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Parables and Uses of a Stumbling Stone

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Abstract: Parallels are discussed between the Biblical (Jewish and then Christian) use of 'stumbling stone' and Shklovsky's thisworldly notion of estrangement – 'making the stone stony.' To Shklovsky's esthetic salvation through estranged perception, Brecht adds value criteria from salvational politics, using, for example, in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* a Marxist figuralism, which rationalizes the sensual body. However, estrangement as a formal device which doubts the present norms is ideologico-politically ambiguous: in the Brecht or Marxist wing it is 'critical,' but in other hands it may be 'mythical': Hamsun, Jünger, Pound, and the Iranian *Ta'ziyeh* play use it with a lay or religious proto-fascist horizon. The final section follows Timpanaro's insistence on biological death as not fully reducible to politics in the usual sense, and juxtaposes stumbling, death, and creative *eros* as politics. In spite of Hegel's insistence on death as a powerful negative, it is a blind spot in canonical Marxism. Even Ernst Bloch, positing hope as the central principle, does not fully engage with it, though I mention some initial useful leads from him, Brecht, and Jameson. We are left with the Freudian topology pitting *eros* against *thanatos*, and the essay closes on a discussion of Marvell's *To His Coy Mistress*.

Keywords: the Bible, Viktor Shklovsky, Bertolt Brecht, stumbling stone, estrangement, communism vs. death, Andrew Marvell

To the memory of Franco Fortini, a great poet and critic of my times,
and for my *landsmann* Sezgin Boynik, who revived my interest in the Formalists

[...] doubt wisely; in strange way
To stand inquiring right, is not to stray;
To sleep, or run wrong, is...
(John Donne)

We have to live now amidst and with the crass defeat of disalienation, in a kalpa when dominant meanings of socialism and communism have suffered an epo-

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chal, though not necessarily irreversible, death: it follows, to upgrade Dostoevsky, that if God and Communism are dead, everything is permitted. It is therefore high time to consider more fully the complex and sensitive matter of how life can (and necessarily must) live in feedback with death. I start my consideration with the use in Jewish and Christian traditions of the term and image of a stumbling stone or rock, continue with matters of estrangement in Viktor Shklovsky and especially various facets of Bertolt Brecht, and finish with the opposition of *death* and *eros*.

1 The Monotheistic Denunciation of Disbelief: Stumbling into a Trap

There is a string and filiation of references in the Jewish and then Christian tradition that uses the term and image of a stone or rock on which and because of which a person stumbles as an important, sensually retraceable and incisive, metaphor for an impediment that causes transgressive behavior – in this case, a grievous religious error – in people.[1] In the Jewish tradition this use flows principally out of Isaiah 8.14, where the Lord says to the prophet about his erring countrymen: "[The Lord of the Hosts] will become [...] a stone one strikes against; [...] a rock one stumbles over, a trap and a snare for the inhabitants of Jerusalem." Here we find already the repetition of different ways of approaching what is the central matter of concern in this section, which I will call *the vision of a powerful transcendental impediment*. The image and metaphor of *stumbling block or stone* also occurs in three other places of the *Tanakh* (Old Testament), importantly in Leviticus 19.14, where one of the Lord's commands to Moses is: "You shall not... place a stumbling block before the blind"; and further kindred forms may be found.

1 Isaiah is cited from the *New Revised Standard Version* of the Christian Bible, and checked with *Tanakh*. For all the Greek versions see Strong's Greek at *Biblehub.com* (biblehub.com/greek). The New Testament items are cited from the *Pocket Interlinear New Testament*, in one of the variants of the King James Version.

All unattributed translations in this essay are mine, at times using but modifying extant ones.

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This expression gets more complicated in the Christian New Testament in the passage in the Greek where the transgression is rendered by *skandalon*. I cannot go into all pertinent details, since this would properly need a confrontation with the original Aramean or Biblical Hebrew *mikshowl* for which I am incompetent. However, in Koine Greek *skándalon* meant first the trigger of a trap that closed down on the victim, but figuratively also an *offense*. This in a way translated well the intent of Isaiah 8.14, but it also bent it towards a doctrinal proceeding alien to it – one of conceptual abstraction not grounded in a sensual image. As taken up by the Christian tradition, *skandalon* is therefore translated either as offense or as some kind of stumbling stone, and occurs in 13 verses. Four are in the Synoptic evangelists and seem to favor the interpretation of *offense*. Of those, three – presumably the early ones – are in Matthew and one in Luke. The first is Jesus's explanation of the Parable of the Sower in Matthew 13.41, where "all the offenses and those who practice lawlessness" (Greek text: *panta ta skandala kai tous poiountas ten anomian*) will be gathered out of his kingdom and burned: the dragnet of the followers of Satan to be excluded from the Kingdom to come is thus established as both wide and vague. 'Offenses' refer to the bad seed of the parable, and thus grew into a first meaning for *skandalon* in the New Testament, signaling important doctrinal trouble, worry or vexation. In Matthew 16.23, Jesus chides Peter, even calling him Satan, and says "you are an offense to me"; similar situations occur in Matthew 18.7 and in Luke 17.1. True, one could argue that, except for Matthew 13.41, the above instances could reasonably also be translated as 'stumbling stone,' but the meaning of 'offense' seems to predominate.

However, in the nine occurrences in the Acts – six times in Paul – and Revelation, *skandalon* is often translated as 'a stumbling block,' hearkening back to Isaiah. This is clear in Paul Romans 9.32 (or 32–33 in other versions): "they [Israel, the Israelites who did not believe Christ was Messiah] stumbled at the Stone of stumbling and Rock of offense" (*to litho tos proskommatos kai petran skandalou*), where both meanings are foregrounded for emphasis (*proskomma*, stumbling, is an unambiguous synonym for *skandalon*). It is less clear but to my mind still dominant in Romans 14.13: "not to put a stumbling block to the brother [that is, in a Christian brother's way] or an offense" (*me tithenai proskomma to adelpho e skandalon*). Here, the translation has again both these terms repeated, more or less as synonyms. Romans 16.17 and Galatians 5.11 could be translated either way, as could the important passage from 1 Corinthians 1.23 that has *Ioudaiois men skandalon*: "we preach Christ crucified – truly an offense to Jews, and foolishness to Greeks" (this is often translated as 'stumbling block'). 1 Peter 2.8 reverts to Paul's and Isaiah's hendiadys: "a Stone-of-stumbling and a Rock-of-offense to those [...] stumbling at the word" (*lithos proskommatos kai petra hoi proskoptousi to logo*). Finally, in 1 John 2.10, "[there is] no *skandalon* in him [who

loves his brother]" is translated in various editions of the King James Bible as "no offense" (2nd version) and as "no occasion of stumbling" (authorized version). And in Revelation 2.14 false doctrines are blamed that "throw a stumbling block (*balein skandalon*) before the sons of Israel," repeating the image from Leviticus that clearly cannot be rendered as simply offense.

In all these references, the self-caused offense or vexation, rooted in personal bias or blameworthy 'carnal thinking' in general, is a difficult image and metaphor to sustain and render fully persuasive since it is quite abstract, while stumbling as into a snare is much more effective. *Offense* works well for those doctrinally instructed, it preaches merely to the converted. Therefore, as an alternative means or methodical image for the offense of disbelief, *skandalon* is conveyed by a stone (*lithos*) or rock (*petra*) that trips up the traveler; this consolidates into the clear and accessible image of a stumbling stone, where the validating natural object has become totally suffused with its functional quality: *pétra skandálou*. At times, the original image is employed as in the *Tanakh*, either with a parallel mention of the abstract doctrine – as in Romans 9.32 and 14.13 – or without foregrounding the moral-cum-ideological abstraction – as in Peter or Revelation. Thus, *skandalon* is either translatable as a stumbling cause or, even when it clearly means doctrinal offense or religious deviation, it carries a more or less strong association with physical stumbling over a smaller or bigger irremovable obstacle in the rocky Palestinian landscape that also gave rise to much imagery in Jesus's parables. I therefore feel entitled to focus in this essay on *skandalon* as *stumbling block*.

From the Bible, mainly from Paul, this passed in the Middle Ages into the innumerable preachings most Europeans listened to on Sundays and holidays. Differing from from theological debates, there is a good chance that what remained with most listeners was the self-explanatory and effective image of a man stumbling at a stone on the path to truth and salvation. Such an *iter vitae* as a perspicuous spatialization of any temporal life-course is probably as old as the Sapiens's passage out of the humid soils of Africa to the stony grounds of West Asia. It would have then been easy for the syntagm of "stumbling block" to become a shorthand for any impediment to belief, understanding, and finally action.

The Greek word *skandalon* passed through Latin *scandalus* to French and eventually English *scandal*. I myself much like the medieval theologians, beginning with Bede and Gregory the Great, who knew full well what *scandalus* doctrinally meant yet realistically said "It is better that a scandal arise than that truth be abandoned" (*Melius est ut scandalus oriatur quam ut veritas relinquatur*, cf. Bryan 19–20). This opened the door for all non-religious uses of this tradition.

The English word *scandal* had come to mean first of all a public damage to reputation, but secondarily also something causing surprise or shock, that is, an

action or event regarded as morally or legally wrong and causing general public outrage, or that outrage (being scandalized) and/or gossip which relates it. This is usually the stuff of yellow press or TV: a financial/political/sex scandal. However, in cognitively worthier ways it could be used to identify an offensive transgression of a given value, where the old doctrinal meanings are not so far beneath the surface. Karl Marx remembered it in bringing to a point his afterword to the second edition of *Das Kapital* in 1873, where he defined dialectics as

> a scandal and abomination to bourgeoisdom and its doctrinaire spokesmen because it includes into the positive understanding of the existing state of things at the same time also the understanding of the negation of that state, of its necessary decline; because it regards every form that came about as in fluid movement, thus also in its transient aspect; because it allows nothing to bamboozle it, and is in its essence critical and revolutionary. (28)

2 Thiswordly Salvation through Estranged Perception

2.1 Values and Religiosity

Going beyond the Christian dogmatics, which reads the stone of stumbling and the (rock of) offense as figures for the Jews' error of not recognizing Jehoshua as the Messiah, for not believing, I propose to revisit variants of the stumbling block in some uses of Viktor Shklovsky and Bertolt Brecht, where it is refunctioned to mean an impediment to thoughtless acceptance, that is, to facile, superficial, or brainwashed believing – most pertinent to the ages of capitalist mass urbanization and media saturation. To bring about stumbling as a spatial and temporal interruption and pause is a ploy that allows the reader or listener time and attention to stop and consider afresh an outrageous or at least unclichétized assertion, position, term or similar: finally, to access a new view and horizon. The epistemological horizon is here diametrically opposed to the doctrinal bias of monotheist religions. That is, instead of blaming negativity – denial, critique – as both the Judeo-Christian tradition, and as most Second and Third International stances also did, the stumbling block is here dialectically welcomed as being in this age critically and epistemologically indispensable in view of a better positivity of understanding. The understanding arrived at is in two ways better than the prior unexamined assent: in yield, by arriving at a cognitive increment, and in method, by being arrived at through the user's own effort, which leads to an intimate and informed consent. The offending stumbling block now articulates a self-made, thiswordly and autochthonous, salvation.

However, I ought to add here that beyond Shklovsky's stance of what one might call (as I will argue below) 'textual materialism' coupled with an ostentatious agnosticism about extratextual socio-political matters and values, in Brecht one can find first of all a true dialectical sublation of theological values and of some useful devices, but not only of metaphors originating in religious writings. In more apparent and even theorized ways this can be found in his close – though at times dissenting – associate Walter Benjamin. For him, the use of 'theology' seems to mean the conservation of given aspects first to be articulated in Judeo-Christian theology (since all atheist alternatives were suppressed by torture, fire and sword), but then transferred from it to the "lay illumination" ("profane Erleuchtung," GS II.1: 297) in such a manner that "nothing theological remains" – meaning, I believe, that the theological concentration on God, and in particular on God as the key to human history, is rejected.[2] Some foci of this refunctioning of religious aspects and values may be peculiar to Benjamin; a prominent example is the insistence on seeing and seizing the moment of the Messiah's arrival as interruption and an end of the whole history of sufferings so far – where I much doubt (with Max Horkheimer[3]) the religious implication that this can bring about some kind of redemption of all those wrongs and sufferings. However, I think the following fertile relationships to categories or aspects found in theology or religion apply both to him and (better digested) to Brecht, as I shall come to later:

1. First, the reason for turning to them is to speak about the absolutely necessary salvation, including the "destructive forces" it may awaken (cf. GS I.3: 1246). This 'estrangement' of Marxism by way of theological semantics was especially useful in the period of Stalinist dogmatic rigidity.

2. Second, an equally absolute and imperturbable claim is being laid upon the addressee's experiential and historical orientation, especially akin to Benjamin's 'messianic' horizon as a radical refusal of existing relations.

3. Third, these aspects are refunctioned into a lay, experimental thinking in close alliance with revolutionary horizons, the "transfer (*Überführung*) of [...] theological ways of thinking [...] into Marxist perspectives" (Scholem 259).

2 See his splendid parable of the blotting paper so full of ink that no ink remains outside it (GS I: 1235, also in "N" 7a, 7, GS V.1: 588).

3 Cf. his letter in GS II: 1332–1333.

2.2 Shklovsky's Stumbling to Refocus, or Poetry Is What Makes the Stone Stony

The fundamental and much debated essay by Shklovsky "Art as Device" ("Искусство как прием"/"Iskusstvo kak priëm") should be reread carefully, so that I will cite it first in Russian and then gloss it in my translation:

> И вот для того, чтобы вернуть ощущение жизни, почувствовать вещи, для того, чтобы делать камень каменным, существует то, что называется искусством. Целью искусства является дать ощущение вещи как видение, а не как узнавание; приемом искусства является прием "остранения" вещей и прием затрудненной формы, увеличивающий трудность и долготу восприятия, так как воспринимательный процесс в искусстве самоцелен и должен быть продлен [...]. (13)

It starts with the automatization and mechanization of people's perception of an object through custom and familiarity.[4] The object is then seen cursorily, as if by the way, through one of its traits only or in algebraic abbreviation – that is, the object does not appear in full, focused consciousness (9, 11–12). Art exists precisely

> to bring back a fuller or richer feeling of things, [...] *in order to make the stone stony*. The purpose of art is to give a perception [ощущение/*oshchushchenie*, sensation or feeling] of things as a vision, not as a recognition; its way of proceeding is the device of 'estranging' things and the device of making the form difficult (затрудненной формы/*zatrudnennoi formy*) that augments the difficulty and duration of perception [...]." (13, italics D. S.).

Since the author in fact talks only about verse but by using "art" as his ostensible subject also lays claim to general applicability, I feel justified to focus here on the phrase "poetry is what makes the stone stony." Furthermore, "the bent path, a path on which the foot feels the stones, [...] is the path of art" (*O teorii prozy* 24). How is that perception of a non-smooth path where you bump into a stone and stop because of it, where you *stumble*, brought about? It may be done by means of metaphor, or (as all verse does) of formalized rhythm, or many other devices. Shklovsky's brilliant insight is that their central common denominator, the central method or device (*priëm*) for this making – whose horizon of working

4 I shall leave aside here the – by now well-known – improvisations and exaggerations to which this hasty and meandering, though quite pioneering essay by a rather young author was prone. The structure of hasty improvisations and shock values in a 'montage of attractions,' quite clearly attuned to the World War I fragmentation of experience and failure of 'positive' causal explanations, is another variant of that Russian structure of feeling immediately after 1917 that Eisenstein was to theorize for his work in theatre and then especially movies.

artificiality re-establishes the original sense of Aristotle's *poiesis*, well rendered in the Middle English and Scottish 'maker' as translation for poet – is in modern art under high capitalism the important epistemological and propaedeutic device of *zatrudnennaia forma*. In it, "vision [...] is 'artificially' made such that perception is delayed and reaches its maximal force and duration" ("Iskusstvo kak priëm" 21). This constructs a more fully perceptible or denser world. In order to effect this, a textual – but then also pictorial, musical, etc. – form or shape is rendered perceptively (more) difficult by deviating from the expected verbal cliché and the attendant stock response in order startle the reader into wakeful and more attentive consideration of meaning and sense: "poetry is a *hindered*, *bent* speech [*rech*']" (22, italics D. S.). The deviation that disturbs the even and somnolent flow of perception is first a temporal wake-up call, but then (and most important) a call to bring back a full and fresh sense – a stumble, or an Epicurean and Lucretian swerve (*clinamen*) from the even rain of atoms.

A few years later, Shklovsky returned to his reliance on Leo Tolstoy's prose when characterizing estrangement (quite incompatible with his hasty identification of prose with automatized perception in "Iskusstvo kak priëm") to stress "the necessity of wresting things out of the series [ряд – also range, sequence] of its customary associations" (*Khod' konia* 115). He ingeniously connects it to the Enlightenment tradition of, for example, Voltaire's naïve Huron looking at European mores and causing scandal by interpreting the Bible literally, for whom Tolstoy substitutes an intelligent peasant who lacks the hegemonic – that is, upper class – reactions in front of institutions and relationships. In such an approach, things throw off their old names and shapes, the poet uses them for semantic shifts – tropes or images: "[H]e grabs a concept out of the meaningful sequence in which it had been and transfers it into another, at which point we experience a novelty, the location of the thing in another sequence." (116) Just how to understand the relationship of concept, term, and thing is left unsaid.

This argumentation of Shklovsky's is in a broad Romantic and then Modernist rebellious literary tradition that focuses on startling and reorienting the user of art away from the hegemonic certainties about what is generally acceptable (the *doxa*). As he notes in *Khod' konia*, a central aspect here would latch on to what Baudelaire, and many others with him, called 'the New' and the pursuit of the new, but this usually stressed the thematic what at the expense of the consubstantial artistic how. In the latter vein, the focus on a user's (reader's, listener's, viewer's) perception and therefore understanding was after 1917 decisively enriched by Benjamin and other 20th-century critics. I will later touch upon a few matters that follow from the image of stumbling stone in Brecht.

The problem with Shklovsky and Russian Formalists is that they found out – together with some other people in that period – the ABC of approaching literary

texts, or works of art in general; I argued this 30 years ago ("Can People Be [Re] Presented in Fiction?"). However, the alphabet has 30-odd more letters, so you go on to DEF and if you're lucky you get to KLM maybe. But if you don't begin with Formalism, you don't get anywhere but to crass ideological evaluations bound to the current moment, while if you do begin with form and then get into feedback with perception and other factors from the sociohistorical context, you have more chances to deal pertinently and richly with your material and cognitive-cum-ideological situation. Thus Shklovsky found out, as it were, a central piece in the puzzle of understanding art or poetry, which is absolutely necessary but not at all sufficient. As he famously remarked in the Preface to *O teorii prozy*: "In the theory of literature, I am concerned with researching its internal laws. To use an industrial parallel, I am not interested in the condition of the world cotton market or in the policies of the trusts, but only in the quantities of yarn and the ways of weaving." (5–6) This very interesting formulation shows that he was fully aware of the real determinants of production (here of cotton), having probably read Lenin's *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1917) or at least his German predecessors, but that he consciously forsook them for a narrower but more congenial and less mined field. To which Victor Erlich in his classical survey reasonably but inexorably objects that this procedure is a justifiable and indeed fertile one within its chosen limits, but "in the long run an untenable position [that] implied narrowing down arbitrarily the scope of literary research" (97) and cites approvingly Trotsky's scathing remark in *Literature and Revolution* that it ignores "the psychological unity of the social man who creates and who consumes what has been created" (97). Later on, Erlich remarks that "[most] Russian Formalists were too busy disengaging art from life to admit that poetry could be as potent on the cognitive and affective levels as it was on the sensory" (180).

Such a cloven hoof of Shklovsky's peeps out in a number of places, most clearly at the end of my initial long quote where he apodictically claims that "the process of reception in art is its own goal [or: an end in itself] and must be prolonged [...]." He was at that point, say 1917–1925, despairing of politics, beliefs, and history outside of art. As he explained in *Zoo, or Letters Not about Love*, art is "a world of independently existing things," not "a window on the world" (80). Nonetheless, he was a true materialist inside the production of art, thence his omnipresent equation of "word" and "thing" (*O teorii prozy* 5). However, he is a very incomplete one, so that his concept of *reception* is mechanical and primitive. He is thus still caught up in the idealist distinction between two realities – the noble world of art and the dirty everyday world of economico-political determinants. As has been pointed out ever since Leon Trotsky, Viktor M. Zhirmunsky (see Erlich 76, 222–223), and Erlich, Shklovsky lacks an understanding of how perception is intimately molded by synchronous culture or

politics in their widest senses – which for me coincide – that is, by the way people live together and understand their lives, on which for example in the same space-time Mikhail Bakhtin was focusing. A reasonable synthesis of Russian Formalist insights with such concerns yields something like Jan Mukařovský's later formulation which takes into account the intimate dialectical tension between text and context:

> Each change in the artistic structure is induced from the outside, either [...] under the immediate impact of social change, or [...] under the influence of a development in one of the parallel cultural domains, such as science, economics, politics, language, etc. The way, however, in which the given external challenge is met and the form to which it gives rise depend on the factors inherent in the artistic structure. (Qtd. in Erlich 224; cf. Mukařovský passim)

This can be economically discussed by means of the further step in Bertolt Brecht.

3 Brecht: The Estrangement Effect Is Most Intimately Political (Critical or Mythical)

> A description of confusion is not the same thing as a confused description.
> Walter Benjamin

3.1 Context

The clichétized perception of Brecht as coldly rationalist is false (see Suvin, "Brecht and Subjectivity"): to use the terms of Victor Erlich's above critique of the Formalists, Brecht's aim was to make poetry as potent on the cognitive and affective levels as it was on the sensory, thus able to participate simultaneously – though in varying degrees for varying instances – in intimate introspection and public or civic struggles. I will here, leaning heavily on his (still) best commentator and elucidator Benjamin, discuss Brecht's central and shaping stance of estrangement; I will then glance, as a *pars pro toto*, at just a few instances from his work where the stone is used as a metaphor. This cannot pretend to exhaustiveness but only to exemplarity.

As all the best artists of his generation, in the age that might be called one of Fordist or massified world wars and revolutions, Brecht shared most intimately the insight that it is absolutely necessary to cognize new matters (*nova*) also in a new way (*nove*). For Benjamin, this means a twofold yet consubstantial cognitive

and epistemological turn in understanding or cognition. As a stance (*Haltung*), it is an estranging one in order to see the present as historical – that is, to advance with Nietzsche from an antiquarian to an intervening history, here seen as deeply political. However, it is also a style or way of writing, which I would call the *emancipatory intervention in which criticism and creativity meld*.[5] To the perennial engagement of poetry (art) with spacetimes and ways of human existing beyond the reader's own – which makes it not only potentially emancipatory in Shklovsky's sense but also deeply incompatible with quasi-theological ideologies of nationalist or other dogmatic stripes – it adds the intervening politics rendered indispensable and urgent in the age of mass world slaughters and lesions.

3.2 Textual Syntax and Reference

Brecht's theatre and dramaturgy generalizes the poetic technique of *perceptive retardation* – the stopping for consideration and starting again for thematic continuity – as its omnipresent structural principle, inscribed already in the dramatic text. This is effected by frequent interruption of action by many means – an immediately obvious but not necessarily always most important example would be the interpolated songs. The stage "flow" is therefore a discontinuous one, composed of short segments as clear shapes with "a definable beginning and a definable end," each of which is framed for more or less emphatic ostension to the audience. Its main interest is "to represent conditions" of people's lives together, rather than to develop a closed-off plot for its own sake (see Benjamin GS II.2: 521–522, also 534–535). This is in Aristotle's terms a stringing together of events (*systasis pragmaton*), each of which is an episode, with the paradoxical result that there are no special segments that could be called episodes. To use a grammatical term, it is a paratactic text, "one damn thing after another," without subsumption under a final cathartic goal, tragic or comic.[6] As emotional stance,

5 Brecht was obviously not alone in his stance, though possibly one of its most consistent and self-aware practitioners; indeed, the argument could be made, as for example in Sommer (6–7, passim), that creativity and critical stance are two sides of the same coin. Weighty and preeminent instances for this can be found in many intervening critics, of whom I shall only mention Jean-Paul Sartre, Raymond Williams, Edward Said, and Fredric Jameson; Said's category of *worldliness* – materialist both in the anti-clerical sense and the pragmatic sense of being in (and having public consequences in) our common world, and clearly implies permanent self-questioning of one's own stances and insights – is brought to a head in his *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (26, 35, passim).

6 Here Brecht is of course at one with many Modernists mistrustful of fake quasi-religious harmonization, and emphatically with the Russian ones. Cf. Shklovsky: "The most vital genres in

empathy for success or failure for the protagonists – where Benjamin's test case is how should the audience relate to Nazi murderers on the stage (538) – is replaced by dosages of *critical sympathy* (a low dose means antipathy).[7]

This also means there is in Brecht's plays no suspense as to whether and how such a goal will be reached, but instead an underlying convergence towards increased clarification as to the nature and causes of the conditions uncovered and seen afresh. To the suspense of illusionistic bourgeois theatre this opposes *astonishment* at many ensuing events and the human condition they delineate. The astonished seeing afresh or anew, seeing as something not up to now suspected, is by Brecht called *Verfremdung*, estrangement,[8] a term that appropriates and translates Shklovsky's *ostranenie* with the new axiological function of making the situation(s) shown appear astonishingly inhuman and intolerable as well as made by people and, under certain conditions, changeable by them. Benjamin reads astonishment as an instance of dialectics at a standstill: "The damming of the stream of real life, the moment when its flow comes to a standstill, makes itself felt as reflux: this reflux is astonishment… [This inconstant] stream of things breaks against rock of astonishment [from which the gaze descends into it]…" (GS II.2: 531) Certainly, astonishment is correlative to a certain – to my mind variable – cognitive distance between the presentation and the audience, which Benjamin shrewdly attributes both to the "wholesale devastations of our societal order" and to their growing impact in "undermin[ing] ourselves and our capacity to remain aware of them" (522–523). The astonishment is, of course, a central epistemological stance of philosophy since Plato's Socrates; it is also a central device as well as stance of verse poetry. Furthermore, it

contemporary art are the collection of articles and the variety show, which depend for its interest on the individual components […]." (*Zoo* 81)

7 I have discussed this at some length in "Brecht and Subjectivity." It should be stressed that, from the post-Romantic condescending pity of the lower classes on (say in the Eugène Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris* so well excoriated by Marx – while the original oppositional Romantics, as Percy Shelley, Victor Hugo, or Heinrich Heine, were much tougher), there has been an unceasing and deafening drumbeat of false opposition to capitalism under the bourgeois individualistic slogan of pity or empathy substituting for and rendering unnecessary indignation and revolt. Even the much abused compassion (for example, in Martha Nussbaum's article "Compassion and Terror," cf. Ure and Frost 205) is ambiguous: does it allow for critical sympathy towards its object or doesn't it? In the first case it is sympathy, in the second an impossible empathetic identification obliterating individual differences (thus not even properly individualistic).

8 *Verfremdung* should not and cannot be translated as alienation in any valid sense (Marx's "alienation" is in German *Entfremdung*); rather, this "making it strange" or estrangement is uncovering and counteracting alienation; see the magisterial essay by Bloch "*Entfremdung, Verfremdung*: Alienation, Estrangement," which should be obligatory reading for all translators of Brecht.

is born out of interest and fosters interest, as well as the awareness of what interests are at stake here and why the reader's interests require his interest for the text: *tua res agitur*, it is your interests which are being delineated here. Finally, such a dramaturgy has "a very different kind of alliance with the passing of time" than the illusionistic one. Just as Shakespeare or the mystery plays, it "can span very extensive periods of time" (532–533), and I would add also shift rapidly through as many imaginary spaces as necessary.

Historically, estrangement was before Romanticism as a rule allowed to remain in writing and art primarily in the guise of an alienation from the Earthly City in favor of the values of the Heavenly City. The best formulation of this in medieval Christianity may be Hugh of Saint Victor's: "The man who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but that one is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign land." (*Didascalicon* 101)

It is indispensable to refer here, even in inadequate abbreviation, to Erich Auerbach's great key to readings of Dante (and beyond): the Christian *figuralism* or *prefiguration*, for in strong and collectivistic systems of explaining history, such as religious or Marxist ones, it anchors the latent interaction of two widely distant historical events – or even serially more ones – in concrete agents and situations. In Auerbach's definition, "figural interpretation establishes a link between two events or persons, the first of which signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second encompasses and fulfils the first [...] [but both are] within time, within the stream of historical life" (53). The chronologically earlier one was the figure, the later one was fulfillment, for example Noah's Ark versus Christ's message or the Church as bearers of salvation. In figuralism, "a given thing in the future justifies the present and the past, [...] appearance and substance inseparably embrace. It is the basis for any 'must be,' including a political one, and for implementing proceedings of recognition [...]." (Fortini 1674). It is the Blochian 'Aha! – now I see.' To briefly recall here my argument on Brecht's *Der Kaukasische Kreidekreis* (*Caucasian Chalk Circle*; cf. Suvin, "*The Caucasian Chalk Circle* and Marxist Figuralism"), this play's open dramaturgy, opposed to predetermined religious – and Stalinist – horizons, embodies the Marxist figuralism of a directionally oriented but open, tendentially possible, just, and redemptive history. This type of allegory retains and encourages the historicity of matters shown but inserts them within a formal process participating both of historical concreteness and utopian expectation. As Auerbach noted, it is an allegory "far more indirect, complex, and charged with history than the symbol or the myth," but its use of venerable or legendary matters is "youthful and new-born as a purposive, creative, concrete interpretation of universal history" (57). Brecht's Marxist figuralism dispenses with any super-temporal theistic solution, and uses

instead a lay, earthly and human, pluri-temporality in all its sensory differentiations. Instead of an incarnation of the Word, Brecht and his ilk start from a topological and verbal rationalization of the flesh and body, where the sensual and the visionary are not sundered.

In Marxism generally, the anticipated golden age of classless and warless society is prefigured in a long series of revolutionary and utopian endeavors in politics, arts, sciences, religions, or philosophies; in this play, the sequence from the past Persian weavers' revolt, through Azdak's paradoxical judgeship, and to the cooperative socialism of the kolkhoz framework, shares and dynamically instantiates this salvational figuralism. Within it, history does not end, so that each point reached is also the starting point for new contradictions and resolutions, subject to new estrangements. The Brechtian dramaturgy's grand sweep differs from the Medieval Christian one centrally by being directed toward a different imaginary onlooker: not God, for whom all unfamiliar events are familiar because He sees their unchanging essence, but a prefigured Man or Humanity of a blessed classless future, to whom all familiar events are unfamiliar because they contain barbarous contradictions (Benjamin's great insight that "there is no document of civilization that is not equally a document of barbarism," GS I.2: 696) and unrealized potentialities.

This Brechtian stance of making things appear strange (*Verfremdungs-Effekt* or briefly *V-Effekt*) is thus a close kin to the utopian estrangement, from Thomas More onwards. Both the traveler in utopia and later – say in Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974) – the traveler from utopia into a normal (capitalist) locus estrange what they see by their amazed eye. Such estrangement decisively deepened the Formalist perceptual insight into an encompassing political epistemic, which reposes on a value judgment against the horizon of expanding cognition, "that does not merely transmit knowledge but actually engenders it," and is eminently pleasurable, what Shklovsky would have called 'art':

> The simple fact that people can be recognized in a certain way creates a sense of triumph, and the fact, too, that they cannot be recognized completely, once and for all, that they are not easily exhaustible, that they contain and conceal so many possibilities in themselves (hence their capacity for development), is a pleasurable cognition. (Benjamin GS II.2: 528 and 30–31)

If any trope is a living contradiction and impertinence where literal everyday meanings self-destruct (cf. Ricoeur 50–51), then estrangement can turn this powerful device against the norm itself of pertinence: it is not the figure but the ground that is impertinent.

3.3 The Potent (and Bipolar) Estrangement

Still, Brecht's very term of *effect*, though rooted in the hardboiled scientific lingo of the 1920s, suggests that the end is extratextual (as opposed to the *priëm*'s Formalist focus on the intratextual). But there is much more to its feedback spiral.

I have in several writings (in chapters 3 and 13 of *Defined by a Hollow*, dealing with the *novum* and with dystopia) defined estrangement as a feedback oscillation that moves now from the author's and implied reader's norm of reality to the narrative Possible World (PW) in order to understand the plot-events, and now back from that world to the author's reality or PW_0, in order to see it afresh from the new perspective gained. It is a cognitive strategy of perception-cum-evaluation based on a radical swerve and desire. Its paratactic interruptions comport multiple possibilities of shape change as departure from salient ways of seeing the author's world, which has as its purpose the recognition that the reader's certainties are not certain but bound to strong value judgments and cognitive frameworks. A shape implies a project of intention and meaning in our lives, a *savoir vivre*, and in temporal terms a traffic between our existentially present values and long-duration ones from the remembered past or wished-for future. It is not simply an experience as singly lived, which is necessarily singular and private, "but its sense, its meaning [that] becomes public," an experience brought to a given semiotic shape and point, for example in language (Ricoeur 16, cf. 21). Disalienating projects in practical societal life and in poetry are always shapes of sensual meaning and oriented time, they strive for a formal or shapely use of life, centrally informed by freedom with poetic justice: Marx's slogan (of Biblical and utopian origin) "From each according to his capacities, to each according to her needs" is a sterling example of such justice, and so is his horizon of a realm of freedom beyond necessity of exploitation, strongly wedded to playfulness (see more on this in Suvin, "What and How Are Poets For").

Estrangement is, then, a boomerang returning to knock some sense into us, or a periscope to help us see ourselves in a different light, as the stranger of strangers or Other of the others – and often at that as the powerful Other (say a European or North American) against the powerless, humiliated, and exploited others (say the 'extracommunitarians' of Africa and Asia drowning off our shores, or inside our society together with the native proletarians). It effects in its own way a return of the repressed. It formalizes and heightens the dialectics of productive distanciation and appropriation present in any reading or viewing of an artefact (cf. Ricoeur 43) by making the work's critical distance from a given situation into the user's own stance suffused by sympathetic

emotion.[9] It is clearly akin to Marx's stance and genre of critique, to the utopian slogan 'things could be not so but radically different,' to the *novum*, as well as to the shocking recognition of beauty as a kind of estrangement-effect alerting us to aliveness: "[O]ne's daily unmindfulness of the aliveness of others is temporarily interrupted in the presence of a beautiful person, alerting us to the requirements placed on us by the aliveness of all persons, and the same may take place in the presence of a beautiful bird, mammal, fish, plant." (Scarry 90)

However, let me posit here, contrary to most commentators but in line with Shklovsky, that *estrangement* as a formal device is ideologico-politically ambiguous, so that it has two poles, the mythical and the critical one. There can very well be, and there has frequently been, an estrangement from the right, a mythical estrangement (cf. Suvin, "Brechtian or Pseudo-Brechtian," also Barthes). In a narrow view, this time "formalist" in the bad sense, "[w]hat mattered was not the direction of the [estrangement's] 'semantic shift,' but the very fact that such a shift had occurred, that a deviation from the norm had been made" (Erlich 151). What mattered was getting away from the old stifling and conservative norm that was supposed to 'realistically' or 'positivistically' reproduce life, and instead produced only its skewed illusion leading inexorably to sensationalism; what kind of new horizons and values were thereby being established remained bracketed or suspended. On one pole there is the Brechtian method,

> to proceed by fits and starts, similar to the images on a film strip [...] [that has therefore more than a little similarity to what Eisenstein called a montage of attractions, and in general to silent movie methods, such as Chaplin's, D. S.]. As a result, intervals occur which tend to destroy illusion. These intervals paralyze the audience's readiness to empathize. Their purpose is to enable the spectator to adopt a critical attitude (towards the represented behavior of the play's characters and towards the way in which this behavior is represented). (Benjamin GS II.2: 537–538)

The other pole comes to a head in fascist ideologies: surely Knut Hamsun, Ernst Jünger or Ezra Pound practiced an estrangement wedded to various protofascist myths.[10] To take a poetically pertinent example, Ezra Pound's powerful invoca-

9 I cannot discuss in this place the important consequences estrangement has for the self-consciousness of theatre art, beginning with the actors, especially the device or method of quoting certain parts of the text as it were second-hand (cf. Benjamin GS II.2: 535–536) as well as Brecht's underlying macro-model of a judgment scene.

10 Judging from second-hand reports, the Iranian *Ta'ziyeh* mystery or passion play about Imam Hussein is an officially encouraged instance of mythical estrangement, "interested in [...] the reinforcement of the religious feelings of the spectators and performers [...]. This is [...] not a theatre of alternatives but of confirmation and determination." (Wirth 34; cf. Stegmann 209–213)

tion and condemnation of *usura* in the *Pisan Cantos* is a major semantic shift or estrangement of those aspects of capitalism that the 'left' fascists were sincerely (though quite inconsequentially) spurning. However, as all such hearkening back to medieval or even supposedly tribal values of a hierarchical *Gemeinschaft*, so typical of Fascism, it is a cognitively sterile – or even actively misleading, precisely because mythical and not critical – estrangement: it does not make for a permanent critique and renewal but leads back to as dogmatic and pernicious certainties as in the most hidebound epochs, in a way worse than the conservative certainties it was rejecting.

Anthropologically speaking, the practitioner of critical estrangement is thus in the company of poets or philosophers and an ally (in however roundabout ways) of the ruled and exploited classes. She aims at cognition wherever it may take us, as long as it participates in finding out a radical *novum* in people's sociohistorical relationships. The practitioner of mythical estrangement is in the company of priests (in precapitalist social formations they were often identical). As an ally of the rulers and exploiters, he aims at catharsis as a sophisticated reaffirmation of the class status quo, as long as it reveals the hidden trans-historical and cosmic forces. Both critical and mythical estrangement start from pleasurable perception à la Shklovsky and use it against positivistic illusionism and Kantian *interesselos* aesthetics; but then they bifurcate into diametrically opposed stances and horizons.

It should be noted that my whole discussion here lacks a properly socio-political examination of the intended and the real addressee and user of art, poetry, estrangement. "Poetry is a chance for choice, a *scandal* or stumbling stone, faced with which we can stop or move on. And once we stop we can listen to its voice. And once we have listened to that voice, we can immediately forget it or get distracted." (Fortini 1279). In brief, it is one matter to digest a perceptual-cum-cognitive shock, another to pass from an understanding to effecting change: theoretically a small and almost synoptic step, practically a huge and time-consuming leap with a series of complex mediations.

4 Brecht and the Stone – Stumbling or Other

Into this general context of estrangement as a central pool of stance and method, I will now drop a few stones – some textual uses of the stone metaphor in Brecht – and see what useful ripples may ensue. Benjamin's commentary on his friend's *German War Primer* (*Deutsche Kriegsfibel*) provides the pertinent framework for all of Brecht's uses:

> The War Primer is written in 'lapidary' style. The word comes from the Latin *lapis*, stone, and describes the style which was developed for Roman inscriptions. Its most important characteristic was brevity. This was first of all due to the effort required to chisel the words in stone, and then to the realization that it is proper for one who speaks to a succession of generations to be brief (GS II.2: 563).

My first instance is from Brecht's most embattled, and today possibly most pertinent, large play *Die Heilige Johanna der Schlachthöfe* (*Saint Joan of the Slaughterhouses*), which translates the Jeanne d'Arc legend from nationalist salvation into (a failed) salvation of the working class in the slaughterhouses of "cold Chicago" – itself a most apt metonymy for our historical spacetime, which I have therefore analyzed at some length ("Salvation Now, for All Flesh!"). What is here taken over from the Judeo-Christian tradition is – just as in the religions – the implied background of spiritual blindness, the need to see a new truth with new eyes. However, this is also an omnipresent poetical theme; it runs in theatre from Oedipus through Lear to Brecht's Galileo (cf. Suvin, "Heavenly Food Denied"): a blindness or sight that thematizes and thus articulates the estrangement stance. In Brecht's play from the depths of the Great Depression it is translated into the class conflicts in the streets outside the slaughterhouses and on the stock-market. In between the huge class arrays, the eponymous heroine is a naïve girl pleading for general understanding, an amalgam of old-style humanism with contemporary 'left' Christians as well as anti-revolutionary social-democracy of the post-1917 kind, whose first literary version might be Vladimir Mayakovsky's Compromiser in *Mystery Bouffe*. Joan Dark's failure is thus seen not as tragic in the predestined and/or compensatory cathartic sense but, on the contrary, as a result of her deficient understanding and ideological illusions. In the midst of the workers' bitter lockout-cum-strike, a key messenger fails to appear, and a voice heard by Joan – transcendental and in a way divine or salvational, as in the voices of Jeanne d'Arc or in the apodictic certainties of Isaiah and Paul of Tarsus – comments: "the stone does not excuse the fallen" ("Den Gestürzten / Entschuldigt der Stein nicht," GFBA 3: 204). So much the worse for the fallen: in the original also rhythmically stumbling on the line break.

The voice is a prefiguration of the defeat and death of Joan Dark, which is inexcusable and irredeemable (cf. Suvin, "Salvation Now, for All Flesh!" 137). They leave out in the cold the hungry masses of the workers and the poor:

> Da bleiben, wie immer so auch heut
> Der steinige boden und die armen leut. (GFBA 3: 202)
>
> Today, as always, there remain
> The poor people and the stony plain.

It is also a realistic prognosis for a possible outcome of Leninist class struggle: in the circumstances of cold Chicago or Berlin, it might well stumble and fail – through a disbelief in one's own forces shared by Joan and most workers. Throughout his work, from *Baal* and *Drums in the Night* to *Life of Galileo* and *Mother Courage*, Brecht focused on a failed revolt for liberation, opting for a creative and embattled pessimism. And in the disillusioned late poem "Truth Unites" ("Die Wahrheit einigt") he referred to Lenin's exemplary stance: "Tomorrow evening / We are lost, if not…" (GFBA 15: 315).

Brecht must have thought well of the combination of the Biblical stumbling block with unforgivable failing since he used it again two decades later, when adapting Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* in analogously tense political circumstances of the early GDR at the height of the Cold War (I discuss this too at length, as a far-off parable of Stalin, in *To Brecht and Beyond* 185–207). As Brutus the tribune of plebeians says after the people's readiness to fight for their city has devastated Coriolanus:

> Der Stein hat sich bewegt. Das Volk erhebt
> Die Waffen, und die alte Erde bebt.
>
> The stone has moved. The people takes
> Up arms, and the old earth shakes.
>
> (GFBA 9: 78, adapted from Ralph Manheim's translation)

However, the allusion includes here also the tribune's immediately foregoing debate with some patricians who compared Coriolanus's immovable resolve with the firmness of the cornerstone on Capitol Hill ("Eckstein," GFBA 9: 73). The true cornerstone of a city is the people: the stumbling stone may also become, in a revolutionary revaluation of values, a cornerstone.

At this point, the abduction from the stumbling stone intersects and mingles with one from the 'cornerstone' house-building metaphor.

Just as in the former case, this goes back to the *Tanakh* and then the *New Testament*. In Isaiah 28.16, the Lord says, "See, I am laying in Zion a foundation stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation," and in Psalms 118.22 "The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone" (and I won't discuss the rather complex Greek and Hebrew synonyms behind the cornerstone). The apostles were very conscious of their new foundation but also of these bases: Luke 20.17 has Christ citing the verse from the Psalms! Building on them, Paul in Ephesians 2.20 defines Christ as the cornerstone of the Christian community. In the same vein, richer but less clear, 1 Peter 2.4–8 defines each Christian as a living stone in the communal building, and after citing both the

Tanakh passages, segues, somewhat confusingly, to the passage with the stumbling stone cited in section 1: "[A] Stone-of-stumbling and a Rock-of-offense to those [...] stumbling at the word." Most probably, as modern commentators disentangle this apparent contradiction, Peter used the stone image ambiguously but always orthodoxly: the stone is either a source of blessing and approved of, or of offense/stumbling and condemned.[11]

Brecht's hegelianizing slogan: "Truth is concrete," so that metaphors depend on the dialectics of changing historical situations, applies also to one of his deservedly most famous poems, "Legende von der Entstehung des Buches Taoteking auf dem Weg des Laotse in die Emigration" ("Legend of the Origin of the Book Tao-te-ching on Lao-tse's Road to Exile"). Its stanza 5 cites as the central insight by Lao-tse that in the long run the soft wins over the hard – with a clear suggestion this applies also to who might win the struggle between the hard rulers and the soft ruled: "That yielding water in motion / Gets the better in the end of the mighty stone. / You understand: the hard thing is defeated." (GFBA 12: 33; cf. the comment in Benjamin GS II.2: 569)

From this very limited probe, it might be inferred that "stone" represents for Brecht first of all the material reality, the final stubborn material impediments and/or cause(s). In politics, it might echo the Biblical stumbling when peoples and persons did not consider their path well; but more often it remains the basis, the poor people, the cornerstone of the city.[12] Thus Brecht played well on the inherent dialectics of Sartrean *facticité*, the sheer being there. Michael Polanyi glosses it as entailing that a problem or a person have greater depth or a deeper reality than a cobblestone, though the stone is sensually more tangible[13] – but on the other hand, I would add, the concept and image of the stone is also much less obviously ideological and more multivalent than a person; it is a piece of 'external' nature and thus ready to be used for convincing manipulation. At the same

11 Shklovsky is no slouch at Biblical echoes either. Writing about the great poet Alexander Blok, his praise is tempered by charging him with the cardinal sin of failing to let "this rock [the form], rejected by so many builders [...] serve as his cornerstone" (*A Sentimental Journey* 240) – from the context one would suppose because he put too much trust into revolutionary change. If my inference is correct, I side in this case with Blok.

12 Michael Stöppler has led me to the meritorious project *Stolpersteine* (*Stumbling Stones*, see www.stolpersteine.eu) by the artist Gunter Demnig: to keep remembrance of the Nazi victims by means of putting a brass commemorative plaque with their name and putative death on the pavement in front of all their final city addresses, in over 1000 European cities. He cites the *Talmud*: A person is forgotten when his name is forgotten. This cognitive and memorial practice was forbidden by the administration of Munich, Bavaria.

13 Cf. Michael Polanyi: *The Tacit Dimension*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967, qtd. in Grene 219–220.

time, the stone as the occasion for stumbling, or for movable (fluid) as well as immovable firmness, is a miniature metonymy for the interruption or pause that Benjamin's foundational essays identified as the central method of composition and syntax in Brecht's plays.

Marx wrote, as cited in section 1, that dialectics allows nothing to unduly overawe or bamboozle it and is quintessentially critical and revolutionary. To engage in critical cognition about events, experiences, and items (or whole areas) of our imaginary encyclopedia means to think dialectically, by being both "in the flow of things," as Brecht called it in the poem "Truth Unites," and interrupting that flow to consider it.

Not quite unrelated is that a stumble – or in its exaggerated circus version, the clown's pratfall, where the inanimate stone is replaced by human foible – is a quintessentially comic device. Brecht's dramaturgy is precisely a raising of comic *uncrowning* (as Bakhtin formulated it *à propos* of François Rabelais) to the dignity of serious or possibly tragic matters of people's destinies.

5 A Parthian Shot: Stumbling, Death, and Creative Eros as Politics

However, the final stumble in a person's life is unfortunately not in function of dialectical or any other cognition (except possibly for others) but of death. The same holds for the death of small or large communities, for example, many historical empires and other states. This underlines or bares the fact, evident for any materialist, that

> nature [...] – if you wish, the physical and then the biological level – is prior to the economico-social and cultural level. This priority is both chronological [...] and found in the conditioning that nature still exercises upon humans [...]. Thus, cognitively, a materialist [...] cannot deny or evade the element of passivity in experience: the external situation, not posed by us but imposed upon us. (Timpanaro 7–8)

Personal death is a matter of biological entropy that cannot be prevented by cognition, while community death could be prevented but the salvational cognition is hindered by structural factors. I wish here to briefly suggest how any enlightenment forthcoming from estrangement and analogous disalienating strategies might be used here and now, amid the simooms of turbocapitalist reality.

Centrally, the product of the hugely productive capitalist civilization is the production of destructive *novums*, the "undermining of the springs of all wealth: the earth and the worker" by practicing "systematic robbery of the preconditions

for life [...], of space, air, light [...]" (*Kapital* 449–450), and today we could add water, silence, health in general, etc. – in brief, life and the pursuit of happiness. As Benjamin memorably explained once and for all, death is the final horizon for a civilization of gambling, excitement, fashionable novelty – and of course of worldwide unceasing wars. It is also the end-horizon of raping the planet by wars, economic exploitation, and ecocide. This is not the easeful death each of us has a right to: it is the collective death of humanity.

Does capitalism's main historical rival, communism, fare better? This depends on what one means by the term and notion of 'communism.' As I argued at length in my essay "15 Theses," following early Marx one can postulate a polarity called Communism[1] (C1) and Communism[2] (C2). C1 is Marx's original emancipatory communism; C2 the official state communism, as it crystallized fully in the 20th-century Leninist revolutions usually ten or fifteen years after coming to power, for example in the USSR or Yugoslavia. C2, sometimes also called 'really existing socialism,' met its death in or about 1989 (ideologically much earlier). C1 – communism as poetic justice, disalienation of dehumanized humanity, or liberation of labor – is today back on the drawing table, and its revival is postulated by a wide discussion on the Left (let me only mention the works by Alain Badiou, Félix Guattari and Antonio Negri, Jean-Luc Nancy, Slavoj Žižek, Costas Douzinas, and Jodi Dean). Following the dramaturgy of estrangement, in and out of theatre, I will here focus on how estrangement correlates to Brecht's understanding of communism (C1) as the 'middle thing.' Benjamin approvingly quotes him: "Communism is not radical. It is capitalism that is radical." (GS II.2: 511) Or, as the subtitle of the great English communist utopia *News from Nowhere* by William Morris has it: communism would be an "Epoch of Rest" for martyrized mankind, licking – no doubt very actively – its deep capitalist wounds. However, while these are fine ideas and noble ideals, how can this today be used? This remains to be seen. Today this is twinned with the question: how do we face death of the body and rout of the idea? Indeed, the terms in these two last expressions have a deep inner kinship and can be permutated – we could just as well say rout of the body and death of the idea.

Alas, death has been a blind spot in canonic Marxism – even though human mortality and renewal is central to the analysis of social reproduction in *Das Kapital*, and Marx himself obsessively used the image of undead vampires sucking blood, like capitalists sucking living labour (cf. Suvin "Transubstantiation," and now the more comprehensive Neocleous 679–83). That could be proved by the absence of explicit discussion from Marx to Lenin (I can recall only a vague mention of the entropic death of the Sun in Engels's disquisitions about natural history). Surely Marx knew well *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, in the Introduction of which Hegel has a strange, impassioned paean both to the "absolute power of reason" and to its being founded on

> the monstrous power of the Negative – the energy of thought. Death, if we wish to name thus that unreality, is the most awful matter (*das Furchbarste*), and to hold death tight requires the greatest strength. [...] [But only] that life which supports death and is preserved in it, is the life of the Spirit. (29–30)

Life, or the Subject, is no power "as the positive that looks away from the negative [...], but only when it looks into the face of the Negative, tarries with it" (29–30). And in the famous discussion of master and servant, where death is "the absolute master" of both (148), self-consciousness is guaranteed (*bewährt*) only by death, as the precondition of "that negation of consciousness that *cancels* (*aufhebt*) by *conserving and carrying on* what is being canceled (*das Aufgehobene*), and thus survives its being canceled" (145). The civil life (*Sittlichkeit*) in part 6 is always shadowed by this absolute master and conditioned by it (324); the consciousness of death differentiates *Sittlichkeit* from the nature and animals. In sum, death is for Hegel either abstract negativity or the precondition for dialectical fulfillment; in the latter guise, it is also the precondition of any beauty that would not be etiolated (*kraftlos*, 29). Clearly, it was Marx's conscious choice not to pursue overtly this strand, though his writing is informed by it.

Naturally, in the storm and stress of fierce repression or armed fighting, where death was omnipresent, Marxism as the theory of the revolutionary movement had to stoically accept it as totally negative and downplay it. And an immortality of the emancipation fighters in the historical memory of their followers was a commonplace, as in all martyrologies. To stick to the depth testimony of poetry, Mayakovsky's verse on the death of Lenin, "Vladimir Ilyich Lenin" – recited in socialist countries, in suitably downsized and expurgated versions, almost every April at the anniversary of his death and frequently at other times too – runs "Lenin lived – Lenin is alive – Lenin is to live forever," and is rife with images of dead commune fighters reviving. But besides these uplifting but often (even in Mayakovsky) turgid and crypto-religious notions, there was little depth articulation about the dialectics of life and death in the whole socialist and communist epistemic tradition. True: in a way Lenin is immortal through his consequences; but so is (say) Adolf Hitler, Genghis Khan or Giordano Bruno burned for proclaiming an infinity of worlds. How are their immortalities different? What are the durations of such immortalities – surely not eternal but simply Fernand Braudel's 'long duration,' that is some centuries or millennia (itself not an indifferent alternative)? And so on. Many elements in this, as I call it, resurrectionary syndrome lead one to recall Marx's quip on the false resurrection of Bonapartism: 'first as a tragedy, then as a farce.'[14]

For thousands of years, churches have always used death as the supreme transcendental stick to inculcate fear into its sheep: in this endeavor they never

stumbled. Lately, medicine has reduced it to a matter of value-free (but not monetarily free!) technology and quantity. We see today that capitalism in its own sick way also invokes and monetarizes death in our omnipresent shoddy glut of ghoulish zombies and assorted vampires or lycanthropes in reality and in mystified mass media, in the fake apocalyptics masking the real danger. It may be understandable but it is astonishing that the mass radical alternatives to capitalism seem not to have delved into the concept of death. However, the influence of Marxism can be seen in some precursors such as Edgar Morin, who identifies in this peculiar concept and stance, simultaneously most biological and most acculturated – that differentiates Homo sapiens from all other animals and is strictly intertwined with human self-consciousness – two great narrations: survival and rebirth. And it then emerges more strongly in neo-Marxists such as Fredric Jameson, Ernst Bloch, as well as Brecht.[15] In particular, I find two stepping stones to serious discussion: first, in Fredric Jameson's comments on Bloch (*Marxism and Form* 143–144) and his essay on the great Andrei Platonov, "Utopia, Modernism, and Death," especially the passage on the "essential relationship" between utopia and death (*The Seeds of Time* 122–123); second, in some astounding notes by Brecht, say the one in his *Buch der Wendungen* (*Book of Twists and Turns*) that yet again employs the stone, and segues onto the great stone in the sky, the Moon:

14 Following Brecht's 1931 proposal in one of the little *Geschichten vom Herrn Keuner* (*Stories of Mr. Keuner*) that "we" (Marxists, communists) should compile, "in the interests of propaganda, a list of problems we consider quite unsolved," I would propose that the cognitions of and in Marxism be divided into, say, three groups: a) what Marxism claims to know (with reasonable certainty, sufficient as guide for action until revised); b) what Marxism does not know (whether the bulk of its practitioners is conscious of that or not); and c) what Marxism is not interested in knowing (in this kalpa; and in the cases that might become of interest in the blue distances of future, this may no longer be Marxism but some sublating successor). As long as something like this is not heeded, any Marxist or communist group remains a religious church.

15 One might have expected to find a weighty contribution to this matter in Ernst Bloch, since he has often come back to death and mortality as indispensable for understanding utopia/nism. However, it seems that the three somewhat longer discussions on death I was able to find all contain valuable aperçus and seeds, and Bloch's horizon of robbing death of its sting (*Das Prinzip Hoffnung* 1384–1391) is the proper one; yet this particular seed in his opus never fully sprouted. The other two are the closing essay of the 1923 edition of *Geist der Utopie*, "Karl Marx, der Tod und die Apokalypse" ("Marx, Death, and the Apocalypse"), done at the wrong time of what one must sorrowfully call his immature 'revolutionary gnosticism'; and a recorded 1964 conversation with Adorno, "Something's Missing" (the title *Etwas fehlt* is from Brecht's *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*/*Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*). Cf. further also Boer and a good overview of important French discussions since Morin and Philippe Ariès in Bourguière. A dissent from full Hegelian recuperation of the negative into the subject's activity is well argued in Timpanaro, on the traces of Leopardi's poetry.

> And I saw that nothing at all was quite dead, not even what had died (*das Gestorbene*). The dead stones breathe. They change and give rise to changes. Even the supposedly dead Moon moves. It shines onto Earth, even if with light from strangers, and determines the trajectory of falling bodies and causes high and low tide for sea water. […] [Thus] we have to treat it as a dead undeadness (*ein totes nichttotes*), yet more like dead, in some respects as what has died, in this respect totally and irrevocably dead, but not in every respect. (GFBA 16: 73–74)

It follows that the whole semantic thesaurus of contraries and contradictories to 'normal life,' together with the third dimension of their temporal vectors (for example Bloch's "not-yet-living," *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* 1390), should be reopened for consideration. For example: is communism in a state of abortion – hibernation – paralysis – lethargy – or what? Or should we take a leaf from the animal or vegetable life and explore transformations such as from larva to butterfly? Transformation means the literal change of form or shape, and is thus squarely within the tradition of overcoming or using the stumbling-block to affirm a form, that is the matter of and in this essay.

I will mention just a few indications that might help in such a consideration. First, like all terms that have a semantic history, the connotations (possibly also some core elements) of death have changed in our age of mass technologized slaughters in wars and concentration camps, and the liquidation of no longer necessary laborers by starvation and bombs – from Verdun through Auschwitz, Kolyma, and Hiroshima to the present destruction of West Asia. Second, literature and the arts are full of representations of death, from the innumerable *pietàs* to the particularly pertinent opuses of Tolstoy, Brecht, and onward, and my very cursory glance at Mayakovsky already shows that much is to be learned from them. It is also frequently concerned with a lay transcendence of death – the theme of *non omnis moriar* (not all of me shall die, I shall not be wholly dead), referring to posthumous fame through works, is older than this formulation by Horace. Third, I would posit with Fortini "that the degree of a society's health can be measured also by the institutional modes in which it frames its own negation […] the cemetery, the madhouse, the hospital, and the prison […]" (1316). Fourth, any use value to be found in death can only arise from understanding what it interrupts – the modes and qualities of life it seemingly puts an end to and certainly quite radically redefines – and what that means not only for bodies personal but also for the body politic and all its classes and collectives.

I argued in "Death into Life" that only use values can stand up to capitalist unequal exchange, rightly called vampiric by Marx. This holds in spades for the present economy, predominantly reposing on what is often called brain labor. Ancient designations for these use values were compassion, indignation, and love: that is, today, communism and poetry. We need to realize that there is no (good and durable) poetry without communism, and no (good and durable)

communism without poetry. Poetry and communism allow no *a priori* rules, only a poetics of looking backward and forward, lessons from experience. They are projects – which translates into Greek as problems. All poets know this, often in fantastic metamorphoses; few communists have allowed their suspicion to flower. When sundered, what we get are caricatures which degrade the potential horizon of either. Both poetry and communism choose the passage from the capitalist point-like time, extending maximally to this year's profits, to a long duration of solidarity, where, as Fortini cites Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "disorder would be less fatal, and death less senseless" (1458). In particular, poetry's horizon is both political and also as it were cosmological, for it deals with human resistance to death by means of a systematic project, a self-education of which all artworks are exemplars (1454–1460).

Thus, what might be the antidotes to defeat and death? Almost all of Brecht's protagonists meet this fate (the weightiest exception being *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, at the exhilarating moment of anti-fascist victory that embodies also his most sophisticated proposal for plebeian continuation of life; cf. Suvin, "*The Caucasian Chalk Circle* and Marxist Figuralism"). How are we to avoid the tragic closure, with its swerve, as near as no matter, into religion? Brecht's answer is usually that what matters is that the audience or reader learn from the negative by contraries. The fictive staging of death (cf. Oberstar) – in his earlier plays often a clownish play to avoid real death – is a kind of antidote or *pharmakon*. Nonetheless, the weighty fact remains that the final stumble in a person's life is in function of death. As Shakespeare had inscribed on his grave-stone, "Bleste be the man that spares thes stones / And curst be he that moves my bones," or, in the much better verse of perhaps my favorite poem, Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress," "The grave's a fine and private place, / But none, I think, do there embrace." This might be well-earned oblivion, leading to the peace of Nirvana. But as Brecht somewhere remarks, the use value of death is surprisingly small. Mankind meets what Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno fulgurantly called "the toughest anti-utopia of death" ("Something's Missing" 9) with the radical utopia of immortality: thus religious Daoism fantasizes a value for its chosen immortals who float down on a pink cloud to help the deserving (cf. Suvin, "The Use Value of Dying").

By contraries to death, the argument of much art and practical hedonism is to seize and overcome time by intensity of feeling and perception (rather than by overarching historiosophic schemes such as prefiguration). Traditionally, a privileged path to such suspension and indeed carnal redemption of time's flow or flight is erotics; I believe the best among many Freudian topologies is the one that pits *eros* against *thanatos*. Thus I will make a swerve from the hardest – stone and failure – to the softest – erotic love and success – and, as in Brecht's "Lao-tse,"

the soft eventually wins. I will therefore use Marvell's poem for a brief sounding of the theme of eros and death, enmeshed most intimately with and in time:

> Had we but world enough and time,
> This coyness, lady, were no crime.
> [...]
> My vegetable love should grow
> Vaster than empires and more slow;
> [...]
> But at my back I always hear
> Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near;
> And yonder all before us lie
> Deserts of vast eternity.

No doubt, this is thematically a long drawn-out and most embellished plea for a roll in the hay, as against the alternative and bugaboo of death; the immeasurable and stupefying Saharan sterility condensed in "[d]eserts of vast eternity" makes in turn more poignant the ominous sweep of "[t]ime's wingèd chariot hurrying near." Slowness of erotic wooing, in hyperbole a "vegetable love [...] vaster than empires and more slow," is theoretically conceded as possibly pleasing because commensurable to the lady's and the lover's worth, but is really no option. What remains is a kind of mixture of micro-Machiavellian cunning and strength with the "sweetness" of "our pleasures."

The poem's horizon is surprisingly and pleasantly Anacreontic and atheist for a fellow-traveler of Puritans. "Now therefore," it ends,

> Let us roll all our strength and all
> Our sweetness up into one ball,
> And tear our pleasures with rough strife
> Through the iron gates of life:
> Thus, though we cannot make our sun
> Stand still, yet we will make him run.

The sun running cannot possibly mean time passing too fast for the lovers, but on the contrary time being crammed full of their rough and sweet amorous experiences. It should be remembered this includes the 'little death(s)' of orgasm(s), which are the antipode and in a way the antidote to biological death because they are not only a supreme pleasure but also obviously non-final as well as procreating life. Almost two centuries later, the young Percy Shelley in his Oxford lab will remember this materialist underground current of an immortality achieved by cramming every moment full with events and feelings.

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