The Political Use of Antiquity in the Literature of the German Democratic Republic

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For W. M. Calder III on his 60th birthday

Peter Huchel:

Der Garten des Theophrast

Wenn mittags das weiße Feuer
Der Verse über den Urnentanzt,
Gedenke, mein Sohn. Gedenke derer,
Die einst Gespräche wie Bäume gepflanzt.
Tot ist der Garten, mein Atem wird schwerer,
Bewahre die Stunde, hier ging Theophrast,
Mit Eichenlohe zu düngen den Boden,
Die wunde Rinde zu binden mit Bast.
Ein Ölbaum spaltet das mürbe Gemäuer
Und ist noch Stimme im heißen Staub.
Sie gaben Befehl, die Wurzel zu roden.
Es sinkt dein Licht, schutzloses Laub.


1 A slightly shorter version of this paper was read at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, McMaster University, the University of Toronto, the University of California at Berkeley and Harvard University; the original lecture-format is preserved; notes are kept to the minimum. I am grateful to James Porter for correcting my English.


The Garden of Theophrastus

When at noon the white fire of verses
Where are we? In Athens, as the garden of Theophrastus and the olive tree seem to suggest? Or in the Berlin of 1962, where the poem was written, first published and read? And what is the meaning of the twelve lines? I will come back to Huchel's poem at the end of my paper, in the hope that the interpretation of a number of other texts may help us to better understand his enigmatic memento.

For centuries the imaginative reception and creative transformation of Greek and Roman antiquity has played a significant role in German literature (as of course in other European literatures too). It is widely known that this tradition of "Antikerezeption" has lived on well into the 20th century. Authors such as Hofmannsthal, Rilke and George, Benn or Brecht, Hermann Broch, Gerhart Hauptmann or Thomas Mann attest to its continuous importance. What is much less well known, however, is the fact that the adaptation of classical material—whether it comes from myth or literature, history or art—still is a major source of inspiration and a much-used form of expression for contemporary German writers. It was not until the extraordinary success of Christa Wolf's *Kassandra* and Christoph Ransmayr's poststructuralist novel about Ovid, *Die letzte Welt*, that a broader literary public became aware of this interesting aspect of modern German literature. In the last decade great strides have been made in the scholarly work on the subject, but much is still to be done—and relevant new texts come out every year.

Flickering dances over the ums,
Remember, my son. Remember the vanished
Who planted their conversations like trees.
The garden is dead, more heavy my breathing,
Preserve the hour, here Theophrastus walked,
With oak bark to feed the soil and enrich it,
To bandage with fibre the wounded bole.
An olive tree splits the brickwork grown brittle
And still has a voice in the mote-laden heat.
Their order was to fell and uproot it,
Your light is fading, defenceless leaves.

3 Since there seems to be no convenient short English term for the phenomenon I will, throughout the paper, use the German term "Antikerezeption" to avoid clumsy English paraphrases.
5 Christoph Ransmayr, *Die letzte Welt* (Nördlingen 1988).
7 I have recently started to build up a computer-based archive for the reception of classical antiquity in contemporary German literature, where we try to collect and analyze all relevant texts by German, Austrian and Swiss authors, and I hope that it will soon be possible to answer inquiries about e.g. Heracles or Orpheus, Sappho, Augustus or the Parthenon in contemporary German literature.
In an article published less than a year ago I tried to give a brief comparative survey about Antikerezeption in East and West German literature, a summary of which may serve as an introduction to the one specific aspect of the phenomenon which I want to address in this paper. Perhaps the most surprising result of the survey was the clear difference between the two German literatures: The extent, variety and socio-cultural impact of Antikerezeption in the West, i.e. in the Federal Republic of Germany, is comparatively limited. Theoretical statements by poets or critics are rare; and a general theory (or, rather, ideology) about the importance of classical antiquity does not exist. Besides Walter Jens, classicist and professor of rhetoric at the University of Tübingen, as well as critic, essayist and poet, for a long time there has been no author for whom classical antiquity proves to be of central importance, if only for certain parts of his work or for a certain phase in his creative life. Only recently have there been significant indications of a change in attitude. I mentioned Christoph Ransmayr’s novel about the Metamorphoses of Ovid, and I could add Peter Handke and Botho Strauss, two of the most important contemporary German authors, both of whom in the eighties began to experiment with ancient material (Strauss) and to confront ancient texts, ideas and ideals (Handke).

On the other hand, the importance of Antikerezeption for the literature produced and consumed on the other side of the Elbe River is astounding. There is hardly anyone among the major figures of East German literature who has not (intensely and in some cases quite extensively) worked with classical material. This is true for the dramatists Heiner Müller and Peter Hacks, for the poets Peter Huchel and Johannes Bobrowski, Volker Braun and Günter Kunert, and for the prose writers Franz Füllmann and Christa Wolf, to mention only the best-known authors.

Whereas in the West classical antiquity enjoyed continuous political support, the regime in the East drastically reduced classical education, first at the high school and then at the university. In view of this fact, the


10 Cf. e.g. “Park” (Trojan War); “Die Zeit und das Zimmer” (Medea); “Die Fremdenführerin” (Atridae et al.).

11 Cf. also Peter Weiss, Ästhetik des Widersstands I–III (Frankfurt a.M. 1975–81) and H. Fichte, Geschichte der Empfindlichkeit (Frankfurt a.M. 1987–); “Mein Freund Herodot” (I 381–407); “Wer war Agrippina” (I 477–82); “Ein neuer Martial” (II 61–74); “Männerlust und Frauenlob: Anmerkungen zur Sapphorezeption und zum Orgasmusproblem” (II 75–105); “Patroklos und Achilleus: Anmerkungen zur Ilias” (II 143–81) and minutaie in the novels (cf. e.g. XV 32 ff.).

12 For other authors and texts, cf. the literature cited above, note 6.
difference between East and West German literature may appear paradoxical and demands an explanation:

A first reason, I believe, can be found in the person and work of Bertolt Brecht, the great father-figure for most authors of the German Democratic Republic. Brecht, throughout his life, worked critically and creatively with ancient history, literature and art. There is not a single area of his rich literary production, from lyric poetry to drama and literary and theoretical prose, that does not show the impact of his study of the ancient world. If one does not forget that besides Brecht other influential authors of the early German Democratic Republic—e.g. Johannes R. Becher and Georg Maurer, Anna Seghers or Erich Arendt—have repeatedly used ancient material to express their experiences and views, it is perhaps no wonder that the next generations of authors would follow in the footsteps of this established and successful tradition of socialist literature.

A second, complementary explanation for the astonishing importance of Antikerezeption in the literature of the GDR may be derived from the core of the official cultural (or rather ideological) policy of the regime which was based on Lenin’s fourth thesis about proletarian culture, according to which “Marxism has won its historic significance as the ideology of the revolutionary proletariat because, far from rejecting the most valuable achievements of the bourgeois epoch, it has, on the contrary, assimilated and refashioned everything of value in the more than two thousand years of the development of human thought and culture.”

The program that is outlined in this thesis was taken up by the leading cultural ideologists of the GDR and developed into the official concept called “Kulturelles Erbe” or “Erworbenes Erbe.” At the ninth meeting of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (SED) Walter Ulbricht, then president of the GDR, proclaimed “that in view of the decadence of late capitalism it is necessary that we diligently preserve the great tradition of our humanistic heritage for the benefit of our people.”

Ulbricht and his followers in the Ministry of Culture were, of course, talking about the affirmative socialist interpretation and utilization of the literary and artistic achievements of the great periods of our European past,

13 P. Witzmann, Antike Tradition im Werk Bertolt Brechts (Berlin 1964); H. Mayer, Bertolt Brecht und die Tradition (Pfullingen 1961); W. Mittenzwei, Brechts Verhältnis zur Tradition (Berlin 1972).
15 Anna Seghers, Ges. Werke in Einzelausgaben (Berlin 1961–): “Sagen von Artemis” (IX 231–58); “Der Baum des Odysseus” (IX 275 f.); “Das Argonautenschiff” (X 126–43).
17 V. I. Lenin, Collected Works (Moscow 1966) XXXI 317.
but it is obvious that under the wide umbrella of this ideology and further protected by the Brechtian paradigm authors could put the hallowed classical tradition to quite different uses. It is here that I feel we may find some of the deeper reasons for the unexpected importance of Antikerezeption in the literature of the GDR. First, Antikerezeption allowed authors (and artists) to evade the aesthetic constraints of "Socialist realism," the official artistic concept of the regime; second, the creative use of ancient material opened up interesting political possibilities: It could be used as a vehicle of more or less open criticism aimed against political or cultural developments; socialistic utopias could be sketched as a contrast with a much shabbier reality of the contemporary GDR; the history or the present state of the Communist Party could be discussed; one's own position and situation as an intellectual within the regime could be defined. It is this political aspect of the Antikerezeption in the GDR that I will try to illustrate in my paper.

Brecht, as is well known, made extensive use of antiquity for political statements. He critically analyzed ancient literature and history, a technique he called "durchrationalisieren" and "entmythologisieren" and which usually consisted in looking at antiquity from a materialistic Marxist point of view and adding the ignored or suppressed proletarian perspective, as e.g. in his famous poem, "Fragen eines lesenden Arbeiter":

Wer baute das siebentorige Theben?
In den Büchern stehen die Namen von Königen.
Haben die Könige die Felsbrocken herbeigeschleppt?
Und das mehrmals zerstörte Babylon
Wer baute es so viele Male auf? In welchen Häusern
Des goldstrahlenden Lima wohnten die Bauleute?
Wohin gingen an dem Abend, wo die chinesische Mauer fertig war
Die Mauer? Das große Rom
Ist voll von Triumphbögen. Wer errichtete sie? . . .

Over and over again, Brecht used mythological, literary and historical figures, stories, or processes as paradigms for modern personalities, events

19 Bertolt Brecht, Poems, ed. J. Willett and R. Manheim (London 1979), transl. by N. Replansky:

Questions from a worker who reads

Who built Thebes of the seven gates?
In the books you will find the names of kings.
Did the kings haul up the lumps of rock?
And Babylon, many times demolished
Who raised it up so many times? In what houses
Of gold-glittering Lima the builders lived?
Where, the evening that the wall of China was finished
Did the masons go? Great Rome
Is full of triumphal arches. Who erected them? . . .
and developments, as e.g. in his unfinished novel, *Die Geschafte des Herrn Julius Caesar*, an attack on ancient and contemporary capitalism. Two short examples of the political use of Roman history may serve as a reminder of this important aspect of Brecht’s work.

After the Reichstag fire in 1934 Brecht sarcastically drew a parallel between Hitler and Nero:

Der römische Kaiser Nero, der ebenfalls
Als großer Künstler gelten wollte, soll angesichts
Des auf sein Geheiß brennenden Rom auf einem Turm
Die Harfe geschlagen haben. Bei einer ähnlichen Gelegenheit
Zog der Führer angesichts eines brennenden hohen Hauses
Den Bleistift und zeichnete
Den schwungvollen Grundriß
Eines neuen Prachtaus. So in der Art ihrer Kunst
Unterschieden sich die beiden.20

And during the heated debate about the rearmament of West Germany in the fifties he issued the crisp warning: “Das große Carthago führte drei Kriege. Es war noch mächtig nach dem ersten, noch bewohnbar nach dem zweiten. Es war nicht mehr auffindbar nach dem dritten.”21 The main targets of Brecht’s political Antikerezeption were fascism and capitalism. But, of course, this poetic technique of indirect critical comment could be (and was) used not only against external enemies but could equally well be turned inward against events or processes within the GDR. An instructive example is Christa Wolf’s *Kassandra*. The author presents the Trojan war as paradigm for the East–West conflict, and although the main part of her criticism is directed against the Greeks (i.e. the West), she at the same time criticizes certain developments in Troy (i.e. in the East). The book, first published in West Germany, could not be published in the East without major cuts.

Another more personal example is Volker Braun’s poem “Die Treulose”:

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20 Bertolt Brecht, Werkausgabe Suhrkamp (1967) IX 525 (my transl.):

The Roman emperor Nero, who also
wanted to pass for a great artist, is said
to have played the harp on a tower
looking down on Rome as it burned at his command.
On a similar occasion
the Führer watching a high house burn
took out his pencil and briskly drew a
plan for a splendid new building. So—in the manner of their art—
the two differed.

21 Bertolt Brecht, “Offener Brief an die deutschen Künstler und Schriftsteller,” in *Schriften zur Literatur und Kunst* (Berlin–Weimar 1966) II 294: “Great Carthage waged three wars. It was still powerful after the first, still habitable after the second. It was not to be found after the third.”
Was denn, Valerius, laß nicht den Kopf hängen.
So haltbar sind die Sätze zweitausend Jahre
Und mein Gefühl noch wiegt sich in den Versmaßen
Das wie Laub abfällt und ich lebe kahl weiter.
Immer wieder der Zorn die Scham Nachdichtung
Aus einer schlechten Gesellschaft in die andre.
Ich liebte sie, wie keine wird geliebt werden!
Da war das Leben heiter etc

Laß die laufen
Nach ihrem Planziel, Volker, jetzt heißt hart bleiben.
Wer wird noch zu ihr gehn, für den sie schön aussieht?
Wen wird sie lieben, wessen Liebste sich nennen?
Soll sie sehen, wo sie bleibt, mit ihren Fortschritten
Fort fort. Sie wird mir nicht mehr die Lippen wundbeißen.
Dank für den Zuspruch, Römer aus dem Weltreiche
Oder wovon sprachst du. Jetzt mußt du durchhalten
Bis sie sich bessert die Treulose:
Sag ich, meine sei schlechter? Ich bin es auch nicht
Ich bleibe hart bis zum letzten Hinkiambus.22

Braun plays with one of Catullus’ most famous poems23:

Miser Catulle, desinas ineptire
et quod vides perire, perditum ducas . . .

The poem is Catullus’ desperate attempt to free himself from the destructive and degrading love of a woman who does not deserve his love. Braun, who directly addresses Catullus and calls his use of Catullus 8 “an adaptation from one bad society into the other,” uses the poem, parts of which he integrates into the text,24 to make a bitter renunciation of his allegiance to the socialist society he had believed in for a long time.

In the following I want to focus on Heiner Müller, the most prominent dramatist of East Germany. Müller, born in 1923, began his career with realistic plays about social and economic problems in the early GDR. After difficulties with political censorship that increasingly hampered or prevented the production of his plays and forced him into extensive rewriting25 he turned to antiquity which, ever since, has been a major source of inspiration for his work.

Müller first produced translations of Sophocles’ Oedipus Tyrannus and Aeschylus’ Prometheus and then wrote “Philoktet” based on Sophocles’ Philoctetes, followed by a satyr-play-like farce about Heracles’ cleaning of

23 Catullus 8.
24 As metre Braun uses a free adaptation of the Catullan choliambus.
the stables of Augias, “Heraclès 5,” and a short didactic play in the Brechtian tradition called “Horatier,” which I will introduce shortly.26

A closer look at Müller’s Antikerezeption27 can show that in turning to a different subject-matter he did not change his political convictions or

[26] The acre of Müller’s Antikerezeption was in the sixties; but he has continued to work with classical material; cf. e. g. “Zement” (1972), “Verkommenes Ufer Medematernal Landschaft mit Argonauten” (1982), “Anatomie Titus Fall of Rome” (1984).

intentions. He just adapted a different, and perhaps safer, mode of expression for his critical analysis and assessment both of the world in general and of the particular society in which he lived.

Three quite different examples will demonstrate Müller’s political use of classical material. Let me begin with a quite unusual form of political Antikerezeption, an almost literal translation of a famous Latin text:

Horaz, Satiren II 1

**Horaz, Trebatius**

H. Ich hör da welche sagen (laut, Trebatius!)  
Ich wär zu scharf in der Satire, frech  
Über die Schranken setzend, die gesetzt sind.  
Anderen gilt, was ich zusammenfüg  
Entnervt. Die reden so: derlei Verse  
Macht einer tausend auch an einem Tag.  
Rat mir, Trebatius, Freund. Was soll ich machen?  
T. Schweig.  
H. Das heißt: keinen Vers mehr künftig.  
T. Keinen.  
H. Hol mich der Zeus! Ja, schweigen wär das beste.  
 Doch find ich keinen Schlaf, wenn ich nicht schreib.  
T. So salb dich und durchschwimm den Tiber dreimal  
Vor Nacht. Spül dich mit Wein. Und kannst dus nicht  
Ganz lassen, sei so kühn, besing des Cäsar  
Sieg und Trophäen! Ich wett, das wird bezahlt.  
Der Krug, der nicht zum Wasser geht, bleibt leer.  
H. Gern, alter Freund, wenn ich dazu die Kraft hätt.  
Nicht jedem ist gegeben, schön zu schildern  
Die lanzenstarrenden Schlachtreihn Roms. Den Gallier  
Ausblutend am Geschöß, das in der Brust  
Ihm steckt. Oder den Parther, der vom Pferd fällt  
Stückweis.  
T. Besing den Fürsten selber, den  
Allzeit gerechten, wie Lucilius  
Besang den Scipio, damals.  
H. Gern, Freund, gern  
Wenn sich ein Anlaß bietet. Nicht allzeit  
Hat Cäsar für Horaz ein offnes Ohr.  
Wird er verkehrt gestreichelt, schlägt er aus.  

Borrowing the voice of Horace for a personal political statement, Müller translates the first 20 lines of the programmatic poem with which Horace opened the second book of his satires. Müller—without adding any

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comments or explanations\textsuperscript{29}—counts on his readers to grasp the paradigmatic quality of the conversation between Horace and his legal adviser Trebatius and to understand that the ancient verses about poetry, criticism and power have preserved their validity over two thousand years. Pointedly, Müller ends his translation at line 20 with the acknowledgment that the powerful when stroked in the wrong way will lash out. What at first sight could appear as a mere exercise in translation by Müller turns out to be a poignant programmatic statement about his poetry and a topical comment on the relation of art and power.

In the second example Müller uses a well-known passage from the \textit{Iliad}\textsuperscript{30} for a personal statement:

\begin{quote}
\textbf{Geschichten von Homer}
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
1
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
2
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{29} Müller’s text is a free translation which, however, stays fairly close to Horace’s text.

\textsuperscript{30} Homer, \textit{Iliad} 2. 222 \textit{ff.}

In the first part of Müller’s hexametric poem Homer is asked by his pupils why he puts the bitter truth about the Trojan war into the mouth of Thersites and then discredits this truth by having Thersites criticized, whalloped and derided; and Homer answers: “to be liked by the princes” and “from hunger”; i.e. the poet cannot write as he pleases, at least if he wants to publish and to eat. Political circumstances and power-structure can prevent the open advocacy of the political truth.

Already here the topicality is obvious, but Müller in the second part of the poem goes one step further: The most intelligent of Homer’s disciples is not satisfied by the answers of his master and repeats the question when the two are alone. And now Homer/Müller gives a second and more profound justification for his attitude: It is not only that the truth leaves pot and pan empty and that it does not provide any laurel; the truth is dangerous, and just to bend the bow in order to shoot the arrow of truth is an accomplishment. Even if the author hides the truth among his lies, as the truth of Thersites is hidden among the lies of the context, it still remains a potentially deadly weapon that can be understood and used by others. Müller thus, practicing the lesson of his fable in his poem, gives an eminently political comment on the situation of poets, or intellectuals in general, who live and work under a totalitarian regime.

Tales of Homer

1
Often and in abundance his pupils were talking with Homer
Elucidating his work and demanding correct explanation.
Because the old poet loved to discover himself afresh
And when extolled wasn’t stingy with wine and a roast.
During a feast, the meat and the wine, the talk once turned to
Thersites, the much despised one, the gossip, who rose in assembly
Cleverly using the war lords’ quarrel for the size of their spoils
Said he: Look at the people’s shepherd who is shearing and killing
Like any shepherd does with his sheep, and he showed the bloody
Empty hands of the soldiers to the soldiers as empty and bloody.
And then the pupils asked: How is that with this Thersites
Master? You let him say the right words but then with your own words
You prove him wrong. This seems to be difficult to understand.
Why did you do it? Said the old man: To be liked by the princes.
Asked his pupils: Why that? The old man: From hunger. For laurel?
Too. But he liked it as much in his fleshpot as on his head.

2
One of the pupils, however, they say was uniquely bright
A great one for questions. He always questioned each answer he got
In his search for the one, the definite answer. He asked
Sitting at the riverside with the old man the question again
As once the others. The old man looked at the youngster and said
Calmly: Truth is an arrow, poisoned to all hasty archers!
Even bending the bow is much. The arrow will still be an
Arrow if found among rushes. Truth dressed as a lie is still truth.
And the bow won’t die with the archer. Said it and rose.
After the two poems I want now, for my third example, to turn to a dramatic text. In the sixties and seventies especially the dramatists of the GDR made extensive use of Antikerezeption. Peter Hacks, the most important East German dramatist beside Müller, wrote no fewer than six plays in which he worked with ancient history or literature: "Amphitryon," "Numa," "Omphale," "Prexaspes," "Rosie träumt" and "Senecas Tod," to which must be added his highly successful adaptation of Aristophanes’ Peace.32 Beside Müller and Hacks, the two most important dramatists of the former GDR, there is the interesting Antikerezeption of younger dramatists like Hartmut Lange33 and Stefan Schütz,34 both of whom were strongly influenced by Müller and both of whom left the GDR (Lange already in 1968; Schütz in 1981) after encountering serious problems with the cultural bureaucracy.

Müller wrote “The Horatian” in 1968.35 As subject-matter he chose the famous story from Rome’s mythical past, told by Livy in Book 1, chapters 22–26, and already used by Brecht for his play “Die Horatier und die Kuriatier.” Müller turned Livy’s story into a short epic–dramatic text in the tradition of the Brechtian “Lehrstück.” The narrative form (the story is told in the third person and in the past tense) creates epic distance; the rhetorical language, the detailed description of gestures and movements of the characters, the composition by scenes and the ample use of direct speech give the text a distinct dramatic quality. Syntax, word-order and rhetoric are obviously adapted to the ancient subject-matter.

Livy opens his narrative with a detailed report of the cause of the conflict between Rome and Alba (chapter 22); he then describes the preparations for war on both sides (chapter 23) and the formal agreement to decide the issue not by battle but by single combat between three brothers from each side (chapter 24). In chapter 25 he gives a full description of the fight between the three Horatians and the three Curiatians, anxiously watched by both armies and ending with the victory of the last of the three Horatians, the sole survivor. In chapter 26 follow the triumphant homecoming of the victor, the slaying of his sister, who had been engaged

32 For Hacks, cf. H. Laube, Peter Hacks (Hannover 1972); P. Schütze, Peter Hacks: Ein Beiträg zur Ästhetik des Dramas, Antike und Mythenaneignung (Kronberg 1976); J. R. Scheid, Enfant Terrible of Contemporary East German Literature: Peter Hacks and his Role as Adaptor and Innovator (Bonn 1977); Ch. Trölse, Peter Hacks: Leben und Werk (Berlin 1980); R. Heitz, Peter Hacks: Théâtre et Socialisme (Berlin–Frankfurt–New York 1984); A. Jäger, Der Dramatiker Peter Hacks: Vom Produktionszustück zum Klassikerzitat, Marburger Studien zur Literatur 2 (Marburg 1986); cf. further notes 6 and 27 above.


to one of the Curiatians and now laments his death, his trial, first before the
duumviri, then before the people who, finally, after an emotional plea by
his old father, acquit the Horatian.

Whereas Brecht in his “Lehrstück” about revolutionary cunning (“Die
Horatier und die Kuriatier”) accentuates the fight between the three Horatians
and the three Curiatians, Müller concentrates on the aftermath. He
condenses the first four chapters of Livy’s report—from the beginning of the
war to the victory of the Horatian—into a short exposition which, while
preserving the gist of Livy’s narrative, comprises only about a tenth of the
text. In the second scene, of about equal length, the killing of the Curiatian
is immediately followed by the killing of the sister. Müller here also takes
over the most important details from his ancient source: The homecoming
of the victor with the mantle of the Curiatian draped over his shoulder,
which is immediately recognized by his sister as the “work of her hands,”
the lamentations of the girl, the anger of the Horatian, his reprimands and
the murder of the sister and its rationale are almost literally taken from
Livy.

Müller stresses the close parallelism between the two deeds of the one
doer no fewer than three times; it is the same thrust, the same sword, the
same death:

Und der Horatier, im Arm noch den Schwertschwung
Mit dem er getötet hatte den Kuriatier
Um den seine Schwester weinte jetzt
Stieß das Schwert, auf dem das Blut des Beweinten
Noch nicht getrocknet war
In die Brust der Weinenden
Daß das Blut auf die Erde fiel.36

With the next lines Müller prepares for the ensuing controversy: When the
Horatian raises the twice-bloodied sword the crowd falls silent. The father
covers his daughter’s body with the mantle of her dead fiancé and embraces
the victor; but his attempt to reduce his son’s two deeds to one, to his
victory for Rome, instead of covering up the inseparability of the two deeds,
exposes it:

Und der Vater des Horatiers
Sah das zweimal blutige Schwert an und sagte:
Du hast gesiegt. Rom
Herrscht über Alba.

36 And the Horatian—his arm still felt the sword’s thrust
He had killed the Curiatian with in combat.
The man he saw his sister weeping for now—
Thrust the sword—the blood of the man she wept for
Wasn’t yet dry on it—
Into the breast of the weeping girl
So that her blood dropped to the earth.
Er beweinte die Tochter, verdeckten Gesichts
Breitete auf ihre Wunde das Schlachtkleid
Werk ihrer Hände, blutig vom gleichen Schwert
Und umarmte den Sieger.\(^{37}\)

The little scene has no counterpart in Livy, who confines the role of the father to the great defense-speech before the assembly. The scene thus serves as a signal for the deviation from Livy which begins here. Müller uses Livy’s narrative primarily to constitute the problem which in the following he discusses in much greater depth and which comes to a quite different solution. In Müller’s presentation of the story the murder is also followed by a trial of the “doer of two different deeds,” which is to say with the debate over whether “the Horatian should be honored as a conqueror or as a murderer tried,” but the execution, the result, and the function of the trial have little in common with the ancient source.

Before the assembly the trial is opened with the question as to whether, despite the threat that the Etruscans could attack Rome at any moment,\(^{38}\) the legal debate within should be continued. The answer is yes. The argument to put the common good, in view of the danger, above the right of the individual and the proposal to postpone the trial because it would only divide the people and thus weaken Rome are both rejected.

In the first part of the proceedings the insoluble antithesis of merit and guilt leads to a deadlock:

Und das Volk blickte auf den unteilbaren einen
Täter der verschiedenen Taten und schwieg.\(^{39}\)

But then the people decide with one voice to divide the identity of conqueror and murderer and to give “to each one his own: to the conqueror the laurel, to the murderer the sword.” Thus the Horatian is first honored for his victory over Alba and then punished for the murder of his sister.

In the second part of the trial the assembly faces the question of how to treat the corpse of the victor/murderer. Here too the Romans vote “with one voice” to preserve the double truth. The corpse of the victor is laid in state on the shields of the army and all Romans honor him:

\(^{37}\) And the Horatian’s father
  Looked at the twice bloodied sword and said:
  You have conquered. Rome
  is ruling Alba.
  He wept for his daughter, hiding his face,
  Covered her wound with the warrior’s mantle
  Work of her hands, bloodied by the same sword
  And embraced the conqueror.

\(^{38}\) Müller has strengthened this motif of Livy’s story considerably.

\(^{39}\) And the people looked at the one undivided
  Doer of two different deeds and were silent.
Then, however, the corpse of the murderer, despite the intercession of the old father, is thrown to the dogs:

Damit sie ihn zerreißen
Also daß nichts bleibt von ihm
Der einen Menschen getötet hat
Ohne Notwendigkeit.  

In the answer to the father’s supplication not to punish his son beyond death Müller for the first time stresses the paradigmatic character of the event:

Länger als Rom über Alba herrschen wird
Wird nicht zu vergessen sein Rom und das Beispiel
Das es gegeben oder nicht gegeben
Abwägend mit der Waage des Händlers gegeneinander
Oder reinlich scheidend Schuld und Verdienst
Des unteilbaren Täters verschiedener Taten
Fürchtend die unreine Wahrheit oder nicht fürchtend
Und das halbe Beispiel ist kein Beispiel
Was nicht getan wird ganz bis zum wirklichenden
Kehrt ins Nichts am Zügel der Zeit im Krebsgang.  

Whereas Müller here stresses the idea that only the radical analysis and documentation of the historical truth can set an example, the short last part of the text develops the question (only alluded to here) of the preservation of the event for posterity. When one of the Romans asks, “What shall we call

40 pointing
Out that nothing was to harm the corpse
Of the Horatian who had conquered for Rome
Neither rain nor time, neither snow nor oblivion
And they covered their faces and mourned him.

41 That they shall tear him to shreds
And nothing will remain of him
Who has killed a human being
Without necessity.

42 Longer than Rome will rule Alba
Rome won’t be forgotten and the example
That it once set or didn’t set
Measuring with the merchant’s balance
Or neatly sifting guilt and merit
Of the indivisible doer of different deeds
Afraid of the impure truth or not afraid
And half an example is no example
What isn’t done fully to its true ending
Returns to nothing at the leash of time in a crab’s walk.
the Horatian for those after us?” the people answer, for the third time with one voice:

Er soll genannt werden der Sieger über Alba
Er soll genannt werden der Mörder seiner Schwester
Mit einem Atem sein Verdienst und seine Schuld.43

And the reasoning added in support of the decision shows that Müller is aiming at the preservation of historical truth in words, whether this be through literature, historiography, or journalism:

Nämlich die Worte müssen rein bleiben. Denn
Ein Schwert kann zerbrochen werden und ein Mann
Kann auch zerbrochen werden, aber die Worte
Fallen in das Getriebe der Welt uneinholbar
Kennlich machend die Dinge oder unkenntlich.
Tödlich dem Menschen ist das Unkenntliche.44

The epilogue is given to the actors who have narrated and enacted the events and now add the closing commentary:

So stellten sie auf, nicht fürchtend die unreine Wahrheit
In Erwartung des Feinds ein vorläufiges Beispiel
Reinlicher Scheidung, nicht verbergend den Rest
Der nicht aufging im unaufhaltbaren Wandel.45

This conclusion once again underlines the thesis of Müller’s paradoxical paradigm. The solution propagated by Müller’s Romans is paradigmatic because by the clear distinction of merit and guilt they do not cover up, but uncover the “impure truth,” i.e. the ambivalent truth of political reality in which positive and negative, necessary and unnecessary violence are indivisibly intertwined, both in individuals and in historical processes. The irritating solution of the problem not only stresses its provisional character but at the same time points to the need to change the very conditions of its existence.

The topicality of the text is obvious; and since—as Brecht in the introduction to his “Antigone” puts it—“philological interests are not to be

43 He shall be called the conqueror of Alba
He shall be called the murderer of his sister
Within one breath his merit and his guilt.

44 Since the words must be kept pure. Because
A sword may be broken and also a man
May be broken, but words
They fall into the wheels of the world, irretrievably
Making things known to us or unknown.
Deadly to humans is what they can’t understand.

45 Thus, expecting their foe, they set—not afraid
Of the impure truth—a provisional example
Of neat distinction, and didn’t hide the rest
That wasn’t resolved in the unceasing change of things.
served,"46 the question arises why Müller used Livy to present his thesis about historical truth. A number of answers suggest themselves: First, the use of a story of Rome’s mythological past serves to produce what Brecht called “alienation”; the historical distance allows for a rational and unprejudiced reception. Second, it is important (and this also is part of Brecht’s dramatic theory) that the relative simplicity of ancient social structures provides for simple models that can be much more easily understood than the complexity of modern reality. Third, the ancient story serves as a foil against which the new version and its intentions can be seen more clearly. All these common aesthetic and didactic functions of Antikerezeption are evident here. But there is more to Müller’s choice of the ancient story. As discussed and practiced in “Tales of Homer,” Müller is using Antikerezeption to express something in an indirect way that could not be expressed as easily in the direct form. He talked openly about this technique in an interview as early as 1982: “In the early sixties one could not write a play about Stalinism; one had to use a kind of model, if one wanted to ask the real questions. The people here understand that quite quickly.”47 Müller is talking about his “Philoktet” here, but many critics have felt that the moral of “The Horatian,” to bear and preserve the impure truth of the inseparable mingling of merit and guilt, is yet another contribution by Müller to the Stalin-debate of the sixties. I agree; but, as a recent statement by Müller shows, there was a more specific political impulse behind the conception of this text. In his autobiography published this summer48 Müller reveals: “The text was my reaction to Prague. ‘The Horatian’ could not be staged. There was an attempt by the Berlin Ensemble to put it on stage, but it was prohibited by the political secretary in charge. The argument was that the text reflected the Prague-position, the claim to give the power to the intellectuals.”49 In this sense the insidious adjective “vorläufig” (provisional), used by Müller to limit the validity of the example the Romans tried to set, unveils its true meaning. The text is a presentation of the Czechoslovak “provisional” attempt to set an example; at the same time it is Müller’s appeal not to suppress the truth about the events in Prague in the necessary debate about the merits and guilt of communist socialism.

The insidious adjective “vorläufig” bears yet another hidden sense: Critics50 have pointed to a number of barbed hooks in the text that prepare the audience for Müller’s final assessment of the Roman example as provisional. There is e.g. the wild ideological fervor with which the Horatian kills the Curiatian, who is already overcome and asks for mercy;

47 Heiner Müller, in Rotwelsch (Berlin 1982) 77.
48 Heiner Müller, Krieg ohne Schlacht (Köln 1992).
49 Müller (previous note) 258 f.
there is the inner link between the one deed of the Horatian that is necessary for the society and the other deed that is "without necessity," a close inner link suggested by Müller's formulation when the Horatian kills his sister: "in his arm still the thrust he had killed the Curiatian with in combat"; there is also the fact that the Horatian does not only appear as the agent but also as the victim of his ideological education, and finally there is the paradoxical solution adopted by the Romans, a solution that is bound to create irritation. Thus "provisional" points not only to the defectiveness of the example but also to the defectiveness of the social conditions in which even the best possible solution of the problem can only be considered provisional.

But what Müller has stressed with regard to the action of his "Philoctetes" appears to be valid for "The Horatian" also: "What happens is necessary only if the whole system is not called into question." The provisionality of the example points to the necessity to do just this, and this imperative to criticism is, of course, directed not against the imperfect Roman past but against the imperfect socialistic present that it stands for.

A number of further texts of Müller and numerous texts from other poets could be added. Here I want to conclude with a poem by Günter Kunert,\(^{51}\) which shows how Antikerezeption in the GDR was used not only for the critical analysis and assessment of political events and processes of general importance but also for more personal political statements:

**Märkischer Konstantin**

Lautlosigkeit plus Reglosigkeit  
Der morgendliche Garten im August  
Frühe Hitze des Tages  
nördlich Berlin der verhoffte Süden  
Zarte Rauchvertikale vom Nachbarhaus:  
der Vesuv  
Tau leckt die nackten Füße  
grüne Zungen von Sklaven  
Dein Imperium umfaßt  
1470 Quadratmeter  
Barbaren klingen schon am Gartentor:  
Hier  
bist du nicht mehr sicher. Wechsle  
den Glauben und errichte

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\(^{51}\) There are more than 150 poems and a number of short prose-texts in which Kunert works with classical material.
In a monologue with himself the lyrical persona envisages himself far away in time and place. In the early heat of a summer day, the smoke rising from the neighbor’s chimney becomes the smoke-trail of Mount Vesuvius and the medium-sized garden north of Berlin turns into the imperium Romanum.

Up to this point the poem could be read as an ironical comment on the unfulfilled travel-dreams of many East German citizens (“north of Berlin the long hoped-for South”). But suddenly the poem takes on a new existential dimension. The small imperium in the Mark Brandenburg is, like the imperium Romanum, threatened by barbarians. The ringing at the garden gate evokes political control and the threat of arrest. The green empire does not provide security any longer. The last lines of the poem finally unveil the real point of the title. Like Constantine the Great our East German poet at a critical moment in his life considers changing his creed. The poem was written in 1975. One year later Wolf Biermann was expatriated and Kunert’s protests made his own situation even more difficult, so that he finally decided to take the advice of his own poem and to change his creed: In 1978 he left the GDR and founded his empire elsewhere.

On the basis of the various forms of biographical and political use of Antikerezeption we have encountered, the enigmatic poem of Peter Huchel which I used as motto for my paper will, at least partially, release its hidden


Silence and stillness:
the morning garden in August
early heat of the day:
north of Berlin the hoped-for South
a delicate vertical line of smoke from the neighbor’s house:
Mount Vesuvius
dew licks the naked feet
green tongues of slaves
Your empire consists of
1470 square meters
barbarians ring at the garden door
here
you are no longer safe, change
your creed and found
your empire elsewhere.
meaning. As Robert Lüdtke⁵³ and Peter Hutchinson⁵⁴ have pointed out, it is a personal political statement with a specific historical context.

Peter Huchel was not only one of the most distinguished German lyric poets after the second world war. For fourteen years (1949–1962) he was also the highly respected editor of Sinn und Form, undoubtedly the best literary journal in both Germanies, distinguished by its liberal editorial policy and practice, which brought together the best authors and critics, philosophers and political thinkers of East and West. As a result of the mounting tensions of the cold-war fifties Huchel met with increasing pressure to streamline the journal according to the official politics and ideology of the GDR, and after serious problems with the party he finally had to retire in 1962. "The Garden of Theophrastus" was published as the first of six poems in the last fascicle of the journal edited by Huchel.

Theophrastus, pupil, collaborator and successor of Aristotle, researched, lectured and wrote extensively on a wide variety of subjects, among which botany played a prominent role. Diogenes Laertius tells us that, although he was not an Athenian citizen, Theophrastus was able to acquire a garden for the Peripatetic school, which he in his preserved will dedicated "to such of his friends as may wish to study literature and philosophy there in common, so that they might hold it like a temple in joint possession." Against this political and philological background the garden of Theophrastus and the threatened olive tree unveil their specific biographical and political connotations: By choosing Theophrastus as mask, as persona, Huchel likens his editorial policy and its intended effects to a gardener, who tries to enrich the soil and to heal the fractures and wounds of the trees (as prescribed in Theophrastus' De historia plantarum) and this, as Lüdtke was the first to recognize, is a metaphorical but rather precise description of the role which Peter Huchel and his journal have played in the GDR. The olive tree that "splits the brickwork" is an image that evokes wisdom and peace; very probably, then, it refers to the periodical which, indeed, tried to split the spiritual and (since 1961) physical walls between the two Germanies. The author knows that his days as editor and gardener are numbered. They—his unidentified, but now easily identifiable critics—have already given the order to totally destroy the tree. At this moment the poet, in a memento that reads like a last will, tells his son not to forget what he and others tried to achieve "planting conversations like trees.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ For the interesting intertextual connections with one of Brecht’s most famous poems, "An die Nachgeborenen," cf. Hutchinson (previous note); for a totally different reading of Huchel’s poem, cf. A. Kelletat, "Peter Huchel, 'Der Garten des Theophrast'," in Peter Huchel, ed. H. Mayer (Frankfurt a.M. 1973) 96–100. Neither Kelletat’s criticism of the
In 1902 in his essay "What is to be done" Lenin wrote: "In a country ruled by an autocracy, in which the press is completely shackled, and in a period of intense political reaction in which even the tiniest outgrowth of political discontent and protest is suppressed, the theory of revolutionary Marxism suddenly forces its way into the censored literature, written in Aesopian language but understood by the 'interested'.' And in his study "Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism" he justifies his own use of "Aesopian language" in 1916: "I had to speak in a 'Slavish' tongue ... In order to show with what cynicism they screen the annexations of their capitalists, I was forced to quote as an example—Japan! The careful reader will easily substitute Russia for Japan, and Finland, Poland, Courland, the Ukraine, Khiva, Bokhara, Estonia or other regions peopled by non-Great Russians, for Korea." It is the paradoxical irony of history that fifty years later many authors in the GDR resorted to Lenin's tactical concept of Aesopian language, and turned it not only against the traditional capitalist enemy, but also against their own socialist society.

In conclusion I would like to point out that the political aspect of Antikerezeption I have singled out here is by no means the only one that is important for understanding the phenomenon, but it seems to me that it is particularly significant, and it will be interesting to see what is going to happen to Antikerezeption in the work of East German writers after the fall of the communist regime which has been so instrumental for the political use of antiquity in the literature of the German Democratic Republic.

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56 Lenin Reader, ed. S. T. Possony (Chicago 1966) 466.
57 Lenin (previous note) 468.