintains that works of art that are able to communicate successfully with their audience “give man such a feeling of confidence and instill in him such a sense of serenity and freedom,” Hacks does not seem to have strayed too far from his predecessor (*Essays* 88). To substitute “die Größe” for “confidence” and “*I-Wert* and *U-Wert*” for “serenity and freedom” would be to say the same thing, but in Hacks’ terminology. Hacks and Goethe additionally agree that this kind of

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<sup>18</sup> It seems prudent to acknowledge that all of Goethe’s talk about seeing the whole from its parts may at times sound closer to a romantic idea of the truth-art relation than to a classical one. Two points must be kept in mind when distinguishing the Neoclassical Goethe from the *Frühromantiker*: (1) he did not believe that truth was found in art, but rather that the truth of nature could be represented in art; and (2) his conception of the “whole” or even “ideal” was actually achievable in art, whereas the *Frühromantiker* viewed it as what one should aspire to, but could never reach (as long as one is mortal, cf. Romantic irony and Vera Pavlovna in *Chto delat’?*).

successful communication would be ultimately contingent upon the audience, namely, how intellectually developed they already were before experiencing the artwork. For Hacks, a popular/proletarian classicism was possible because he is convinced that the East German public is advanced enough to appreciate it and be inspired by it; however, the late 18th-, early 19th-century bourgeois audience for the art that Goethe encouraged was far more diverse, enjoying different levels of sophistication, education, and even access to that art. The consequence of this was that not everyone from Goethe's time was able, in Hacks' opinion, to "share with the true artist the flight to a higher level" (76). (Perhaps this unfortunate fact is in the forefront of Goethe's mind as he pens the all too heavy-handed *Pandora*.)

For Goethe as well as Hacks, a classical work of art is able to activate the minds and emotions of sophisticated viewers in its depiction of the classical artist's *Haltung* of the outside reality. In the artwork's harmonious and balanced presentation, the artist's mind shapes and organizes the raw material of everyday life in order to represent nature truthfully. His "poetic" or "poeticized" image is a portrayal of "not things that have happened" or mere copies of events, "but things that may happen, i.e. that are possible in accordance with probability or necessity." This is a position that can take us all the way back to Aristotle's *Poetics*. In the fragments that remain, the philosopher also argues that art must be seen as an artist's expression of how he understands the outside world. Insofar as this theory is true for the classical schema, the artwork must necessarily illustrate not just what is, as the historian does, but rather

what could be. In this tradition art is, after all, a fiction, even as it represents the truth, because the actual truth is never immanent to it. This modal shift from the indicative to the conditional also means that, for Aristotle as well as for Goethe and the always abstracting Hacks, art is the domain of the universal (the particular, on the other hand, belongs to history), and this is exactly what Aristotle believes makes art “philosophical,” subjecting its audience to mental exercises that both delight and educate them (51a37ff, 48b9ff). As they engage with the poetic whole of a given artwork, the viewers “learn as they observe and infer what each thing is” and what role each part plays through their intellectual and emotional identification of what is presented with what they already know and the cathartic discharge of all the energies wrapped up with that experience (48b9ff). As Badiou writes, for classical thinkers “Art has a therapeutic function, and not at all a cognitive or revelatory one” because it relies on the viewer’s recognition of and concomitant working through what is in the artwork.

Hacks’ explicit explanation for his recursion into the literary critical tradition to adopt an method and theory of art many centuries old is clear: if a classical age, like the period of GDR socialism that arrived after the sublation of the class antagonisms of capitalism, is to be represented truthfully and with all of its attending hopes about the future, it can only be represented in a grand classical form. Behind this, however, appears to be yet another explanation extending from his commitment to working

with that which appears to be stuck under the heading of the “das Unveränderliche,” meaning the unchangeable or the immutable. Hacks is far from comfortable with any stable categories, and he fears the fossilization of many of the natural objects of art, like landscapes, seasons, meteorological events, that is, things that are “outside of the grasp (*Zugriff*) of history, unrecorded by the category of becoming,” and, as a result, turns into clichés. But Hacks also sees potential in adopting these old words and symbols in a contemporary context. For one, it would prevent artists from relying too heavily on the “new,” as he feels the disciples of science (those, like himself, who were engaged with epic theatre, for example) had. Second, “Words, like things, must encamp in order to become poetic,” he explains, so they must be around for long enough that they have come to enjoy “a kind of simplicity” that is less complicated than the newer material around them. Rather than finding that they become so familiar that they also become invisible to viewers or readers, Hacks believes that the *Unveränderlichen* could actually find themselves to be more “vivid” when introduced in unusual ways and that they would “compel the audience to see the old as well as the new in the object” (*MaK* 144-145).

I submit that Hacks’ return to the literary canon can be understood through a similar logic. Hacks implores the artists of time to adopt for their new context the old style and form of ostensibly staid, *Unveränderlichen* classicism so that they can prepare their audiences to recognize fully the great significance of the fact that they, too, live in a classical period, one that is both radically new and yet familiar. In this sense, the



audience of the Socialist-Classicist artwork comes to see not only the renewed tropes in the artwork, but even their own society, as poetic, they thereby come to imagine all that is possible in their remarkable new world.

## CHAPTER 3

### MÜLLER'S OPEN DIALECTIC AND THE ANTI-LESSON OF THE LEHRSTÜCK

Heiner Müller's explosive play *Mauser* was written in 1970, some 21 years after the German Democratic Republic (GDR) had been founded, but was not performed until 1975 in Austin, Texas. The key problems raised by the play as well as its *Lehrstück* (learning or teaching play) form, were, however, already familiar to the German theatre community, as *Mauser* drew heavily on Bertolt Brecht's *Die Maßnahme* (*The Measures Taken* 1930-31), a controversial work in its own right.<sup>1</sup> Like Peter Hacks' 1979 adaptation of Goethe's *Pandora* (1807-08), the motivations for which were discussed in the previous chapter, Müller's play puts him in a dialectical relationship with his predecessor, taking a great deal from him while also reworking and revising Brecht's work for a new time and new audience that had recently been turned against the latter author.<sup>2</sup> For his part, Hacks believed that the GDR of the 1960s and '70s was enjoying the arrival of actually existing socialism, and this state of affairs encouraged him to create whole and balanced classical works of art that were to reflect the increasingly harmonious society around him and thereby inspire his viewers to imagine and even aim for a similar kind of greatness. Müller, it is safe to say,

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<sup>1</sup> The version of *Die Maßnahme* to be discussed here is from 1931.

<sup>2</sup> For more on the shift in the reception of Brecht in the GDR in the 1970s, see David Bathrick's "The Dialectics of Legitimation: Brecht in the DDR," *New German Critique* 2 (1974), 90-103.

disagreed strongly both with Hacks' assessment of East Germany and with his classical artistic methodology. While Hacks basked in the achievements of a society that he believed had resolved (or would shortly resolve) all class conflicts, Müller was more concerned with the antagonisms that remained or had arisen in the post-revolutionary GDR. In *Mauser*, they come to the fore most boldly and prominently in the Müller's interrogations of the status of the individual relative to the party or collective and the significance of this relation vis-à-vis the individual's knowledge or consciousness.

Like the other works discussed in this dissertation, Müller's principle aim in staging these tensions in *Mauser* was pedagogically motivated. However, the knowledge or truth of the play or of other *Lehrstücke*, for that matter, is not just the theory of historical materialism that is championed in Gorky's *Mat'* and that hastens the creation of Hacks' Socialist Classicism. More importantly, for Müller it is the opportunity or call to investigate the consequences of class struggle from a post-revolutionary perspective. It is, in fact, potentially misleading to say that there is any truth in the play at all. As a Brechtian *Lehrstück*, the goal of *Mauser* is not to impart a specific message, but rather to introduce, facilitate, and encourage a way of acting and thinking; its related Truth, then—related because it is made possible by these new behaviors—is that reality is “changeable” (Brecht, “Realistisches Theater und Illusion” “Realistic Theatre and Illusion” 25: 176). Consequently, Müller's play draws on Brecht's model in order to offer yet another viable literary alternative to the mode

of Socialist Realism that predominantly relegated art to the position of a vehicle for the communication of the single doctrine of Marxist-Leninism.<sup>3</sup>

The unidirectional pedagogical model of Socialist Realism closes the artwork off from its audience and keeps them in the same purely passive and consumptive role that is characteristic of their position in capitalist society. The *Lehrstück* model, on the other hand, offers an alternative in which the performers are the primary intended beneficiaries of the artistic experience. As “students,” the actors are encouraged to learn by engaging with the play self-reflexively and productively. The truth—again, not a fixed message, but a perspective or way of looking at the world—that they take away with them after a performance is an *external* one that has been both imported into the content and reflected in the dialectical formal structures as well as an *internal* one produced in the labor of the actors as they stage the play.

These are two fundamentally different ways of understanding the relationship between art and Truth. One is didactic, like Socialist Realism, and one is quasi-romantic, accepting that art itself can produce Truth. To be clear, I have no intention of saying that the *Lehrstück* model necessarily leads to the production of works of art whose truths are romantic and/or didactic in content, even though there are

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<sup>3</sup> Any details of Socialist Realism beyond its explicit didactic aesthetic commitments will not be discussed here largely because they have already been addressed in previous sections and the cultural politics of the policy have little concrete effect on the issues that are the focus of this chapter (other than the admittedly significant fact that *Mausier* was banned in the GDR when it was first written). For more on the young Müller’s relationship to Socialist Realism in works like *Der Lohndrucker* (*The Scab* 1956), *Die Korrektur* (*The Correction* 1957), and *Die Umsiedlerin* (*The Resettler* 1961), see “Müller as Mayakovsky” in Jonathan Kalb’s *The Theatre of Heiner Müller* (1998).

undoubtedly failed *Lehrstücke* that are dogmatic and authoritarian. I am instead making the claim that the underlying aesthetic theories about the art-Truth relation that support this method are formally romantic and didactic: the open truth that *Lehrstück* is supposed to communicate and make possible is both imposed on the play from the outside and produced in the development and experience of the play itself. The attempt to bring these two schemata together is what Badiou in “Art and Philosophy” says defines the avant-garde project at its most general level (8).

It might seem to have been tricky for the avant-garde to have been pulled in two directions, and Badiou even believes that this naïve double allegiance is what doomed the avant-garde project to failure. This fate could even be said to have befallen *Die Maßnahme*, a critique made most clear when Brecht’s play is read alongside Müller’s revision. David Bathrick and others have observed that *Mauser* is “on a structural level a purer rendering of the *Lehrstück* aesthetic,” but I will take this statement further over the course of the following pages.

Compared with Müller’s open and incessantly turning dialectical play and paradoxes, *Die Maßnahme* seems to simply acquiesce to its own didactic operations by closing off some of the creative and productive options made possible by the *Lehrstück* method and form. *Mauser*, however, makes Brecht’s play more Brechtian—a daring feat, considering his compromised position as an avant-garde, ostensibly vulgar materialist in the 1970s in the GDR—and, in so doing, presents a provocative alternative to Socialist Realism. It offers an example of an avant-garde form of

education through literature that allows for the artwork to serve as a carrier *and* producer of meaning, and hence it exhibits a seemingly contradictory commitment to competing aesthetic theories that respectively claim that Truth is external *and* immanent to the artwork. In the avant-garde spirit of finding Truth both outside and inside of art, I will examine Brecht's own *Lehrstück* theory as well as *Die Maßnahme* and *Mauser* in the following analysis.

*Brecht: From Epic to Lehrstück*

In the first major monograph to be published on Heiner Müller in English, theatre scholar and critic Jonathan Kalb claims that “Brecht is Müller’s primary influence, a figure that stands behind all of his other alter egos and tactical masks” (*The Theatre of Heiner Müller* 23). Despite the fact that they had never worked together closely and that Müller’s ideas certainly developed a great deal over the course of his life, “there was no time after the 1950s when he was not consciously imitating, apostrophizing, or criticizing him” and his theory of the theatre (23). In 1980, Müller even claimed that “to use Brecht without criticizing him is betrayal” (qtd. in Kalb 24). This is precisely what will be proven to have been at work in Müller’s revision of *Die Maßnahme*, for even at his most reverent—evident in *Mauser*’s close devotion to the *Lehrstück* method and form—the student is unfailingly critical of his teacher.

In *The Powers of Speech*, Bathrick makes the case that that, around 1975, a growing rift between long-dead Brecht and Müller, his self-styled “heir apparent,” is

detectable, as the latter comes to view the former's dramatic theory as increasingly irrelevant for having "forfeit[ed] a radical subjectivity [...] essential for a socialist society." To leave out the subject, Müller believed, would be to assume the position of apologist for the authoritarian state (101-102, 94). While this sentiment does already seem to be taking shape in *Mauser*, prior to 1975, Müller was more or less on-board with (though, once again, not uncritical of) Brecht's program for theatre, and *Mauser* but one of his most explicit engagements with it. Two of the other more prominent literary representations of this relationship are the plays *Philoktet* (*Philoctetes* 1958) and *Der Horatier* (*The Horatian* 1968), which together with *Mauser* make up Müller's self-proclaimed "Versuchsreihe" (experimental series) and "presupposed/criticized Brecht's *Lehrstück* theory and praxis" (*Mauser* 68).<sup>4</sup>

The conception of the *Lehrstück* with which Müller worked is one that Brecht had derived from his own theory of the so-called "epic theatre." The aim of epic theatre is to provide a radical alternative and response to what Brecht identified as bourgeois dramatic theatre, which he viewed as propagating a consumptive, "culinary" style of art only concerned with pleasing the audience and providing them with entertainment. As he explained in "Vergnügungstheater oder Lehrtheater?" ("Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Education?" 1930), the key difference between the two has to do with their different "method[s] of construction" (22: 107). Dramatic theatre,

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<sup>4</sup> In *Kleine Literaturgeschichte der DDR*, Wolfgang Emmerich argues that *Philoktet* is *Mauser* in parable form, and he finds it with the claim that the two plays as taking on the same two central themes pitting (1) Realpolitik against humanist communism and (2) State reason against the individual (275).

in seeking to pleasure and distract its viewers from their everyday lives, allows itself to be formed and commodified by the conservative apparatuses in society, whereas epic theatre works to dismantle those same apparatuses by interrogating more broadly the function of art in society, i.e., how it works and what effects it has (“The Modern Theatre is the Dramatic Theatre” 1930, 34-35). Unlike Peter Hacks’ theory of Socialist Classicism, which was designed to formally reflect and serve the nascent and future socialist society, Brecht’s epic theatre was responsible to “the bourgeois society of the present, and its goal [was] to expose the hidden contradictions within that society” via a provocative, pedagogical staged works of art (Carlson, *Theories of the Theatre* 384).

The form of the play is thus decisive both for understanding the work’s relationship to the establishment and, as a consequence, its relationship to its audience. The key differences—which Brecht explains are “changes of emphasis” or “shifts of accent”—between the dramatic and epic theatre forms are worked out over the two essays mentioned above. The spectator of *dramatic theatre* is engrossed by a series of events that he desperately wants to identify with and that can affect him at an immediate, emotional level. This is possible because of the superficiality of the play. Characters, for example, are shallowly depicted and static, and the plots that unfold around them are subject to an “evolutionary determinism” that produces an unstoppable momentum pulling the play forward linearly and placing all of its emphasis on the end of the action. Because he is always waiting for the final reveal or resolution, the spectator of dramatic theatre is made more and more passive over the



course of the play. The spectator of *epic theatre*, however, is increasingly aroused by the narrative presented to him. Because he is not caught up in trying to ascertain what will have happened by the end of the performance, he can focus on events as they take place, on their processes, and in that way see how the world presented before him changes and grasp the fact his world is also changeable. He is in a position where he can follow arguments for various positions that are presented, and he can consciously reflect on the parallels between the play and his own life. In so doing, he is forced to study the “picture of the world” that he is confronted with and make decisions about it. All of this is made possible by the montage form of epic theatre whereby the events of the play run in curves rather than a straight line and jump from one scene to the next without necessarily being developmentally connected (“Modern Theatre” 37, “Vergnügungstheater” 22: 109).

Epic theatre demands that its viewers are active and thinking while the “observe” (not watch) the play, and it expects that when the curtain falls, they will break into discussion with one another, “forced as it were to cast [their] vote[s]” on what they have just seen. This kind of provocation, Brecht stated clearly, is “theatre’s social function” (“Modern Theatre” 39). Still, it need not come at the expense of all the pleasure or enjoyment that the theatre can provide, Brecht was careful to say. Like the dramatic form, the epic form must supply “some kind of palliative” to help the audience deal with the struggles they face every day, but the escape that it provides must be kept in check.

According to Marvin Carlson, Brecht's concern that epic theatre became too focused on pleasure led him to overcompensate for his "slip" by devoting his efforts towards the development of the *Lehrstück* method in the 1930s. He was worried that the audience's expectations for mindless entertainment might prevent the theatre from realizing its radical potential. Even in a brief note at the end of "Modern Theatre," he explains that, in the three years that had passed he wrote the opera that had occasioned the essay, "attempts were made to emphasize the didactic more and more at the expense of the culinary element" (42). As Carlson explains, the *Lehrstück* satisfied Brecht's "desire to explore the possibilities of a true socialist theatre for a future period when compromise forms [like the epic] would no longer be necessary" and theatre could focus solely on its "social function" as a facilitator of learning and education (384).

To these ends, Brecht conceived as the *Lehrstück* as a play with a pedagogical purpose. Although the term means literally teaching (from *lehren*) play, Brecht's own theories of the *Lehrstück* form suggest that a more fitting name for his invention might be *Lern-stück*, or learning (from *lernen*) play. The theory of the *Lehrstück* is scattered throughout a few short essays and fragments that Brecht wrote around 1930, the same period during which he was formulating his views on epic theatre. At its grandest level, the function of the *Lehrstück* is similar to that of the epic form, that is, its intent is not merely to "explain, but also to change" the world by provoking thought, discussion, and eventually concrete action in its "students" ("Vergnügungstheater" 22:

110). In the estimation of scholar Reiner Steinweg, whose work, including *Lehrstück und episches Theater* (*Lehrstück and Epic Theatre* 1995), comprises the definitive studies of the form, this coincidence of explanation and change is, in fact, the principle tenet of Brecht's theory. Of greatest significance here is the point that the *Lehrstück* works to achieve these results not by providing the audience with answers, which is to say by "teach[ing] 'Marxism' or another philosophy/social theory," but rather by showing its students "how to more precisely see reality" as mutable (19).

The *Lehrstück* is intended to serve as a guide toward a certain kind of thinking and a certain kind of consciousness, rather than as a mere opportunity to instill a specific lesson. The distinction between a text that indoctrinates and a text that provides an educative or eye-opening experience is a crucial one for understanding Brecht's *Lehrstück*. In their article "Producing Revolution" (1976), David Bathrick and Andreas Huyssen identify this as the primary difference between a pedagogical method that calls for object lessons and one that calls for example lessons. In an object lesson a specific principle or truth is given directly to the student and is expected to be accepted without reflection. An example lesson, however, is far less straightforward and involves the "demonstration of a process of contradictions" that must be "play[ed] through" in order to be discovered, recognized, and understood. The aim of the former is to "learn *from*" the concrete examples that are offered, while the aim of the latter is to learn "by actively reproducing" the examples, to "learn *through* them" in a "critical trying out of behavior" (111).

This is, once again, the difference between a *Lehrstück* true to its name—a play with an object, a play that teaches—and a *Lehrstück qua Lern-stück*—a play with an example, one through which a participant learns through practice, rumination, and experience. Therein lies the major innovation of this form. Whereas the educative tools of epic theatre are trained on audience members who are expected to work through the material that is presented to them, here these tools are trained primarily on the performers of the play. But by “performers” Brecht did not mean professional actors, he means lay people, i.e. workers, who are enlisted to act. In the process of performing, they learn and become “students.” As he emphasized in “Die Grosse und die Kleine Pädagogik” (“The Great and the Small Pedagogy” 1930), the *Lehrstück* “completely changes the role of playing (*Rolle des Spielens*). It sublimes the system of the actor and the spectator” so that those involved are both the performers of and the ones who benefit/learn from the performance (21: 396).

To step back for a moment, it is important to recognize that underlying this theory “is the expectation that the actors can be socially influenced through the execution of particular behaviors, the adoption of particular attitudes, the rendering of particular speech, etc.” (“Zur Theorie des Lehrstücks” “On the Theory of the *Lehrstück*” 1937, 22: 351). For example, the experience of acting like a child by straining one’s voice and body language as a child does when he attempts to be understood clearly can help the actor to grasp what is going on in the mind of a child: “Just as moods and series of thoughts can lead to attitudes and gestures,” so “attitudes

and gestures can also lead to moods and series of thoughts” (“Zur Theorie des Lehrstücks” “On the Theory of the *Lehrstück*” 1930, 21: 397).<sup>5</sup> In Brecht’s estimation, the mere experience of behaving like someone else has a certain radical potential, especially for non-professionals who, he insists, “must stay lay people” in the roles that they play so that they can bring their own experiences to bear on them.

The chief formal distinction of the *Lehrstück* is that the worker-actors are called to cycle through various roles over the course of the play, and ideally this happens at their own discretion, according to their own judgment. The point this is to provide them with an opportunity to act as if they were another person, to see through their eyes and share their experiences, as much as that is possible. Therefore, the play itself is a “frame in which one can discover and try out new possibilities of behavior” (Steinweg 19). At one moment the worker-actor may speak for the vulgar Communist party, and at the next she may champion a kind of bourgeois humanism. Accordingly, the pedagogical goal of this rotation is not merely to expose the actors to different perspectives, but rather to compel them to perform contradictory ones. As they do so, they must work through both intellectually (“series of thoughts”) and instinctively (“moods”) the real, everyday struggles in their society by occupying and then playing through these antagonistic positions.

This is a collective effort. One actor does not a *Lehrstück* make. The

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<sup>5</sup> For more on these exercises, see “Über die Aufführung von Lehrstücken” (“On the Performance of *Lehrstücken*” 1930, 21: 397).

production necessarily involves a number of worker-performers who collaborate on the play as they decide how to assign and exchange roles and thereby learn from each other's experiences and assist in the creation of new ones together on stage. When all of these parts come together in a production, the rotating form of the *Lehrstück* causes the actors to recognize the connection between their particular experiences of conflict, those of their peers, and the structure of conflict more generally (Steinweg 19). As the players perform a *Lehrstück* by embodying different character types, particular socio-historical contradictions are laid bare through this experience: the actors learn about the contradictions in society, and they learn to see the deeper social structures that are at the root of their individual troubles. Yet still more significantly, however, they also learn a form of dialectical thinking that will help them see these contradictions even once they leave the theater and return to the city streets. Their consciousness, in other words, will have been raised through this group effort, and they will have been radicalized through this collective behavioral exercise in a way that has the potential to change their behavior outside of the theater, as well.

As Brecht noted, "The *Lehrstück* teaches through the fact that it is played, not seen" ("Theorie" 22: 351). The experience of working through its formal requirements puts the actors in the position of confronting a manifold of possibilities in what Steinweg calls a "mind/spirit athletics" (18). This exercise allows them to engage with *and* reflect on the particular concerns of various characters in various situations. In their efforts to stage the play, the actors thus learn to overcome what

Brecht lamented as the philosopher-politician divide of Taylorized bourgeois society, which cedes the domain of thought to the philosopher and action to the politician. According to Brecht, this is a false distinction because “There is no difference between true philosophy and true politics,” and it is even in the interest of society and the state to support the development of well rounded, well socialized citizens by encouraging the active engagement of those who would prefer to sit back and the careful meditations of those who tend to act before they think. To this end, the greatest measure and most significant social contribution of theatre, as Brecht maintains, is as an educator that can provide a stage for just this kind of civil project: “Beauty does not decide the value of a sentence or a gesture or a plot, but rather [it is decided by] whether or not the state has a use for it” (“Theorie der Pädagogien” “Theory of the Pedagogies” 1930, 21: 398).

With the transition from epic theatre to *Lehrstück*, the pedagogical stress shifts from *Mitdenken* (thinking with) to *Mitspielen* (playing or acting with). Those to be educated are not mere consumers; they are part of the work of art. To the extent that they bring their own stories to bear on a play that already carries with it a truth built into the performance by the author for the benefit of the worker-actors, the *Lehrstück* is a didactic educational exercise. But the fact that the real lesson of a *Lehrstück* can only be achieved through a collective performance and the fact that this lesson cannot be divorced from the experience of producing the artwork suggests that there is some other, non-didactic and perhaps immanent way that the *Lehrstück* form generates its

own meaning and Purpose.

Examples will help to draw this relationship out further. Brecht's *Lehrstück* period lasted roughly from 1926 to 1933 and included a reinterpretation of Gorky's *Mat'* as *Die Mutter* (1930-31), as well as *Der Jasager/Der Neinsager* (*He Said Yes, He Said No* 1929-30), *Die Ausnahme und die Regel* (*The Exception and the Rule* ca. 1930), and *Die Horatier und die Kuratier* (*The Horatians and the Curiatians* 1933-34), the last of which was based on a Roman legend that Heiner Müller also adapted as *Der Horatier*. Müller's reworking of Brecht's *Die Maßnahme* is the focus of this chapter because both plays follow closely to the *Lehrstück* form and put their actors through the same dialectical exercises, and given these constants, this comparison will bring the operations of each play into stronger relief. Brecht's work will prove to fall short as a *Lehrstück* by fixing the educative and productive conflicts in it. With a concession and the pull of a trigger, the dialectic at the heart of his play is resolved and its contradictions are sublated in the achievement of the revolution. As a result, *Die Maßnahme* proves to be a dramatic piece with a message that is true to the *Lehrstück* name, but not to its spirit as a learning play. Müller's text, however, leaves the dialectic open, and *Mauser's* pedagogical effect is less didactic and more resourceful with respect to the potential of art as art. In the end, this comparison helps to demonstrate how Müller's adaptation of Brecht's method and form provides a politically viable and useful alternative to Socialist Realism as well as a forceful rejoinder to the Party's didacticism.



## Die Maßnahme *as* Lehrstück

*Die Maßnahme* has a number of provocative themes running through it, but two of the more classic Marxian ones stand above the rest. First is the tension between the collective or Communist Party and the individual, and as we shall see, this relationship is what frames the events of the play. Second is the topic of education, which is tied up with questions of proper class consciousness and consciousness raising. Keeping a close eye on these themes will help to both classify this play as *Lehrstück* and to understand the way that the formal presentation of these themes is constructed in a way that allows the worker-actors to learn from them as they play through them.

The background of *Die Maßnahme* is that communist activists have been sent from Moscow to China to organize the workers for the anticipated revolution. It opens with the *Kontrollchor*, or monitoring chorus, inviting “the four agitators” to come before them and praising them for the work they have done spreading the word of the revolution. Before they can get very far, the agitators interrupt them and announce in unison that they have killed a comrade who “often did the right thing, sometimes did the wrong thing, but finally he endangered the movement.” The reason they give for his transgression is that, even though the comrade “wanted the right thing [he] did the wrong thing.” The agitators present their case abstractly at first and as a moral issue, and the norm they use for their evaluation is implied to be the word of the Communist Party that trained them and in whose name they radicalize new revolutionaries. The agitators do not approach the chorus in order to report the

killing, but rather because they “ask for your judgment.” They are not looking for permission to act, because “they” have already killed the man; instead they wish to review the events that led up to his death—“what happened and why”—so that they can hear the official verdict on his performance in the field (67).

What follows are a few thematically connected scenes featuring the traitor, who is only ever called “the young comrade.” Each is named and numbered, and they simply serve as snapshots of the young comrade’s failures with no additional story filled in. His successes, which are alluded to on the first page (“the right thing”), are never even relayed. In “The Stone,” for instance, the young comrade attempts to convince the overseer of a band of coolies that it is in his best economic interest to provide his workers with better shoes. As the young comrade becomes more and more vocally irritated with the boorish overseer, the latter catches on to the former’s “propaganda” and sends his men out to catch the comrade. According to the agitators, “He was hunted for two days and met us, and with him we were hunted through the city of Mukden for a week.” The young comrade’s short fuse not only compromises the agitators’ schedule, but it also compromises their mission, as they are undercover and cannot work where they might be recognized (77).

The other two scenes presented by the agitators to the chorus as examples of the young comrade’s transgressions—“Justice” and “What Really Is a Man?”—unfold in similar ways. First, the young comrade allows his sympathy for the workers to get in the way of his covert mission or he comes to identify with the workers. This leads

him to blow his cover and eventually jeopardize the propaganda campaign he and the agitators are working on. Because the consciousness-raising work that he has been drafted to do is one early phase in a much bigger mission for the revolution, his missteps are said to have significant consequences for the movement as a whole.

In these scenes, the young comrade acts as an individual and in accordance with his own judgment rather than as a part of the collective. When he does so, he does not only fail to fulfill the task that is given to him by the movement; he also fails as an ally of the movement, and, as the agitators explain, he no longer serves on the same front as they do. “See the reality!,” they exclaim: “Your Revolution” is one thing, “But our Revolution” is another (89). In distinguishing himself, the young comrade also threatens the integrity of the movement’s supposedly unified front. As they have told the coolies, one of their principle tenets is to “help yourself by helping us: exercise / solidarity!” (79). At this stage in the revolutionary process, the individual is useful only insofar as he is part of something bigger than himself. The single, emancipated man does not yet exist, as the agitators make clear to the young comrade: “You betray us!”; “when you speak, / we are lost”; “Because you were recognized, our work is betrayed” (91, 95).

The errors of the young comrade are uniformly attributed to an ideology of individualism that leads to an underdeveloped consciousness, though not in those words, that is too susceptible to spontaneous feeling. Before his first assignment in “The Stone,” the agitators warn him not to “fall victim to sympathy.” Not long after,

in what we are lead to believe is his first mission, he admits that this specifically is his weakness, for “it is hard to see these [coolies] without sympathy” (73, 75). At the discussion following this scene, the agitators complain that “He didn’t help [the weak man], but he hindered” our mission by “separat[ing] feeling from reason” and responding to the former rather than the latter (77). A man with a more developed consciousness—which is, after all, what the agitators are trying to cultivate in the workers who are the target of their propaganda campaigns—would have been able to keep his emotions in check and his eyes on the prize, as it were.

Because, by the end of the play, he can think of no “exit” from the position he has put himself in, it seems that more education for this “young” and inexperienced comrade may have been his saving grace, and it is clear that no one is above continuing education in the play (95). As the chorus notes, quoting Lenin, “Clever is not one who doesn’t make any mistakes, / clever is rather one who understands how to improve them quickly,” and even these Party representatives are not excluded (77). It is perhaps for this reason that the agitators approach the chorus in the first place to work through and ask for judgment on the events that lead to the young comrade’s death. Although the chorus members are consistently treated like adjudicators, like they who already know because they represent the Party, even they still have something to learn. Just over halfway through the play, they begin to pose a number of questions, confessing that “We haven’t been listening to you / as judges for a while, but / as students,” and by the end they say that the agitator’s “report

shows us how / important it is to change the world / [...] / Only taught by the reality can we / change the world” (85-86, 96).

The short scenes of the young comrade’s failures presented by the agitators could be understood as individual example lessons, as demonstrations and exercises about what can happen given a certain set of circumstances in “reality,” as the agitators put it. The play itself is organized to this end. Were it written according to what Brecht called the bourgeois dramatic form, the fate of the comrade would have been the culminating moment giving meaning to all of the play’s other events; all of the other moments would have either been leading up to or picking up the pieces from the climax. Moreover, the audience would have been consumed with and emotionally invested in the question of whether or not the young comrade would have to pay for his transgressions.

However, the structure of the *Lehrstück* prevents its observers—both the audience and its actors—from getting lost or caught up in the plot. The young comrade’s death is announced within the first five lines of the play, preventing the possibility of any emotional dramatic tension or attachment through identification and/or concern for him, which allows reason rather than sympathy to rule the minds of the viewers and performers as they engage with the play. Additionally, every one of the individual example scenes also demands conscious reflection. Each opens with the agitators providing background on the events to come and is followed by “Wiederholung” (review, reenactment) of the scene. Then, at the end, each closes

with a “Diskussion” between the agitators and chorus of what took place. These “discussions” allow the groups of characters as well as those who play them the opportunity to ruminate on the actions of the comrade and where he may have gone wrong. They also give the agitators a platform for explaining what could have happened had the young comrade acted otherwise. For instance, when they suggest what he “could have said to the coolies” after one failed organizing attempt, their conditional past tense is instructive. Nevertheless, they are not trying to offer corrections to his behavior—there are no “should”s—but they are noting how he could have acted otherwise in the situation he was in and how it could have had a different outcome if he were to have done so.

Both the overall structure of the play as well as the individual example lesson scenes are organized by the order of (1) introduction, (2) demonstration, and (3) discussion, and this puts those involved in the position of going through the intellectual exercises in the play with the text as it moves through them. In so doing, it provides theses and counter-theses on the events from the perspective of the comrade (acting as an individual) and the perspective of the agitators and chorus (acting for the Party). The strongest instance of this is in the penultimate scene, titled “The Betrayal,” in which the young comrade and the agitators debate whether or not it is time to “begin the action” in the town that they have been working in for some time (86). When the comrade approaches the agitators to express that he is convinced the time is ripe for some kind of demonstration, the agitators respond that he is wrong, “But

give us your reasons and try to convince us!”), and a debate ensues (86-87).

But the “mind/spirit athletics” that the actors undergo are not limited to these content-focused debates or to the argument/demonstration structure of play. As a *Lehrstück*, *Die Maßnahme* requires that its actors rotate through various positions over the course of a performance. This is written into the stage directions. The only people ever on the stage are the same ones who are present in the opening scene (the chorus and the four agitators), and in each subsequent scene, the agitators take turns playing different roles: one agitator might stand in for the young comrade, one might become a policeman, and two might play coolies. Once again, the point of this is to understand the motivations of various characters by performing them and “playing through” their contradictory perspectives. The educational import of this experience is augmented by the fact that the actors are encouraged to decide for themselves how to stage the play and determine who should play which role when. This turns them in to even more active participants, as it forces them to make decisions.

While pedagogical style of this *Lehrstück* is deeply concerned with opening up and facilitating discussion mostly through its formal structure and performance requirements, even this is offered as just one approach to education. The space for thought provided by the dialectical exercises in Brecht’s work is presented in stark contrast to the rigidity of the propaganda uttered by the play’s representatives of the Communist Party. Utterly impersonal stock expressions, often replicated word for word, are littered throughout the speech of the agitators and the chorus, as well as the

young comrade before the holes in his consciousness are detected: “Man must help man”; “In the interest of Communism, / in agreement with the advance of the proletarian masses / of all countries, / saying yes to the revolutionizing of the world...”; “we bring [...] instruction about their position to the ignorant, class consciousness to the oppressed, and the experience of revolution to the class conscious” (the three steps of inciting revolution) (e.g., 68, 69, 95). The “kommunistischen Klassiker,” or communist classics, are also mentioned in a knee-jerk way. “The ABC of Communism” by Bukharin and Preobrazhensky is named several times, as is Lenin.

This rote, mechanical way of speaking are practically tics in the speech of these characters, and in comparison with Brecht’s dialectical pedagogical method of education, its messages appear closed and fixed. This is not to say that there is necessarily any value judgment made in the play itself about its propagandistic language; it is simply presented as an alternative method of instruction or agitation. However, Brecht did appreciate one over the other in the domain of theatre, at least where this play is concerned. Once again, theatre’s great value is that it can bring out both the politician *and* the philosopher, the actor *and* the thinker, in those who engage with it, helping them to realize that the world is changeable and encouraging them to be active in changing it. In order for this to happen and for the value of art to be achieved, art must encourage dialectical, not dogmatic, thinking.

As the formal exercises of *Die Maßnahme* stage and raise questions about the



struggle of the individual relative to collective and about different educational paradigms, they bring to light an additional dimension of the play related to philosophical aesthetics, namely, the relationship between art and Truth. What are then the aesthetic underpinnings of the *Lehrstück's* method and performance? Badiou's cursory evaluation of Brecht in "Art and Philosophy" is that the playwright is the consummate didact. For him, "art produces no truth, but is instead an elucidation—based on the supposition that the true exists," and the "philosopher [is the] leading character in [his] didactic dialogues" (6, 5). This is largely true. Even though *Die Maßname* as a *Lehrstück* seems to avoid proffering a clear, didactic message, it operates according to a didactic understanding of the art-Truth relation. Both the philosopher and the politician are devoted to a truth that may be communicated in, but that is nonetheless external to, art. Furthermore, as the lay actors play through and switch around various roles, they seek to observe and grasp the experiences of others, which are, of course, not immanent to the work of art itself.

In "The Author as Producer" (1934), Walter Benjamin reminds us that Brecht's attempt to make philosophers and politicians out of his lay actors was a kind of "Umfunktionierung," which is a "functional transformation" or radical alteration of old forms of the apparatus of artistic production "in accordance with socialism" (774). But it cannot be overlooked that the *Lehrstück's* *Umfunktionierung* changes the status of its lay actors from people who would be mere consumers of dramatic theatre into producers of art. They think and are active both on and (it is hoped) off stage by

“transcending the specialization in the process of intellectual production” (777). Like the author himself, the actors generate meaning not only by sharing the truth of their personal experiences with others, but also by creating or realizing a work of art with each other. The staging of the play produces its own truth that can neither be anticipated nor reduced to an extra-textual something. It may still have an external aim (to change the world), but the significance of the collaboration of the participators is internal to the play’s production.

With this in mind, it is easy to see that there is more than blunt didacticism going on here. The *Lehrstück* does not only serve an outside truth, and there is a reason why Brecht’s pedagogical method relies on art rather than, say, a stump speech or a pamphlet. The “truthful” content of many of the classic works of Socialist Realism—and *Mat’* is among them—could be (and were!) repackaged in various ways, and not one bit of their message would be lost. And from another point of view, the novels themselves could be thought of as new packaging for the familiar Marxist-Leninist *Weltanschauung*. This is not the case for the *Lehrstück*, for its form, like its content, is believed to have the potential to provoke radical and dialectically open ways of thinking as it is played through. The educational opportunities it provides do not rely solely on the exposure of its actors and audiences to new ideas. The *experience* of performing the artwork has an effect on the minds of the collaborating participants, stimulating their imaginations, viewing themselves as individual parts of something bigger, and forcing them to think about how they, now producers, can

change the world or create a new one.

Because of the premium Brecht placed on the *Lehrstück's* ability to communicate a specific content and to develop in the minds of its participants productive new forms of thought as a result of their experience with the play, I wish to claim that the aesthetic model informing his method is both didactic and pseudo-romantic. According to Badiou, the attempt to bring together these two schemata is the hallmark of the 20th-century avant-garde tradition. The impetus behind this seemingly paradoxical hybrid was a “search for a mediating schema,” he explains: it was didactic in that it had a “desire to put an end to art” because the avant-garde longed for authentic and immediate experiences to counter the alienating effects of capitalism, and it was romantic in its concomitant “conviction that art must be reborn immediately as absolute,” as self-determining, as Truth itself (8). Critic Peter Bürger explains in *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974/1984) that this is possible because, in the avant-gardiste work, the “individual element is no longer necessarily subordinate to an organizing principle,” and “Where the work is no longer conceived as organic totality, the individual political motif also is no longer subordinate to the work as a whole but can be effective in isolation” (90). Thus, a work of art can aim for “revolutionizing the praxis of life” just as it maintains that art in general should be taken serious as “its own end” (91, 89).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For more on this issue, Bürger spends much of his chapter “Avant-Garde and Engagement” discussing Brecht specifically in the context of the Adorno/Lukács debates on modernism (83-94).

While Brecht's theory certainly does not strive for the holism described by the *Frühromantiker* and achieved by Gorky's Nilovna (cf. Chapter 1), there is still something somewhat romantic about his emphasis on the consciousness-raising experience of the worker-actors as they stage the play, and a great deal of this has to do with the fact that it implies that art has a unique facility to do just that. Not only does the *Lehrstück* reveal truths, but its performance produces them. Furthermore, it is because the *Lehrstück* has no fixed, didactic truth—only a didactic relationship to Truth—that this is possible. This is certainly a far cry from Brecht's model of epic theatre and from the Socialist-Realist method of art, a fact that comes into better focus when Müller's *Mauser* is analyzed and revealed to be an even stronger example of the *Lehrstück* form than Brecht's own *Die Maßnahme*.

#### Mauser as Lehrstück

The narrative of *Mauser* draws heavily on *Die Maßnahme*, and this includes sharing most of Brecht's thematic material. The most recognizable similarity is the tension between the individual soldiers for the revolution, represented by characters simply named A and B, and the collective/Communist Party, represented by the chorus. Like the conflict in Brecht's play that grows between the young comrade and agitators, the ones that develop between each soldier and the chorus/Party arise from events in which A and B act according to either their own judgment or their own impulses.

B's major transgression in the eyes of the movement occurs when he is sent on

a mission to execute a group of peasants. Defending himself before the chorus after the fact, B describes the scene—the peasants standing before him, hands bound, faces towards a quarry—and explains that in that moment he was overcome with the feeling that, even though he had been told they were his adversaries, he and the peasants were on the same side in the greater fight for emancipation. They all come from the underclasses, yet they have been pitted against each other. After some thought, B's decision was to “take my hand out of the contract” with the revolution and “cut through the ropes on [their] hands,” with the explanation that “your [the peasants'] enemies are our enemies” and sending the peasants “back to your work” (58).

While B's act of letting the peasants go was the manifestation of a somewhat impulsive, but still deliberate, decision that he had made after identifying what he believed to be the misplaced targets of the revolution, A's offense is less calculated and more spontaneous. As he speaks before the chorus and attempts to piece together the story with them, it becomes clear that his break came after he was assigned to kill B, which he did coldly and with only the reflection that “Against doubts in the revolution: no / Other remedy than the death of the doubters” (59). “[W]e killed him with my hand,” he continues, “we” connoting the revolution. This moment launched A into a bloody rampage that lasted for more than a week, all courtesy of the revolver assigned to him by the movement and discharged by his hand, which was “bound to [that] revolver / with the mandate of the revolution” (60).

As A reflects on these events, he recollects the revolutionary slogans—recognizable as such because they are rehearsed several times throughout the play by all of the characters—that were running feverishly through his head at the time of his killing spree: “With the mandate of the revolution [...] / To dispense death on its enemies / So that killing ends [...] / DEATH TO THE ENEMIES OF THE REVOLUTION” (60). That final statement, which he calls his “order” or *Kommando*, he admits to having repeated out loud during his fury as almost a battle cry. But like his hand, which is controlled by the revolution, he says that was not speaking with his own voice as he rampaged through the town, and, similarly, when he happened to see his face in a mirror, it was “not with his eyes” that he gazed upon himself (60-61). Even in the judgment of the chorus, “you [A] were one with your work” during the spree, “And you were no longer conscious of it” (67).

Once the “battle noise” died down, A gazed upon his bloody hands, again able to see “Him who was I” and hear “my voice,” and finally beginning to “ask with my voice about the certainty” of the task he carried out (63-64). This becomes a major point of recognition for A once he reflects on his life as a soldier, and he is able to present as such because the entire play is more or less an occasion for A to try to make sense of this rage he went through for ten days. This is an opportunity for A to defend himself before the chorus, who is determined to make him pay for his violent outburst, because they maintain that “You *yourself* killed with *your* hand / Not our enemies” and overstepped his orders (emphasis added 55). But A sees his actions as

entirely consistent with the mandate he was given by the revolution. “I did my work,” he demands, “I killed for the revolution,” and he asks to be “let out of the contract” because he is “too weak” to continue fighting the way he believes they want him to (*ibid*).

Upon reflection, both A and B believe that they acted in line with the goals of the chorus. The latter soldier’s judgment is informed by a bourgeois humanist interpretation concerned with long-term goals that A’s short-sighted, vulgar revolutionary instinct counters forcefully and decisively when he kills B along with many innocent civilians. In the estimation of the chorus, however, neither is successful in the one task given to them. The failure of characters is that they acted as independent agents rather than as dutiful soldiers. The evidence of this agency is clear—B’s seeming cowardice before the enemy and A’s bloody outburst—and, like Brecht’s young comrade, it is the manifestation of their incomplete, undialectical consciousnesses, according to the chorus. A’s spontaneous activity prevents him from thinking, whereas B’s reasoning and sympathy prevents him from following through with his duty. Neither seems to have a proper revolutionary education, for despite their constant mechanical rehearsal of the Party’s stock phrases, which only demonstrates the superficial indoctrination of the soldiers, there are still “holes” in their consciousnesses (this is said explicitly of A), and the events just discussed are evidence of that (62, 63).

The final test of A and B as soldiers for the revolution is how they face their

punishment, their “last assignment,” as the chorus puts it, which is to “die for it,” for the revolution that “needs your death” (56, 55). B’s last statements have him asking “To what end the killing and to what end the dying,” and although he does stand before A’s gun, begrudgingly granting that he must be punished, he holds on to his principles until the end (59). A, however, refuses to acquiesce to his own death, which also means that he refuses his final task as a soldier. “Learn your final lesson” “Learn deine letzte Lektion,” the chorus demands; “Learn to die. / What you learn increases our experience. / Die learning. Don’t abandon the revolution.” “Lern sterben. / Was du lernst, vermehrt unsre Erfahrung. / Stirb lernend. Gib die Revolution nicht auf” (56, 67).<sup>7</sup> Once again, it is clear that his “weakness,” as chorus often calls it, is related to his underdeveloped consciousness, and it is the “one hole in our front” (62). In order to repair that front, the chorus says that A must fill in the “hole in his consciousness” by “learning” and then performing his final duty by once again ceding his autonomy to the will of the revolution in agreeing to his own execution (67). “The revolution needs / Your yes to your death,” they proclaim, but A refuses to grant them that: “My life belongs to me [...] I don’t want to die” (66-67).

Before diving into the consequences of A and B’s protests in comparison with the reaction of Brecht’s young comrade when he is told that he must die for his

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<sup>7</sup> This statement is likely an allusion to a short text by Brecht later titled “To Teach to Die”: “people are worthless for society / human help is not common / nevertheless help is given to them and even though the death of / the individual is simply biologically uninteresting for society / dying should be taught” (*Brecht’s Modell der Lehrstücke* 58). Here Brecht is stressing the function of the *Lehrstück* to teach behaviors rather than specific lessons. The teachings of Müller’s chorus, however, though they echo Brecht here, are more often laden with doctrine.



disobedience, it might be helpful to make a couple more points specifically comparing the *Lehrstück* forms of *Mauser* and *Die Maßnahme*. As in Brecht's play, the overall structure *Mauser* is based on the retelling of key events, but in Müller's text, these moments are conveyed to the chorus directly by the soldiers themselves rather than by a third party. *Mauser* opens with the chorus sentencing A to death for his transgression, and it seems as if he shares his story so that he can try to convince his judges that he had acted in line with their wishes. "I killed for the revolution" is his most common line of defense (55). B, we learn, has already been killed by A by the time the play begins, but he appears as a kind of phantom in A's story so that he, too, can provide his perspective on his moment with the peasants.

Moreover, in *Die Maßnahme*, multiple instances of the young comrade's failures are shared with the chorus, and each time they are followed by brief discussions. In *Mauser*, however, only a third the play is filled with the retelling of one story from A and B each. The rest of it is devoted to a discussion and debate between A and the chorus not only about the details of his killing spree and his guilt, but also about the more general goals of the revolution. The latter are often introduced via the Party's stock phrases and modified with slight, but meaningful, variations and rhetorical play that illuminate the growing gulf between the perspectives of A and the chorus. One example of an often repeated phrase and its modification is the order for soldiers to kill the enemies of the revolution is "is a job like any other," but A's rampage is "a job like no other" (57 and elsewhere). There are more.

What makes the discussions and language games in *Mausier* even more interesting is the all-important *Lehrstück* role switching. As in *Die Maßnahme*, Müller more or less built this in to the play itself in his stage directions, and as the author explained in the note that follows the play, “The proposed distribution of the text [into parts] is variable” (Weber 133). Already on the third page, Müller signals that the actor initially playing A may change places with a chorus member (the character tag reads “A [CHOR]”), and immediately after the three peasants are released by B, they are allowed to speak through the mouths of whichever chorus members choose to take on the roles. Like Brecht’s agitators, who, by the end of the performance, will have played through several different characters, Müller’s chorus members may have the opportunity to play different ones, with the important prohibition that “no performer can assume another’s role all the time.” Even the audience may be brought in, Müller explained. One way of doing so would be to have one half of the audience read for the chorus and the other read for the individual characters, but if they do, “the text not read by each group should be blotted out in the script” so all participants they must pay close attention to and carefully think through the text together as they read. Ultimately, “the mode and degree of variants” in how each group decides to stage the play, is, according to Müller, “a political choice that has to be made in each individual [performance] case.” It is political because it involves both making decisions that will govern the behavior of others on stage and making judgments about the relationships between and the motivations of people.

There are two decisive differences between these plays, and they are critical for understanding my claim that Müller's text is a more Brechtian version of Brecht's own play as well as the great import of Müller's decision to draw on the avant-garde *Lehrstück* form in his experimentations with political and pedagogical theatre in the GDR. The first has to do with the fact that neither A nor B consents to his punishment for acting out of order. In their refusals to submit willfully to their "final duty," they become enemies of the revolution according to the chorus' black-and-white logic. This in turn means that they must be killed because, as is repeated several times throughout the play, "the daily bread of the revolution / Is the death of its enemies" and the "holes" in their consciences are "the one hole on the our front" (68, 62). If they should live, the revolution could simply not survive.

A is more obstinate than B, and his refusal to label himself as an enemy presents a strong challenge to the concrete future of the revolution, partly because the movement does not know whether or not it can continue in such a vulnerable state. It claims, after all, to be malnourished and presenting a porous front. A's tenacity also has the effect that the play devotes a significant amount time to important discussions and debates between the chorus and himself about the theoretical foundations of the revolution, including the status of the individual within it and the Party's values.

While *Die Maßnahme* confronts these same tensions, Brecht resolves them for his observers and actors by the end of the play. In the final scene presented by the

agitators to the chorus, the young comrade is asked if he “know[s] any way out” from his act of betrayal, and his simple response is “No.” When they subsequently ask him if he is “in agreement” with their proposed punishment, his reply is equally direct, and he says “yes” to his death in the way that neither A nor B chooses to (95). With the young comrade’s consent and the pull of a trigger, one side gives in and goes silent; only the Party still stands.

As Harry Louis Roddy Jr. points out in his essay “A Revolutionary Critique of Individualism” (2000), Brecht’s play has long been criticized for a “totalizing adherence to the Party line” (198). In one example, Georg Lukács censures Brecht in *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (1963) for “imposing intellectual schemata on the spectator [that turn] his characters into mere spokesmen” and, in the process, harmfully reducing the universal and important “problems of humanity” to local ones, like “inner conflicts and contradictions of the warring parties” (87-88).<sup>8</sup> A decade later, Wolfgang Schivelbusch writes about the difference between “socialist consciousness [...] as the consciousness of fixed positive values [and] as the consciousness of contradictions” (105). Even though the impetus behind this distinction is Schivelbusch’s claim that the latter is characteristic of Müller’s work, it is not difficult to read the former as describing *Die Maßnahme*.

To be fair, Brecht had no problem with his text presenting a positive content.

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<sup>8</sup> For additional examples in this vein, including the critiques of Adorno, see Elizabeth Wright, *Postmodern Brecht: A Re-Presentation* (1989).

In his comments on this play, he wrote that “The aim of the *Lehrstück* is then to show politically incorrect behavior and, through that, to teach correct behavior” (“Politischer Lehrwert” “Political Value of Teaching” 1930, 92). But the twice-repeated word here is significant. Brecht did not mean that a play conceived according to his *Lehrstück* theory and method should provide a single answer or truth. The *Lehrstück* should instead compel its participants to conduct themselves in such a way that they bridge the philosopher-political divide he describes in “Theorie der Pädagogien.” But *Die Maßnahme* veers from this intention when it allows the Party, presented as the philosophers with the proper consciousness and, more importantly, with the correct answers, to triumph over the spontaneously sympathetic young comrade.

In contrast to the closure presented in Brecht’s play, the content Müller’s work manages to stay open throughout, and it is enhanced and supported by an open structure. In *Die Maßnahme*, the young comrade never has a chance. As Bathrick and Huyssen remark, “given the tight construction of the play, the audience cannot but interpret the death of the young comrade as the telos of the entire play” (112). What’s more, he is already dead before the curtains open and, consequently, he never stands a chance against the Party in the context of the play. In *Mausier*, however, the future of A (and B, for a brief time) is unknown throughout the performance. Even though in the final moments the chorus leads the audience and actors to believe that A will be killed by them (he “went to the wall and said the order / [...] / DEATH TO THE

ENEMIES OF THE REVOLUTION”), his death does not take place on stage or even during the play (68). The curtain falls before any shots can be fired.<sup>9</sup>

The choice not to reveal the outcomes of A and B might seem to place Müller in the same realm as the authors of dramatic theatre, who, per Brecht, rely on suspense rather than intellectual provocation to garner the attention of their audiences. Yet the question of whether or not A will actually die is never suspenseful primarily because it is constantly under discussion throughout the play and often as a general theoretical, rather than an actual, problem to be dealt with. Even B’s death, which is swift, seems to draw out this abstract conversation further, rather than serving as an omen in the text or foreshadowing some tragic ending for A.

Furthermore, not only are the discussions of the soldiers’ deaths neither conventionally “dramatic” nor tragic for these characters, but they reflect more on the prospects of the movement than they do on those of the individuals A and B. Given that the future of A, who has betrayed the revolution and is called an “enemy,” is technically unknown at the end of it, the future of the movement is also put into question. As the chorus makes clear time and time again, it is sustained by the “death of its enemies,” so if A does not die, what will transpire? From the first lines of Brecht’s play, in contrast, we already know that this will not be a problem in *Die*

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<sup>9</sup> It is worth pointing out that many have read A’s final line (“DEATH TO THE ENEMIES OF THE REVOLUTION”), which is the order that was given to him and that set him off, as his submission to the will of the chorus, given that he is now their enemy. This interpretation is not only inconsistent with A’s behavior throughout the play, but it also overlooks the ambiguity of the label of “enemy” in *Mauser*.

*Maßnahme*, for the success of the revolution, which is so efficient at purging its bad elements, is never question.

Accordingly, Müller's openness extends from the formal structure of the play to his rhetorical style, as well, which comes to generate even more evidence of his revolution's vulnerability, when, for instance, we press further the question of who, exactly, are the "enemies" of *Mauser's* Communist Party. Although they are typically only defined negatively as those who are not fighting for the revolution, the more nuanced answer is that the enemies are both outside and inside of the movement, as the chorus cagily confesses: "the revolution itself / Is not one with itself" (59). This is a fact that B had already recognized when he sympathized with the peasants, saying that "Ihre Feinde sind meine Feinde" (58). The ambiguity of "Ihr" is notable. Because it is at the beginning of a line of verse and is capitalized, B could be addressing the peasants in the plural formal form (*Ihr*) or talking about *die Revolution* itself, as a feminine noun (*ihr*). The first case would read, "Your enemies are my enemies," and the second, "Her enemies are my enemies."<sup>10</sup> Of course, B is already an enemy of both groups; he is the adversary of the peasants for fighting them in the war and the revolution for betraying it in the sympathy he feels for the peasants. This line then takes this antagonism further to reveal not only that he is the adversary of both groups, but that he shares their enemies, including himself. B is thus his own enemy. In a *Lehrstück* in which all logic is expected to be formally dialectical, it does not make

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<sup>10</sup> English translator Carl Weber's text mirrors the first option (123).

sense for B to occupy the position of an extra floating term that is the rival of the peasants, the revolution, as well as himself.

Müller's style presents an additional paradox in an early monologue delivered by B when he asserts the following: "Der Revolver meine dritte Hand / [...] mit meiner Hand tötet die Revolution" (58). The uncertainty of this statement is in its syntax. There are two ways that this could be translated into English: (1) "The revolver [is] my third hand / [...] the revolution kills with my hand," as it is not uncommon for Müller to leave out the verb in sentences made up of just a subject and a predicate noun, and (2) "The revolver[,] my third hand[,] / [...] kills the revolution with my hand."<sup>11</sup> The question that remains is if the revolution kills with B's hand (option 1) or if the revolver, which is what the movement uses to control the hands/actions of its soldiers, kills the revolution with the soldier's hand (option 2).

These lines impart ambiguity around issues related to agency in *Mauser*, and variations on them surface for both B and A more than once throughout the play, usually delivered in similarly phrased utterances spoken by both the soldiers and the chorus. It is notable that the first and most prominent instances of each of these paradoxes are voiced by B, who, as scholars like Bathrick and Huyssen have argued, should be viewed as Müller's surrogate for Brecht's "young comrade," as the primary "weakness" of both figures is their spontaneous sympathy (with some rational basis),

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<sup>11</sup> Weber's text once again follows the first version: "The revolver my third hand / [...] the Revolution kills with my hand" (123-124).



and is meaningful that B's language is the primary motor to set back in motion the playfulness closed off by Brecht with the young comrade's utterly unambiguous demise.

At the conclusion of *Die Maßnahme*, Brecht's staged revolution is in a position to move forward—perhaps even towards victory—after having purged the traitorous element within its ranks. There are undoubtedly other contradictions that it will face, but the principle one, the one within its immediate influence and impeding its own movement, has been resolved. The revolution of Müller's *Mauser*, however, is hopelessly doomed for two reasons: (1) if it is to progress, the enemy that it must kill is both outside and inside of the movement and (2) traitors A and B have not only killed *for* the revolution as soldiers, but also killed the revolution itself with their “third hands,” the revolution's revolvers. Each of these paradoxes prevents victory for the revolution and foreshadows its inevitable self-destruction.

All of this boils down to the fact that there is no “right” answer provided to the actors (or audience members) of Müller's play. Brecht's, on the other hand, are told by the chorus that the judgment given by the agitators and accepted by the young comrade was not “his sentence” “sein Urteil,” “but rather / the reality” “sondern / die Wirklichkeit” (94). Even though the chorus does later admit that reality is changeable, the implication is that that they themselves will be the agents of that change. In the final two lines of the play, after having noted what the report of the four agitators had revealed to them personally, they proclaim, “Only taught from

reality can we / change reality” (96).

The great achievements of Müller’s play are best appreciated when *Mauser* is read next to *Die Maßnahme*. In its refusal to teach, in its lasting contradictions, its open and incessantly turning dialectic, it is not merely a correction of Brecht’s text for a new time, but also an enhancement of the *Lehrstück* form. As Stefan Mahlke notes on an essay on Müller’s appropriation of the *Lehrstück*, “*Mauser* radically changes the available prototype of *Maßnahme*” (66). When Brecht’s work sides with the revolution, it hinders and perhaps even precludes the potential of the play as a *Lehrstück* to set in motion or inspire a dialectical, revolutionary consciousness in the minds of its actors. Instead, it offers a resolution, an object lesson about the necessity of obedience and violence. This is *eine Lehre der “Wirklichkeit”* rather than one of behavior, as the chorus freely admits, and *Die Maßnahme* is indeed a *Lehrstück* true to its name—more invested in *teaching* than setting the stage for *learning*.

The content of the play reinforces this. The young comrade, for example, is never taken all that seriously, and even when the agitators allow him to state his case as to why he believes that the time is ripe for the great action, they only respond with stock phrases (87). Even more significant is the fact that he never truly has the opportunity to speak for himself. Because the frame of the play has the agitators present the young comrade’s stories to the chorus, all of his attitudes and actions in these situations are filtered through them. While at first glance this “playing through of behaviors” in different roles may seem to be a useful exercise for the *Lehrstück*

method, the fact remains that the young comrade, who most needs to be heard in order to balance out the perspectives offered in the text, is and can never heard from directly.

The education that the actors in *Die Maßnahme* receive is entirely mediated by the perspective of the Party, either through the agitators or through the chorus, but *Mauser* is able to direct the traffic on Brecht's one-way street in two directions. Although A and B are played by members of the chorus and members of the chorus are played by A and B, neither side is privileged. A defends himself before his judges and never gives in. In the end, *Mauser* is more faithful to the spirit of the *Lehrstück* as *Lern-stück*, allowing for his performers to experience a true example lesson by working through various behaviors. In turn, this provides his actors with more options as they bring their own individual perspectives to bear on the staging of the play and as they are moved to reflect on and discuss the events of the play with each other.

It is important to situate historically what Mahlke calls the "optimism" of the *Lehre* of *Die Maßnahme* in contrast to *Mauser*. As Benton Jay Komins describes it, "Müller's effective re-writing of Brecht's play injects historical consciousness into perceptions of the course of socialist and communist revolution in the Eastern Bloc, which changed dramatically between the utopianism of the late-1920s and the uncertainty of the postwar period" (99). Brecht's was a time when "Soviet dictatorship offered one of few alternatives to fascism," whereas "Müller wrote *Mauser* against the precedents of Soviet-style authoritarianism" (100). In other words, Brecht was writing

from a pre-revolutionary perspective about a pre-revolutionary time, which produced some anticipation and excitement. But he was also unsure of what was to come. His positive ending is “intermingled with doubts” and does not completely “forget the costs of the revolution” (Mahlke 66). The agitators do, after all, approach the chorus for a reason. They seek a judgment. As Mahlke argues, *Die Maßnahme*’s optimism as well as its doubts are actually what makes it possible for Müller—writing after the revolution, about a revolutionary time, and “with the experience of socialism that has not found peace”—to work through the “the long-term effects” of the events of Brecht’s play in his own and, in the process, update and improve on the original (*ibid*).

Even with these differences in mind, it should still be clear that both Müller and Brecht subscribe to the notion that the stage can and should serve as a platform for Truth, whether that truth is a doctrine of some kind or a behavior. As a pedagogical tool, the form of the *Lehrstück* is intended to provide a literal and metaphorical stage for different voices and positions that will incite and facilitate discussion and debate among its performers, who decide how to stage the play, as well as among its audience members. In both *Die Maßnahme* and *Mauser*, the principle issues explored both through form and content have to do with matters that come from or exist in a reality external to the works themselves, and these include the position of the individual with respect to the collective, the role of education (consciousness) in the movement, and whatever its own participants might bring to the play. The major difference between the this aspect of these two works, however, is

that Müller's relies on this didactic schema to offer up for discussion the irresolvable tensions inherent in these issues, whereas Brecht's falls comparatively short and instead ends up communicating a didactic and fixed message through his didactic schema.

An additional benefit of reading Müller's text next to Brecht's is that, as a more successful work in the avant-garde aesthetic tradition (as argued above), it highlights the limitations of the didactic schema, even as it engages with it. Not only does *Mauser* underscore just how predominantly didactic *Die Maßname* is, but it also reveals through its formal paradoxes, its open structure, and its variable performance organization the enormous potential of the *Lehrstück's* avant-garde pedagogy, one that is interested in truths that are both communicated through art and produced in the experience of it. In committing itself to a single message, Brecht's own play limits or undercuts the great creative possibilities made available by *Lehrstück* method. Müller keeps these flexible and augments them further through his own rhetorical play and other formal choices that he described as facilitating the "training of the (individual) capacity to make experiences" that carry truths with them while producing their own (Weber 133). In his comments following *Mauser*, Müller called this the "function" of the artistic performance, and it is the result of the actors' collaboration with one another, because "Experiences are only transmitted by and in a collective" (*ibid*). In the avant-garde *Lehrstück* theatre, those who once served as mere vessels for the material of dramatic theatre now harness their collective energies and perspectives to

become thinkers and creators. This shared effort produces not only a stage performance, but also an aesthetic experience (the part is understood in relation to the whole, the particular in relation to the general) that can generate radical dialectical thinking in the minds of participants reinforced by the open and unresolved content in Müller's play.

As a work of politically committed art operating in an avant-garde mode, *Mauser* takes advantage of its form in a way that ensures that it will be not simply a bearer, but also a producer of meaning. The shared experience of performing this *Lehrstück* and the related "mind/spirit athletics" of its logical and behavioral exercises make possible the aesthetic experience that is at least as pedagogically consequential for the actors as the play's more explicit subject matter. This is the most meaningful difference between *Mauser* as a *Lehrstück* and the mode of Socialist Realism, for Brecht's theory and method allowed Müller to create an activist role for art *as* art in the revolutionary socialist context.

But *Mauser's* stylistic and formal play also leaves us with a major problem, namely, that close reading the rhetorical play of the text reveals that the only way the revolution can continue is through self-destruction. What is being said about the pedagogical and political project of the *Lehrstück* when its most faithful imitator forces itself into the position of self-annihilation? What of the task of teaching a certain kind of thinking through acting, through a shared performance and production? One

answer is that *Mauser* stages yet another contradiction at the level of form. Müller's play is effectively a pedagogical text that questions the ethics of combining art and political prescription, and to this end, it is a paradoxical success. As it does with Brecht's play, *Mauser* productively appropriates the educational, avant-garde *Lehrstück* form only to dismantle it from within.

## CONCLUSION

The present project was motivated by the belief subscribed to by so many committed artists and theorists over the past few centuries that art can and should be used to educate on behalf of a leftist political program. But behind this belief are two more fundamental questions often overlooked by critics of socialist literature from the Eastern Bloc who either find offensive its ostensibly crass instrumentalization of art or simply disagree with the content presented in it: namely, (1) why art is used for political ends, that is, what makes it distinct from other means of delivering political content (its form); and (2) how is used for political ends, that is, by what means art can serve politics. From this starting point, it is a short drive to matters of aesthetics and method.

The selections by Maxim Gorky, Peter Hacks, and Heiner Müller discussed in the preceding pages were all chosen for their coupling of a formalist aesthetics and political pedagogy, approaches which flew brazenly in the face of the Socialist-Realist method Gorky himself helped to articulate at the 1934 Writers' Congress in the Soviet Union. All three texts reveal that an engagement with art—the experience of it—can initiate a transformation in the reader of a novel or the viewer or actor of a play that may lead to the discovery of truth and further that this development does not occur only (or even necessarily) because of any tendentious dicta communicated in the words of the text. Rather, the form of art itself—the very characteristics that



distinguishes art from other types of content—can inspire spiritual (Gorky), ontological (Hacks), and behavioral (Müller) exercises that in turn can enable readers (Gorky), viewers (Hacks), and actor-participants (Müller) to develop true forms of consciousness and thought. As Gramsci demonstrates, free thinkers are not parrots who merely imitate what they have been told; they are autonomous agents, creative producers of thought, philosophers who experience a more sustainable and liberating education than didactic Socialist Realism could ever provide.

Finally, just as all three authors put their audiences through exercises that force the latter to reflect on their works' artistic forms, so, too, do the authors themselves self-consciously reflect on the aesthetic underpinnings of their own work. In turning away from Socialist-Realism's didacticism, each resurrects, embraces, and revises an ostensibly outmoded and (certainly in the Eastern Bloc) unpopular understanding of the relationship between art and truth: Gorky's novel illustrates a romantic revelation of truth in art, Hacks' Socialist Classicism describes a classical image of truth that should be achieved in art, and Müller's *Lehrstück* demonstrates and embodies an avant-garde, dialectical, truthful form of thought. In so doing, these authors engage critically and productively with a tradition often derided or ignored by their peers, proving that committed art need not simply dismiss or reject the past in order to advance.

In the end, it is Müller's development of a true *Lehrstück* in response to Brecht's *Lernstück* that gets at the heart of what makes *Mat'*, Socialist Classicism, and

*Mausier* so compelling, especially against the backdrop of Socialist Realism: these works and theories of art share a commitment to teaching how to think over learning what to think.

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