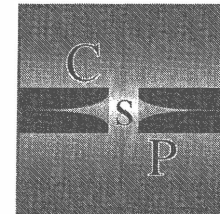


Edward Said and Jacques Derrida:
Reconstellating Humanism and the Global Hybrid

Edited by

Mina Karavanta and Nina Morgan



Cambridge Scholars Publishing

To our loving husbands, Peter Morgan and Dimitris Angelopoulos, and children, Nicholas Morgan, Amarantha and Marilia Angelopoulos, who bore witness to our absence and presence and traveled with us, and who have taught us and continue to teach us to think in a loving and caring way.

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CHAPTER SIX

HUMANISM BETWEEN HUBRIS AND HEROISM

VASSILIS LAMBROPOULOS

Near the end of his life, Edward Said tried to rescue a certain humanist practice from the general exhaustion of humanism in the 1970s following the post-structuralist onslaught. Against a homogenizing and totalizing tradition of imperial learning, he argued that “it is possible to be critical of humanism in the name of humanism” (Said, *Humanism* 10), and tried to outline the terms of such a possibility. He proposed the discipline of philology as a model for this counter-humanistic practice, suggesting that “the actuality of reading is, fundamentally, an act of perhaps modest human emancipation and enlightenment” (66) that enhances understanding. But how exactly can we be critical of humanism in a humanistic fashion? How can we practice a patient and systematic reading that questions, rather than reinforces, dominant dogmas and discourses? To examine these questions in a concrete way I will look at a twentieth-century writer who throughout his life read very carefully and thoroughly some of the greatest Western works. Whether he adapted Sophocles or Shakespeare, German or Italian theatre, Bertolt Brecht tried always to be critical of humanist ideology in the name of the highest humanistic values. I propose to discuss the last major philological endeavor of his life, his work toward a new production of *Coriolanus*.

After an exile of fifteen years, Brecht returned to Germany in 1948. A year later, the two Germanys were established and the playwright settled in East Berlin, where he completed the last play he ever wrote, *The Days of the Commune* (1948-49). In the years 1951-52, he was preoccupied with *Coriolanus*, wavering between adapting and rewriting it. Eventually he leaned toward the former. Working largely with the classic 19th-century translation by Dorothea Tieck, he cut scenes, shortened speeches, paraphrased, clarified, added. He published a preliminary translation of the first scene in 1952. The following year, he published the “Study of the First Scene of Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*,” a dialogue on the same scene

among four theatre men—himself, two directors, and a dramaturge. He continued to revise, making many amendments to the original. When he died in 1956, the adaptation was still unfinished. It was published posthumously later that year, and it was rearranged and first performed in 1962 in Frankfurt. The Berliner Ensemble staged its own modified version of the adaptation in 1964.

No other Shakespearean play represents class conflict more vividly than *Coriolanus*,¹ a play about the emergence of autonomous society, and the meaning of rule and virtue in it. It takes place around 490 BC, during the Roman republic that followed the fall of Tarquin the Proud, the last king of Rome, in about 507 BC. It shows the crisis of the warrior aristocracy that is driven by the heroic ideal of valor as virtue. But it also portrays the people as emotional and uncertain about their beliefs and goals. The play depicts an intense agonistic situation involving plebeians (small farmers, craftsmen, traders), five tribunes (elected representatives acting as intermediaries to protect the common people from the ruling aristocracy), patricians, and Volscians (a rival tribe to the south). It begins with a confrontation and the threat of civil war. In the opening scene, a mob of plebeians plans an uprising against Coriolanus whom they consider enemy of the people. Famine has struck Rome and citizens blame their leaders, demanding the right to set their own price for the city’s grain supply. Here is how William Hazlitt saw Shakespeare’s message:

Any one who studies it may save himself the trouble of reading Burke’s *Reflections* or Paine’s *Rights of Man* or the *Debates in both Houses of Parliament* since the French Revolution or our own. The arguments for and against aristocracy or democracy, on the privileges of the few and the claims of the many, on liberty and slavery, power and the abuse of it, peace and war, are here very ably handled, with the spirit of a poet and the acuteness of a philosopher. (IV, 214)

Brecht turned the tragedy into a didactic play by injecting it with the political question that animated his last play, *Days of the Commune*: How can the people prevail in the extreme agonistic circumstances of an uprising? Hence, the four theatre people who study the opening of *Coriolanus* begin their conversation by examining the unity and determination of masses that reach the point of revolt. Brecht’s adaptation arouses sympathy for the mob, favors the insurrection of the plebeians, and supports the interests of the common people. While the plebeians failed both in Shakespeare’s play and in the 1918 Spartacist revolt of his youth, Brecht wants them to stand for democracy and win, turning Rome into a fraternal city of land distribution, refounding it upon social justice.

His adaptation ends with the balance of power shifting toward the tribunes who resist patrician pressure. Plebeians and tribunes gain in dignity while the patricians emerge as traitors.

In 1964, the year the Berliner Ensemble produced its definitive version of *Coriolanus*, Günter Grass delivered a speech entitled "The Prehistory and Posthistory of the Tragedy of *Coriolanus* from Livy and Plutarch to Shakespeare down to Brecht and Myself." In it, he attacked Brecht's text, "based on Plutarch's pedagogy and Livy's republican feeling for constitutional government" (xxvii), as a distorting adaptation and proposed a historical context for understanding it:

Bertolt Brecht adapted this tragedy, which has lost none of its sting, in 1952 and 1953. The period when he was working on it takes in the fateful date: June 17th [1953]. While Brecht, leaning on Livy, was racking his brains to figure out how to provide the plebeians, whom Shakespeare arms only with staves and clubs, with more effective weapons, the construction workers of Stalin-Allee [Stalin Avenue] revolted, unrehearsed and unarmed, to protest against the increased production norms, as in other days the plebeians rose against the prohibitive price of grain. (xxxiv)

June 17 was the climax of the 1953 uprising, with widespread strikes in East Berlin factories and shops as well as sympathy strikes and demonstrations in many East German cities and towns, demanding better working conditions, free elections, and a united Germany. Following his 1964 speech, and while he was participating in the 1965 election campaign, Grass wrote *The Plebeians Rehearse the Uprising*, a tragedy fraught with the dark ambiguity that he believed Brecht took out of Shakespeare.

Günter Grass's play *The Plebeians* premiered in January 1966 and was published later that year, causing a great stir in both literary circles and the popular press. The play takes place on a single day thirteen years earlier, on June 17, 1953, and portrays Bertolt Brecht and his troupe rehearsing his adaptation of *Coriolanus*. Observing the three unities of classical drama, this modern "German tragedy," as Grass called it, presents continuous action in the same setting and in the span of a few hours. The occasion in Brecht's theater is simple: the director and his collaborators are rehearsing the first scene of Shakespeare's play. Grass has written a play about staging a play where all we see on stage is the stage where the rehearsal is taking place. For four acts, all we see on stage is a stage. There is no outside world.

While on June 17th Brecht was, according to historical record, rehearsing another adaptation (Erwin Strittmatter's *Katzgraben*), for

reasons of heightening the conflict Grass in his play makes Brecht rehearse instead *Coriolanus*, a work on which he could indeed have been working that day and on that stage. For Brecht, the Spartacist uprising in Berlin in November 1918, his formative revolutionary experience, negated itself when workers obeyed a sign to keep off the grass. He is determined to create theatre that will help future workers avoid this mistake, teaching them how a true rebellion works. As the play opens, he is rehearsing a successful revolution by adapting the opening mob scene of *Coriolanus*. The rehearsal is interrupted abruptly when a delegation of workers appears, seeking to enlist the Boss and his prestige in their unfolding uprising. He refuses to take them seriously. From the beginning Brecht (who is called throughout the play, "Boss") finds the workers who interrupt his work sloppy. He has no hope for their uprising because, on the basis of his experience, he knows that it lacks the necessary planning. When his wife, an actress who plays the mother of Coriolanus, challenges him, his disapproval is clear:

VOLUMNIA: Suppose we're not in Rome today
Or in King James's London,
But in Berlin, and half the city –
The Eastern half, I mean, our people –
Suppose all East Berlin should come disturbing,
Hissing, demanding,
And shut your theater down.
BOSS: That smacks of Puritans;
But since, as you yourself just said,
This isn't Shakespeare's London –
Poor Shakespeare! Taking plague as a pretext,
They often shut him down –
My theatre will stay open.
At worst we'll have some broken windowpanes.
VOLUMNIA: I've never been afraid. This time I am.
Down there the people's rage is boiling over
And here we are stirring up theatre dust
BOSS: Oh unrehearsed incompetence! (18)

In the end Brecht is of course vindicated when the uprising fails. Rehearsed theatre revolt has a goal and method while the unrehearsed street revolt has only passion and confusion.

Throughout Grass's play, Brecht is obsessed with the tragic paradox of *Coriolanus* as it emerges already in the first scene: How can the audience endure the tragedy of the thwarted popular uprising? The plebeians revolt against those exploiting them but very soon they are swayed by deceptive

arguments and give up as General Coriolanus appears and pours his scorn upon them. This turn of events should be unbearable to an East German audience. Brecht has decided that, if the mission of the stage is to educate its audience, it should present a successful way to launch a revolution. The paradox must be resolved, tragedy avoided. Thus he keeps rehearsing the opening scene to make sure that this time the plebeians will get the uprising right—that is, to eliminate the tragic dimension and ensure the triumph of the revolt. The audience of his production will not be exposed to the confusing vagaries of human frailty and historical contingency. Here is his goal:

BOSS: Grumblers. Amateur revolutionaries. My plays are full of them. When they hear machine guns, they run.
 ERWIN: But don't forget Spartacus was your first successful play. (*Grinning*) Revolutionaries and moonlight.
 BOSS: Even Liebknecht and Luxemburg were romantics.
 ERWIN: And what were you? An undernourished anarchist with a guitar and talent.
 BOSS (*laughs softly*): It was a productive period though. The lines came bubbling. We argued all night. Should the revolution be classical or romantic?
 ERWIN: But in the end you came around to the aesthetic principle.
 BOSS: Marx himself stressed it.
 ERWIN: And Lenin says revolution should be practiced like an art.
 BOSS: Exactly. That's why we're putting on a didactic play. Instruct the public. Our indoctrinated tribunes will show the plebeians how you make a revolution and how you don't. (13)

When the workers of Berlin rebel and come into Brecht's theatre to seek his support, we are introduced to another audience—not the one he imagines, but a real one. Furthermore, this new audience is not taking its seats in the auditorium but occupying the stage; and it will not wait for the complete production but is interrupting the rehearsal. Brecht, who by 1953 has seen enough of the twentieth century to fear the worst, cannot trust a spontaneous popular uprising. For a moment he is torn, but only for a very brief moment:

BOSS: What a lousy date this is for the history books. Ah, Livy, Plutarch, Lenin. If I could only swim with the stream, leave Rome, move, be moved, make statements, true or false, shout; if I could only be beside myself, but in the swim. (*Sits down exhausted*) I'd like to be reading Horace. What do pines look like in the morning? (*He sits hunched up behind the director's desk*). (70-71)

Since 1918 he has seen people follow their impulse, improvise, and fail to seize power. The unrehearsed rebellion is not worth supporting. Convinced of the futility of the on-going rebellion, Brecht uses the workers for the staging of his uprising while they try to win him over to theirs. He quotes Shakespeare; they quote Marx. Only art makes sense to him. It provides the terms, the context, the values with which he deals with the world and people around him. He lives in a world of quotes—textual, verbal, visual, and auditory. Struggle is transitory; only art endures. “Paradoxically, he is seen at the start of the play trying to alter the course of literary destiny, ‘upgrading the plebeians and the tribunes’ and changing them into ‘conscious revolutionaries.’ When the workers ask him to upgrade their revolt and, as they see it, dignify their cause with his signature, thereby influencing their destiny, the Boss refuses” (Miles 161).

The workers ask Brecht for a written manifesto but he believes he has been writing for them all his life, only they don't know how to read (Grass 27). Only one plebeian, the Hairdresser, asks for his direct participation in the revolt, quoting *Mother Courage*, a play of his that she has seen in the past and that has influenced her own participation. This appeal works because for once the quote and the action, the reference and the revolution, his youth and his present come together joining hands. Theater can lead people to the revolution. But before they reach the exit, the actress playing Volumnia returns with news from the street and stops them: martial law has been declared. She offers pragmatic advice for the company and its theatre. While in Brecht's adaptation the Roman plebeians are victorious, on the stage of his theatre the workers' revolt collapses. The desolation resonates with the question that Brecht raised in his *Galileo* of whether a country needs heroes:

ANDREA (loudly): Unhappy the land that has no heroes!
 GALILEO: No. Unhappy the land where heroes are needed. (98)

Like the astronomer, Brecht cannot be a hero and does not think that a country needs one. In Grass's dramatization, the Hairdresser eulogizes the bleeding hero who has been wounded by police bullets when cutting down the communist flag on top of the Brandenburg Gate.

At the end of Grass's play, Brecht realizes all is in vain. Nothing has been understood as he hoped. He writes an ambiguous letter to the authorities where two paragraphs declare solidarity with the regime and the last one sympathy for the workers. After this latest, bitter compromise, he understands that to him theatre has become an end in itself. Throughout the day, he has used everything and everybody for his next production. While at the beginning of the play Brecht plans to rewrite *Coriolanus*, at

the end he feels that he is himself a Coriolanus. They both exhibit the same arrogance and express the same contempt for the plebeians. "The similarity between the two rests in small part upon the fact that both felt their work was for the people, or their homeland at least, and felt it unnecessary, even demeaning, to prove their loyalty and carry favor with those who were not bright or perceptive enough to deserve the benefits of their activities" (Pickar 215). He never contributed to a real revolution. Although he compromised in order to save his theatre, he cancels the production and leaves for the country, abandoning the empty theatre (much like his hero Galileo who at the end of that play denounces his exclusive commitment to pure science). He abandons the effort to adapt Shakespeare since events have proved that the stage cannot function as a moral institution. The defeat of the uprising has convinced him:

BOSS: ... that we can't change Shakespeare unless we change ourselves.
LITTHENNER [an assistant]: You mean we're going to drop Coriolanus?
BOSS: He has dropped us. With contempt. From this day on we'll be at cross-purposes. Where there was solid ground a few hours ago, I see gaping, grinning cracks. Only yesterday I was rich in words of vilification. Today I haven't a single one to fit him, you, or myself. —And to think we wanted to demolish him, the colossus Coriolanus. We ourselves are colossal and deserve to be demolished. (Grass 103)

Brecht will now withdraw from the city and from public art and will retreat to poetry, to pure and private art with no radical aspirations. His political idealization of art is gone, his theory bankrupt, his practice ruined. The bitter conclusion of the play brings to mind the poem "Nasty Morning" which Brecht wrote in his country house at Buckow in the summer of 1953, and was first published in 1957. The poem ends:

Last night in a dream I saw fingers pointing at me
As at a leper. They were worn with toil and
They were broken.
You don't know! I shrieked
Conscience-stricken. (*Poems* 440)

As Grass put it at the end of his speech, Brecht's hubris is that "everything turns to theatre in his hands;...everything becomes for him an aesthetic question" (xxxvi). *The Plebeians* is a play about representation in that we never see the revolt happen. It is only reported, reconstructed, re-enacted. From a literary viewpoint, *The Plebeians* is a great postmodern palimpsest pulsating with multiple linguistic registers. Its intertextual virtuosity dazzles as it stages Brecht staging Shakespeare (while drawing on Livy

and Plutarch) and it converses with revolutionary theory and modernist theatre, Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (where the stage represents itself and the initial rehearsal is also interrupted) and Peter Weiss's *Marat/Sade* (which is also about putting on a play and an uprising, and has a writer as protagonist) in Grass's work. Brecht understands theatre as an independent microcosm where he is master/ruler: the world of aesthetic autonomy where rehearsal has priority over everything else. His theatre absorbs the revolution through techniques of rehearsing. By the beginning of Act 3, Brecht has integrated the uprising in his city into his production. Theatre converts the revolution into a performance and renders it impotent. Everything happens in order to be integrated into the play, or more accurately, in order to provide material to the rehearsal. Everything is justified only by its artistic (specifically, theatrical) potential. This Brecht ends up believing that the unrehearsed life is not worth living and that all the world is a stage.²

Machiavelli, in Book I.4, "That Discord between the Plebs and the Senate of Rome made this Republic both Free and Powerful," of his *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius* (1512-17), explores how a republican government can be sustained. He praises the Roman tribunes for opposing both Coriolanus and the senate and for allowing the expression of popular discontent. Thus he finds civic conflict beneficial to republics. In the conversation on *Coriolanus* which he published in 1953, Brecht stresses that the play's opening is full of conflicts: "And great and small conflicts all thrown on the scene at once: the unrest of the starving plebeians plus the war against their neighbors the Volscians; the plebeians' hatred for Marcius, the people's enemy—plus his patriotism; the creation of the post of People's Tribune—plus Marcius's appointment to a leading role in the war" (*On Theatre* 255). Yet he is more interested in contradictions than in agonism, as Brecht is looking for ways to reconcile conflicts and bring about a unified society. Theatre pulls him in an aesthetic direction, Marxism in a moral one. In both cases, the quest for the overcoming of contradictions is the driving force. Everything, beginning with the revolution itself, must cohere; everything must be artistically harmonious and morally consistent. This approach leaves no room for the contingencies of political agonism.

But if Brecht remains trapped in the legacy of Left Idealism, what makes Grass's play larger than the drama of the committed artist is the willingness of the plebeians to believe in such an artist. Brecht may wish to homogenize *Coriolanus*, that "monument of contradictions" (Grass 5). What is far more unsettling is that the parable of the belly, which in Shakespeare teaches the fickle plebeians submission, has the very same

effect on the rebellious workers who hear it on Brecht's stage. The participants in Brecht's conversation discuss the dramaturgic question of how effective the great fable of heteronomy may be for a modern audience. Can the workers of Berlin believe the story that Menenius used in Shakespeare to defuse the insurrection? In the play by Grass, when the workers realize that Brecht is withholding his support for their struggle, they decide to hang him as well as Erwin, his dramatic adviser. It is at this point that, in order to save their lives, Erwin (Piskator) decides to use a trick of their trade and perform an excerpt from *Coriolanus*. He tells those who are about to kill the two of them the famous parable that the patrician Menenius tells the rising plebeians in the opening scene. When one day all the body's members decided to thrash the fat round belly because it was idle, the belly responded that the others cannot survive without the belly. The workers of Berlin understand that the belly is the state, admit that they depend on it, find the parable persuasive, and let the two theatre people go. Obviously, this proves Brecht right. Originally, he wanted to emend Shakespeare by eliminating the paradox so that the East Berlin audience would not be perplexed by the tragedy of the failed revolt. But Erwin has just used the Shakespeare original to reintroduce the paradox, confuse his listeners, and make them change their plans. If tragedy still works in communist Germany, Brecht concludes, the revolution has no future. Grass's tragedy shows both artists and workers trying to dissolve conflict and committing the insolence of a homogeneous, closed sphere, artistic or civic. Neither Brecht's revisionist plebeian uprising in the adaptation nor the uprising of the German workers in the streets moves beyond Act I, scene 1. Brecht departs with an utterly tragic indictment of all sides:

BOSS: Do you want me to write: I congratulate the meritorious murderers of the people. Or I congratulate the ignorant survivors of a feeble uprising. And what congratulations will reach the dead? —And I, capable of nothing but small, embarrassed words, stood on the sidelines. Masons, railroad workers, welders and cable winders remained alone. Housewives didn't hang back. Even some of the Vopos threw off their belts. They'll be court-martialed. In our camp they'll add new wings to the prisons. —And in the Western camp, too, lies will become official truths. The face of hypocrisy will rehearse a display of mourning. My farseeing eye sees national rags falling to half-mast. I can hear whole platoons of orators sucking the word 'freedom' empty. I can see the years hobbling by. And after the fatal calendar leaf has been plucked ten or eleven times, they'll take to celebrating the seventeenth with beer orgies as they celebrated the Battle of Sedan in my childhood. In the West I see a well-fed nation picnicking in the green. (108)

Both rehearsals are aborted, both experiments fail. Internal contradictions cancel both artistic and social revolution.

Since Elizabethan times, Western drama has established a long tradition of plays that deal with the tragic dilemmas of rebellion. To stay within modern theatre, the list includes Romantic works like *The Robbers* by Schiller, *Egmont* by Goethe, *The Borderers* by Wordsworth, *Marino Faliero* by Byron, and *Danton's Death* by Büchner; modernist works like *Dirty Hands* by Sartre and *The Just* by Camus; and postmodern ones like *The Balcony* by Jean Genet, *Marat/Sade* by Peter Weiss, *Occupations* by Trevor Griffiths, all the way to *The Coast of Utopia* by Tom Stoppard. When dealing with challenges of self-rule, political drama prefers the extreme situation of the revolution. By presenting politics in its most antagonistic manifestation, when rebellion may lead to destruction or foundation, theatre dramatizes the quest for civic autonomy—life in the tragic regime of explicit and self-reflective politics. Autonomy is possible when society posits itself as the source of its norms and institutes itself according to principles of self-governance. Democracy, the regime of autonomy, is the tragic regime because it renounces absolute guarantees and marked boundaries, pursues intrinsic justification and legitimization, and seeks limits to the self-instituting activity of the community in order to avoid hubris and self-destruction.

In his tragedy, Grass shows how even critical work of tremendous ingenuity can lapse into traditional humanism, how philology, despite its best intentions, may start totalizing again. No matter how scrupulous, reading does not necessarily lead to enlightenment. Edward Said invokes heroic readings "that enable many others after them" (67). Brecht's approach reminds us that there are also many hubristic readings that disable or exclude many others. Said stresses that humanism "is not about withdrawal and exclusion. Quite the reverse: its purpose is to make more things available to critical scrutiny" (22) as products of the human capacity for self-creation. In addition to receptivity to discreet texts, Said advocates "humanistic resistance" which he calls "critique" (73). Once again, Brecht's political reading shows that interpretive resistance is not enough. His commitment to critique did not extend to participatory citizenship. When the struggle for freedom knocked on the door of his theatre, he saw it as an opportunity for more critique. Instead of helping fellow citizens, he offered them interpretive involvement in theatrical pleasures. Grass shows that progressive goals and rational approaches too can commit the hubris of closure, that techniques of "trouble" (77) can turn self-absorbed, that visions of liberation can cloud readers' views.

Critical humanism may take the path of hubris or heroism. It is interesting that neither of them is the result of conscious planning. No reading can seek to become hubristic or heroic—these are ascriptions given after the fact because we do not know where either of them begins. Said argues that critics need to maintain an alert sense of responsibility to provide “that kind of finally antinomian or oppositional analysis between the space of words and their various origins and deployments in physical and social place...all of it occurring in the world, on the ground of daily life and history and hopes, and the search for knowledge and justice, and then perhaps also for liberation” (83). According to the title of his book, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, in addition to being secular and philological, criticism must ultimately be “democratic”—it must be an exercise of democratic principles and practices. Humanism and participatory citizenship should be mutually reinforcing. A critical humanism that, like tragedy, guards against interpretive and political hubris may contribute in a modestly heroic way to the emancipatory struggle and the democratic project.

The problem with critique, though, is that it is practiced as interpretive resistance because its domain is not the democracy of citizens but the republic of letters. As we know from genealogies of literature as an institution, this modern republic constitutes an autonomous cultural domain with its own discourses and mechanisms for the production of artistic value. Its residents are active consumers of literature who interpret it in diverse ways: authors interpret it by writing it, critics by reviewing it, readers by delighting in it, instructors by teaching it, scholars by researching it, directors like Brecht by staging it; but they all enjoy the aesthetic independence that only the social differentiation of arts such as literature can deliver. Those who join Brecht and Piskator on their stage are admitted into a very special community (the republic of letters) and experience an exhilarating sense of freedom (aesthetic autonomy) in freely exercising a special right (literary interpretation). What holds the community of interpreters together is the social contract of critique, namely, philology as an oppositional conduct—the belief, intrinsic to this republic, that interpretation works politically.

If the contract of the community is the freedom to critique, the collective project of the community is to rehearse, which is exactly what is happening on Brecht’s stage throughout Grass’s play. Advocates of letters unanimously and unflinchingly insist that their work is fundamentally political precisely because the constitution of their republic is by definition counter-political. Unhappy with existing politics, they maintain an alternative sphere whose denizens do not act on public issues but instead

textualize them. Dissatisfied with actual government and unable to replace it, they do not just envision a better society but enact it. Thus they rehearse in artistic terms revolution, freedom, justice, equality, and other ideals. They have no respect for current regimes or movements and do not expect them to address any major socio-political issues. That is why their orientation is utopian, prophetic, messianic, or apocalyptic, and their focus remains what is to come.

It is important here to stress that the self-understanding of the republic of letters does not distinguish between praxis and theory, doing and contemplating, politics and art. Far from being anti-political, let alone non-political, the sites of the republic provide the stage for a different politics, the uncompromising politics of difference. People of letters beg to differ and opt to defer. Public interaction in the republic is modeled not on the agora but on the theatre collective (like the collective rehearsing *Coriolanus*), the literary circle, the small magazine board, the artistic “school,” the university seminar, and other “few select circles,” to use Schiller’s vision in the concluding paragraph of the *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Mankind*. Therefore self-rule is practiced by the interpretive collective as a matter of artistic sociability, hence the aesthetic character of its autonomy. The practices of the political party, the revolutionary movement, the town hall meeting, or the workers’ council are alien to it.

During rehearsals, there are only possibilities, not positions. On Brecht’s stage, everybody is a role, not an individual. People are not supposed to retain their street or work identity since that would thwart possibilities. The rebellion can be properly rehearsed only as an act of philological reading, only as open-ended experimentation with textual variants. If all the world is a stage, all politics should be performative. Performance requires distance (from one’s person), which is why interpretation differs and rehearsal defers (the uprising). However, between the always already of texts and the not yet of rehearsals, the present has been annulled.

In the end, the critique of presence debunks as illusory the appearance of citizens in the open, indicting politics as the metaphysics of the *po is*. It rejects the idea of a public space (meeting, mobilization, demonstration, strike, revolt) where citizens can be openly present. Caught between wake and wait, the present is doomed. The archetypal member of the republic is the stranger and the foreigner (with the trials of their displaced sociality)—the German Adorno in Los Angeles, the Austrian Freud in London, the Algerian Derrida in Paris, the Palestinian Said in New York or, more generally, iconic figures like the pariah, the exile, the outcast. That is why

Said is drawn to Auerbach in Istanbul (who serves as a trope) rather than Gramsci in prison (who served a sentence). That is why we think of Said as public intellectual but not citizen. Outside the republic of letters, the interpreter feels displaced, existentially homeless. If membership to a party, a union, an association, or a movement is established on the basis of identity, belonging to a counter-political republic is a question of alterity where the comrade is replaced by the other, and the votes of the citizen by the rights of the alien. The ensuing responsibility becomes how to extend hospitality to otherness, not how to forge solidarity with immanence.

The rhetorical mode of aesthetic politics (and its artistic sociality) is irony. Like Brecht's letter to the East German authorities, interpretive resistance consciously equivocates. It certainly does not deceive itself about the brutality of the regime or its own duplicity in its preservation. It is also honest when it pledges to keep rehearsing great ideals till it gets them right. At the same time, it keeps a proud distance from any demands that present circumstances may make on its commitment, always drawing appropriately ambiguous conclusions from its dialectical considerations. Of course a letter composed from a critical distance and inviting diverse interpretations may be easily edited to support those in power. After all, they too act in the name of the people, proclaim humanistic principles, and can draw on philological methods. What is important is that the rehearsal of the future remains ironic, questioning metaphysics and resisting closure. That is why the presumed moral complexities in what Heidegger wrote about Nazism and Lukács about Stalinism continue to be scrupulously interpreted.

As Novalis knew, in an aesthetic worldview occasions are beginnings of novels, not of revolts. Throughout his life, Said remained interested in beginnings. His critique of origins continues to be important, but it is unfortunate that he did not elaborate on foundations, that is, on the beginnings of democratic polity. Political theory seems to be the missing link between his humanism and his politics: more than Said on Vico, it would have been indispensable to have Said on Machiavelli. But his political positions did not inform his interpretive practice. He had to keep his two kinds of writing apart in terms of format, style, and publication: he wrote politically about politics and counter-politically about literature. But then again nobody seems to know how to write politically about humanism since the critical function of humanism from the late eighteenth century has been to attack political positions as morally untenable.

Politics by other means may be interpretive resistance and avant-gardiste trouble but it is by definition counter-politics, failed politics, deferred politics. Democracy in another sphere may refer to professional

societies, campus committees, and reading groups but it is by definition a counter-political democracy. With these institutional limitations of philology in mind, in order to practice a democratic humanism it may be time to start our inquiry not at the self-satisfying end of critique (irony and interpretation) but at the other end, that of democracy—to start not with an oppositional performance but with a constitutional founding. What if, instead of rehearsing resistance and deferring democracy, we looked into the polity we want, the laws and institutions that may be more conducive to humanism than the present ones?

What makes *The Plebeians Rehearse the Uprising* one of the darkest modern tragedies is that, when Brecht refuses to leave the stage—his little autonomous republic—his severe reservations about the revolt unfolding in Berlin are perfectly valid, and by the end of the play they have been justified. Once again, a popular rebellion made serious mistakes that undermined it. Brecht may be choosing the rehearsal over the barricades but historically speaking he does know what is wrong with the uprising. Yet, it does not follow that philological endeavors focusing on Scene 1 of *Coriolanus* can help overcome the antinomies of revolt. If it is a great theatrical production we are pursuing, we can do worse than re-interpret Shakespeare. But if it is the overthrow of oppression that we seek, then we should revisit the legendary Spartacist revolt of January 1919 in Berlin which is constantly on Brecht's mind. In this regard, Said was wise enough not to textualize the tragic antinomies of the Palestinian struggle, and instead treated them as what they were, political issues. For example, when in 1988 the Palestinian National Council (the Palestinian Parliament in exile) declared Palestinian independence and undertook to set up a democratic government, Said, an independent member of the Council, helped draft the new constitution. In order to criticize German totalitarianism, an exiled master of philology wrote a book of close readings, blaming the Greek concept of mimesis for the Nazis. Critique can still learn from this exercise in interpretive resistance. However, those interested in the potential contribution of humanism to participatory citizenship will turn from one kind of beginnings to another—from Auerbach in Istanbul writing on literary origins to Said in Algiers contributing to political foundations.

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The paper is dedicated to Stathis Gourgouris, Edward Said's friend and mine.

Notes

¹ Shakespeare's last tragedy, his last Roman play, and most overtly political work was written probably in 1608, a year after the Midland Rising (the English peasant protests against nobles who confiscated communally held lands), and during a period of political struggle between Crown and Parliament. It used extensively a very popular translation of Plutarch's *Lives* that came out in 1579. Both the Roman Livy (59BC-AD17) and the Greek Plutarch (50-125) describe the republican experiment in Rome in 490BC and tell the story of Coriolanus, the Greek author pairing the Roman general with Alcibiades.

² Grass, according to Lore Metzger,

infused the work with a tragic perspective. He gave his play the subtitle 'A German Tragedy' (*ein deutsches Trauerspiel*), leaving it an open question whether he claimed to have written a tragedy or whether plebeians rehearsing an uprising is a tragic game Germans play. The tragic sense of inevitable suffering dawns on the protagonist only retrospectively, only after the event. Having recognized the full implications of his rehearsal of invulnerable aesthetic solutions while, concurrently, vulnerable men and women paid for their revolutionary attempt with terror, imprisonment, and death, the Boss retires from the theater world. The day's progress has called in doubt his convictions on art and moral responsibility. ...He abdicates his playcraft, like Prospero relinquishing his power of enchantment. He is not deposed but deposes himself. (141)

Grass found himself in a similar position in 1966-68 during the student uprisings. It is not an accident that in the 1970 Royal Shakespeare Company production the actor playing Brecht had a Grass mustache.

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