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*Correcting traditions and inventing history:
the manipulation of mythology and of the past in the
Nibelungen-literature of the 19th and 20th centuries*

Summary. This contribution analyses several relevant rewrites of the Nibelungen legend in order to point out the narrative strategies deployed by different authors to establish a relationship between the traditional plot (or, rather, plots), which were handed down through centuries by oral transmission and Medieval sources, and a concrete historical context. The Medieval written versions of the legend – both the Old Norse and the German ones – show little or, in fact, no interest in the historical setting of the narrative and do not seem to pursue any reliable or chronological consistency. The modern re-writers, on the contrary, have often set the action in specific historical contexts, a choice of setting which is usually strictly connected to the author's artistic, cultural and ideological agenda.

To this end, I have singled out texts which, in my opinion, reflect important changes in mentality and culture, without belabouring the variances in their literary worth: first of all, I took into account some rewrites which belong to the German 19th century (Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué, Ernst Raupach, Friedrich Hebbel and Felix Dahn); then Ibsen's theatrical rewrite of the *Völsunga saga*; the fantasy novels by the contemporary new-heathen writers Stephan Grundy and Diana L. Paxson; and, finally, the iconoclastic theatrical pastiches of the playwrights Heiner Müller and Volker Braun, whose works are deeply rooted in the experience of the German Democratic Republic.

1. *The nationalization of the Nibelungen legend*

The Medieval narratives which transmit the Nibelungen legend do not show any conspicuous interest in the historical embedding of their matter, nor do they thematize in any explicit way the relationship between the act of rewriting the traditional, inherited tale and the historical context in which the rewriting took place. The German *Nibelungenlied* depicts – in the same way as the contemporary courtly romances do – an abstract feudal milieu, projecting a way of life and social conventions of the late 12th century back onto the screen of an unhistorical past. Just as the author of the *Nibelungenlied* assimilates his matter – at least in part – into the descriptive patterns of the courtly romance, so do the authors of the Norse versions fit the legend to the literary system of Medieval Iceland, reshaping it in the form of a heroic lay

or a heroic-legendary saga.¹ In no case do the Medieval re-tellers of the Nibelungen legend seek to match the traditional narrative with the information supplied by historiography, nor do they show any awareness of the historical conditions which first gave birth to the story of Siegfried's death and the massacre of the Burgundians.

This lack of interest in the "real" historical setting of the Nibelungen narrative is shared by the first remarkable modern rewrite of the legend, the dramatic trilogy *Der Held des Nordens* ('The Hero of the North') published by the German romantic poet Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué from 1808 to 1810.² As a matter of fact, Fouqué was urged to his undertaking by a compelling passion for history and politics, but his interest concerned his own time and his own country. What he aimed to do was to bring to life again the supposed virtues of the ancient Germanic heroes, awakening through their example the pride and national self-consciousness of the Germans in their struggle against Napoleon and for the building of a modern state. To this purpose, the traditional narrative about the Nibelungs had to work as a foundation myth of the new national community. There was, therefore, no need to reshape the legend in a radical manner or to set it in a specific historical context, whereas it was necessary to choose the most "authentic" and effective of its versions – the Norse ones, according to Fouqué and to most romantic writers of his age – and to recreate it into modern poetry, in order to make it appealing to a large audience of modern readers.

The first significant rewrite of the Nibelungen legend to introduce vague historical references into the plot is the drama *Der Nibelungenhort* ('The Treasure of the Nibelungs') by the German playwright Ernst Raupach, an author almost totally neglected now but very popular in the first-half of the 19th century.³ The drama, staged for the first time in 1828 and published in 1834, is a patchwork of narrative material taken from diverse medieval sources of the legend. Relevant to our discussion is the fact that Raupach – expanding allusions already contained in the sources – makes the opposition Christian vs. Heathen the major theme of the narration. The setting of the action is,

¹ I refer in particular to the heroic lays of the *Poetic Edda* dealing with the Nibelungen matter and to their prose adaptation in the *Völsunga saga*. More complex is the question about the version contained in the *Þiðreks saga af Bern*, both with regard to the strategies of rewriting the traditional narrative and the collocation in the tradition itself.

² de la Motte Fouqué [1808-1810 (1996)]. See also the studies on Fouqué's work, and in particular on his rewrite of the Nibelungen matter: Lorenz (1994); Schmidt (2000); Stockinger (2000); Ferrari (2004).

³ Raupach (1834). On Raupach's drama see the sarcastic remarks of Heinrich Heine [Heine 1833-1834 (1979: 225)] and the recent biographical contribution in Rosch (2002).

therefore, identified with the historical scene of the fight between Huns and Burgundians in the 5th century. In this way, Raupach's Etzel (Attila) is neither a wise and generous Monarch, as in the *Nibelungenlied*, nor the abstract model of a wicked, greedy king, as is Atli in the Old Norse lays of the *Edda*. Instead, in keeping with history, he is the barbarian leader of a coalition of peoples which he has won and subjugated: this explains why his death, at the end of the play, is celebrated by the Gothic king Dietrich (Theoderic) as the liberation of the Germanic, Christian peoples from the wild and cruel scourge of the nations.⁴

This first step towards a historicization of the Nibelungen matter is still very cautious and discreet, but it marks the beginning of a practice that has proved to be one of the most relevant strategies of rewriting the legend. In order to confer a new meaning and a new effect upon the old narrative, its re-tellers very often do not confine themselves to redefining the characters and to reshaping the structure of the tale; instead, they place the plot into a specific historical frame, extracting from the archive of memory the set which best fits their purpose. In this way, the Nibelungen legend becomes the bridge or the conductor which makes possible "der Tigersprung ins Vergangene" – as Walter Benjamin said⁵ – that spreads a new light on the present. Even if Benjamin's reflection concerned primarily the self-consciousness of the working class, this movement backwards in search of a pregnant historical moment which foreshadows, announces or founds the present is not an exclusive prerogative of the revolutionary forces. On the contrary, every social, national, cultural or political group, even the most reactionary, may use history – as actually happened with the Nazis – as a catalyst for emotive reactions and identification processes. For this purpose the Nibelungen matter is particularly suitable: historical figures (Attila, Theoderic, the Burgundians, etc.) appear as important actors in the Medieval sources, but, on the other hand, they are completely abstracted from the concrete historical conditions in which they originally operated. This gives modern re-tellers the possibility not only to represent history according to their main interests and intents, but even to *create* history, manipulating and altering the chain of events and, in some cases, changing the very setting of the dramatic action. Such flexibility in content has made possible the long sequence of rewrites, and the transformation of this whole tradition into a narrative frame where different and contradictory ideologies, projects and

⁴ On Attila's figure in Medieval narratives see Williams (1981).

⁵"The tiger jump into the past" [Benjamin 1940 (1974: 701)]. With regard to Benjamin's vision of history see, in particular, Löwy (2001).

discourses compete against each other in a struggle for self-assertion and hegemony.

It is impossible, of course, to analyse on this occasion the whole, vast multitude of the Nibelungen rewrites, even if we should confine our discussion to those rewrites which carry out strategies of historicization.⁶ I'll try, therefore, to single out some of these strategies and the texts which best illustrate them. First of all, I think it's important to highlight how Raupach's neglected and despised play cleared the way to the much better known and appreciated dramatic trilogy of Friedrich Hebbel, *Die Nibelungen*.⁷ As Raupach does, Hebbel sets the action in the age of the conversion of the Germanic peoples to Christianity. His reshaping of the tale is, however, much subtler and more complicated than Raupach's: on the one hand, he stages an abstract "age of conversion", an epoch during which all Germanic peoples – Germans, Anglo-Saxons, Scandinavians – simultaneously embrace the new faith; on the other hand, he intertwines myth and history (or perhaps, more correctly, philosophy of history) in an inextricable way. His Siegfried and his Brunhild are creatures of the myth: Brunhild, in particular, is alluded to as an offspring of the Norse Gods. The interaction and the encounter of mythical and human beings must eventually lead to the tragic conclusion, but this very conclusion – as happened in Raupach's play – marks the beginning of a new time. The last words of the drama are again Theoderic's, and they announce the overcoming of a new phase of history: a human and Christian one.

I find it worthy to note that this expanded vision, from Raupach's narrow, nationalistic and conservative point of view to Hebbel's broad historical and philosophical one, is reversed again after only one-and-a-half decades by a very popular imitator of Hebbel who was also an enthusiastic nationalist and an admirer of Bismarck, Felix Dahn, whose play *Markgraf Rüdiger von Bechelaren* ('Margrave Rüdiger of Bechelaren') was published in 1875.⁸ Even more than in Raupach's and Hebbel's dramas, Theoderic is here the triumphant hero at the end of the play; moreover, he is the real motor of the plot. His aim is to liberate the Germanic peoples from Attila's yoke and, at the same time, to revenge Siegfried; thus, he is perfectly aware of Kriemhild's murderous intentions, but he plays Kriemhild off against Hagen in order to bring them both to the tragic final result. Even though the Burgundians are to be blamed for having treacherously killed Siegfried, their fight against the

⁶ For a complete outlook on the rewrites of the Nibelungen matter see Gentry / McConnell / Müller / Wunderlich (2002).

⁷ Hebbel [1862 (1964)]. On Hebbel's trilogy see de Boor (1966) and Glaser (1991).

⁸ Dahn (1875).

Huns displays the enormous superiority of the Germanic soul and the intrinsic cowardice of the oriental peoples of the steppe. At the end of Hebbel's drama, Theoderic inherited Attila's power and took upon himself the responsibility of a universal reign "im Namen dessen, der am Kreuz erblich";⁹ at the end of Dahn's drama, Theoderic does the same thing "für der Germanen Volk".¹⁰ Here, then, a new historical phase opens, one which, however, doesn't concern the whole of mankind, but only the part of it which speaks a Germanic language.

2. *Saga, history and drama: Henrik Ibsen's rewrite*

In spite of the huge differences in their structure and literary quality, Raupach, Hebbel and Dahn form a chain of rewrites: adopting similar strategies in order to combine some traditional elements of the Nibelungen legend into a new text; setting it at the same time in the historical context of Late Antiquity. A totally different strategy is adopted by Henrik Ibsen in his drama *Hærmændene på Helgeland* ('The Warriors in Helgeland') of 1858.¹¹ Ibsen's narrative also depicts an age of transition, but in this case the setting is Norway in the time of the foundation of the kingdom and of the conversion to Christianity. Already at the very beginning of the play, the first stage direction informs us: "Handlingen foregår i Erik Blodøkses tid",¹² that is to say in the years 931-933, a historical setting that is later confirmed by the references to the reign of king Aethelstan in England. But Ibsen doesn't confine himself to setting the action in a specific, crucial time in the history of Norway; instead, he tries to bring to life the "saga time" of the Norse past and to display it on stage. To fully understand Ibsen's operation, we have to take into consideration one of his – relatively – few theoretical writings: *Om kjæmpevisen og dens betydning for kunstpoesien* ('On heroic ballad and its meaning for poetry').¹³ In this contribution, written and published in 1857, just one year before he wrote *Hærmændene på Helgeland*, Ibsen maintains the necessity of making use of the traditional ballads and narratives to create a new literature able to appeal to the people of his time, and he discusses the means to realize this project. In his opinion, both Icelandic sagas and Norwegian ballads belong to the literary heritage of the Norwegians and express

⁹"in the name of the One, who turned pale on the cross" [Hebbel 1862 (1964: 319)].

¹⁰"for the sake of the Germanic people" [Dahn (1875: 160)].

¹¹ Ibsen [1858 (1898)]. This reference edition of the drama is now available on-line: <http://runeberg.org/ibsen/2/>. On this drama and, more in general, on Ibsen's historical dramas, see Lynner (1909); Bø (1997) and Aarseth (1997).

¹²"The action takes place in the time of Erik Bloodaxe" [Ibsen 1858 (1898: 3)].

¹³ Ibsen [1857 (1930)].

the intimate essence of their soul, but the structure of the ballad makes it much more suitable than the saga for dramatization. Ibsen, therefore, judges in quite an ambiguous way the attempts made by his predecessors to rewrite sagas into dramas, particularly by the influential Danish poet Oehlenschläger. As a matter of fact, Ibsen emphasizes the difficulties that the peculiar structure and style of Icelandic sagas pose for a theatrical rewriting; in spite of this, he glimpses the possibility of working on the language to overcome such difficulties. According to Ibsen, it is necessary to add some lyricism to the saga in order to make a drama out of it, but on the other hand, one has to make use of a prose very near to the saga-style to compensate the loss of plasticity that the introduction of lyric elements in the matter involves.

I think it quite likely that, after this theoretical reflection, Ibsen felt tempted to measure himself against the difficult task he had described in his essay. What is quite surprising, however, is that Ibsen picked out a legendary pattern instead of a historical narrative as the main hypotext for his theatrical rewrite. Apparently, he recognized in the Medieval narrative about the *Volungs* some motifs – or, rather, a constellation of motifs – which kept on fascinating him for the whole of his life: the unfaithfulness toward a true and deep love and the consequences of such unfaithfulness; the contrast between a mild and submissive woman and a wild, aggressive one; and above all, perhaps, the rebellion of a strong and restless woman against the rules imposed by a conservative, male-dominated society. Ibsen, therefore, took over the *Nibelungen* legend, manipulated it thoroughly and made a family saga out of it: there are no princesses and no kings in his version, no dragons and no dwarfs. His heroes and heroines are realistic figures taken from the inventory of the Icelandic sagas: Gunnar is a *hersir* in Norway; Sigurd is his foster-brother, a sea-king and a liegeman of King Aethelstan of England; Brunhild and Gudrun are renamed Hjordis and Dagny, and they are respectively the foster-daughter and the daughter of an Icelandic *landnámamaðr*, the old and wise Ørnulf. Sigurd doesn't have to pass through a wall of fire to awaken Hjordis from an enchanted sleep; he has instead to kill bare-handed a huge white bear to win her admiration, and he does so disguised, in the service of Gunnar, even if he is in love with Hjordis, because he believes that she doesn't really love him but his foster-brother. All these characters speak like the heroes of the realistic sagas, in a sober and often laconic, elliptical prose. Ibsen even inserts some stanzas in the prose of the play, recreating somehow the alternation of prose and poetry typical of so many sagas. Moreover, in order to create such an unprecedented thing as a “theatrical saga”, Ibsen integrates into his main hypotext episodes, quotations and refer-

ences taken from other sagas and Old Norse texts: *Laxdæla saga*, *Njáls saga* and *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* above all, but also *Friðþjófs saga Frækna*, *Hávamál* and perhaps *Örvar Odds saga*. In the fourth act, he even inserts a whole episode in which Ørnulf, distressed after the death of all his sons, recovers his strength and vitality after having composed a funeral poem in honour of the dead: a rewrite of Egill Skallagrímsson's *Sonatorrek* is thus performed on the stage, in the frame of the rewrite of *Völsunga saga*.¹⁴ In his 1857 essay, Ibsen had denied any difference between the fictional world of the sagas and the extra-textual world of history: "enhver Periode afspeiler sig for Efterslægten alt efter Beskaffenheden af de Overleveringer, hvorigjennem den bliver bekjendt."¹⁵ With his *Hærmændene på Helgeland*, thus, he displays on the stage a vision of the national past of Norway made up of different literary motifs and fragments. In this staging, Hjørdis acts and speaks not only like so many frightening and inscrutable heroines of the Norse past, but even as an ancestor and a foreshadowing of the modern, restless and unhappy Hedda Gabler. This strategy of de-mythicization and, at the same time, of psychological interpretation contrasts the final scene of the drama: after Hjørdis' death, her son Egil sees his mother riding on a black horse in the sky, towards Odin's Walhalla.¹⁶ This re-emergence of the myth seems to question Ibsen's strategy of rewriting, but this is true only at a very superficial level of analysis. In fact, Hjørdis' apparition at the end of the play not only confers an eerie greatness to her life and death, but also enhances the audience's identification with the cultural and religious representations of the Norwegians before Christianization.

3. *Historicization and re-mythicizing: new-heathen literary rewrites*

If we now turn our attention to our own time period, we can identify at least two widely diverging rewriting strategies of the Nibelungen legend which are of particular interest to our discussion. On the one hand, we see a strong and unexpected tendency towards historicization of the ancient narrative taking place in the probably least realistic of all literary genres, modern *fantasy*. On the other hand, in the last decades some German playwrights have taken up the Nibelungen matter and have reshaped it in a paradoxical and grotesque way, using anachronism itself in order to emphasize misery, self-deception and contradictions in the history of Germany.

¹⁴ Ibsen [1858 (1898: 100-102)].

¹⁵ "Every epoch is mirrored and transmitted to posterity according to the character of the documents through which it is known" [Ibsen 1857 (1930: 136)].

¹⁶ Ibsen [1858 (1898: 113)].

Both Stephan Grundy's novel *Rhinegold* (first published in 1994) and Diana L. Paxson's trilogy *Wodan's Children* (published from 1993 to 1996) retell the Nibelungen legend by setting it in the context of the 5th century, thus depicting the collision of the Germanic and of the Roman worlds, the short-lived power of Attila and the triumph of Christianity over the old traditional heathenism.¹⁷ As a matter of fact, Raupach, Hebbel and Dahn did the same in their plays, but Stephan Grundy and Diana L. Paxson make use of all the devices of the historical novel to outline a broad and accurate description of Germanic life during the late antiquity. They introduce into the plot references to historical figures like Aetius, King Theoderid of the Visigoths, Emperor Valentinian III and so on. Diana L. Paxson goes so far as to replace the character of Theoderic with his father Thiudimir in order to restore the consistency of chronology violated in the Medieval sources. Furthermore, both writers exhibit a vast knowledge of the civilization of the ancient Germanic peoples and of their religion, and both take pains to add a glossary and some bibliographic references to their books. In spite of all this, Grundy's and Paxson's novels are *not* historical novels because of the active role played in the plot by various gods and by witchcraft. It's just this mixture of historical accuracy, descriptive realism and fantasy that determines the originality of these rewrites: the gods act on the level of history and, even if men can't change the stream of fate, they can at least influence the course of events by controlling natural and supernatural forces through magic. The myth is thus embedded in history; in fact, it is its hidden face and its invisible motor. This reconsideration of the mutual relationship between myth and history is not, of course, without purpose. Both Stephan Grundy and Diana L. Paxson are indeed prominent members of the new-heathenism: Stephen Grundy has written a handbook for the practising of Norse religion¹⁸ and Diana L. Paxson declares herself to be a *gythja*, a priestess of the Old Norse Gods and a practitioner of oracular *seiðr*. Their novels, therefore, are not merely amazing successions of heroic and bloody deeds, as Sword and Sorcery novels usually are; instead, they aim at spreading knowledge about the old heathen religion of the North, at presenting the gods in action and at supplying a sort of pagan theodicy, explaining and justifying the conduct of the gods and their – temporary – withdrawing from the history of men. The myth recovers in this way its original function, founding the religious experience of a new, scattered heathen community and giving form to it. The novels are thus, at the same time, effective tools of religious propaganda and guide-books to the

¹⁷ Grundy (1994); Paxson (1993); Paxson (1995); Paxson (1996). On the new-heathenism see Blain (2002).

¹⁸ He published his handbook under the pseudonym Kveldulf Gundarson [Gundarson (1993)].

supposed, reconstructed cultural world, beliefs and practices of the ancient Germanic peoples.

4. *Through tradition against tradition: Heiner Müller's and Volker Braun's rewrites of the Nibelungen legend*

A totally different rewriting strategy was adopted, as mentioned above, by some German writers and playwrights who lived and worked in the German Democratic Republic and who actively took part in the cultural and political debates of the post-Stalinist era. For the sake of brevity, I'll confine myself to a succinct analysis of three works which I consider particularly relevant to our discussion: Volker Braun's *Siegfried Frauenprotokolle Deutscher Furor* ('Siegfried The Women's Minutes German Rage') and Heiner Müller's two "Germania"-plays: *Germania Tod in Berlin* ('Germania Death in Berlin') and *Germania 3 Gespenster am toten Mann* ('Germania 3 Ghosts at Deadman').¹⁹ Although there are evident differences among these three plays, they also reveal important similarities concerning the way in which the two writers use the Nibelungen legend in order to lead the audience to ponder over the historical development of German society. From this point of view, we can assert that both Braun and Müller put into effect a strategy which is directly opposite to that of most authors of the 19th century. Fouqué, Raupach, Hebbel, Dahn manipulated the traditional narratives and rewrote the Medieval sources with the purpose of eliminating obscurities and contradictions, of extrapolating their concealed meaning, and of preserving in compact, coherent texts what they considered the most authentic expression of the German soul. In this way they contributed to turning the Nibelungen leg-

¹⁹ Braun [1987 (1992)]; Müller [1977 (2004)]; Müller [1996 (2004)]. On Volker Braun's theatrical rewrite see Joschko (1992) and Schmidt (1995: 187-220). On Heiner Müller's dramas see Klussmann (1982); Fiebach (2003); Heeg (2003); Eckardt (2003); Bohn (2003); Jourdeuil (2003); Hauschild (2003: 322-330; 497-506).

German contemporary history plays an important part also in *Ostfotze* ('Eastern Cunt'), one of the eight episodes which make up the theatrical suite *MauerStücke* by the producer, actor and playwright Manfred Karge [Karge 1989-1990 (1996)]. In *Ostfotze* the characters of the *Nibelungenlied* act on the scene of post-1989 Germany, but the tragedy of the hypotext is completely substituted by the burlesque, and Karge's farce doesn't reach by far the complexity and effectiveness of Müller's and Braun's rewrites. Even the prominent DDR author Franz Fühmann coped with the Nibelungen tradition: he wrote the poem *Der Nibelunge Not* in the 1950s [Fühmann (1978: 18-19)], a prose version of the *Nibelungenlied* for the Youth [Fühmann (1971)] and in 1973 the screenplay to a film which was never realized [Fühmann (1987)]. The poem offers an anti-heroic view of the Nibelungen narrative, and in the invective against the *Mörderdynastie*, the 'dynasty of murderers', he carries out a superimposition of ancient legend and recent history.

end into an effective political myth: a powerful factor in mobilizing the consciousness of the people and in creating consent for the nationalistic and expansionistic policies, first of the Prussian and later of the German governments.

Heiner Müller and Volker Braun, on the contrary, take up the myth as a result of two centuries of interpreting and re-telling practices, and dismantle it: emphasizing not only its inherent violence and contradictions, but even the possibility of re-reading it as a powerful metaphor of the German disaster during the 20th century. Both authors underline the strong relationship between Nibelungen matter and history, but they focus their attention on contemporary German history: retelling the Nibelungen myth after Stalingrad and Auschwitz, they drive the audience to question the whole combination of attitudes, moral values and commonplaces handed down as the “German soul”. To this end, they make systematic use of anachronisms and show overtly on stage the metaphorical mechanism in action.

Heiner Müller’s play *Germania Tod in Berlin* – written between 1962 and 1971, published in West Germany in 1977 and staged for the first time in Munich in 1978 – is made of thirteen different scenes, not explicitly correlated to each other, but all thematizing the history of the German working class from the Spartakist insurrection of 1918 up to the workers’ rebellion against the communist government in East Berlin in 1953. The Nibelungen heroes Gunther, Hagen, Volker and Gernot appear only in the fifth scene, *Hommage à Stalin I*: they are ghosts on the battlefield of Stalingrad, fighting an imaginary battle against invisible Huns. Müller, thus, takes up the famous propagandistic metaphor of Hermann Göring, who in a radio speech had compared the German soldiers in the infernal Stalingrad cauldron to the Burgundian warriors in Attila’s Hall, and makes a spectral theatre out of it.²⁰ The dead warriors don’t even remember the reason for their fighting, or perhaps they don’t want to. As Gernot, with an implicit reference to the myth of Odin’s warriors in the Walhalla, confesses that he is tired of dying every night and asks why they have to fight, Hagen’s and Gunther’s answers are manifest, conflicting lies, propaganda tools to justify the war: they have to revenge Siegfried; Siegfried was killed by the Huns; Siegfried was actually a traitor; and so on. As a matter of fact, the Nibelungen are fighting just for the sake of fighting, and Gernot’s questions have to be silenced. So the warriors’ band kills the dissident and lets loose its destructive, macabre exultation masturbating over the corpse. The murderers’ solidarity, however, doesn’t prevent them from killing each other at the end of the scene, trying to grab

²⁰ On Göring’s radio speech see Krüger (1991).

hold of the hoard. Gernot's doubt and questioning can be read as an attempt, or at least an opportunity to stop the senseless succession of wars and massacres, but its failure clears the way to the merciless actualization of the myth: the corpses of the Nibelungen thus coalesce in a monstrous conglomerate of flesh and metal, ready to perpetuate its work of killing.²¹

Another possibility for using the Nibelungen legend to light up and question German history is exploited by Heiner Müller in his last play, *Germania 3 Gespenster am toten Mann*, written in the years 1994-1995 and staged for the first time in 1996 in Bochum, after the writer's death on 30 December 1995. Again, Müller arranges in a line a sequence of different scenes, this time concerning the social and political development in Germany after World War II and the failure of the socialist experiment in the German Democratic Republic. Of capital importance in the play are the figures of Hitler and Stalin, both acting on the stage, as well as the references to Rosa Luxemburg, the Polish revolutionary leader murdered during the Spartakist insurrection whose ideal of an anti-authoritarian socialism disappeared from the communist agenda with her death and the subsequent success of the Leninist model. Rosa Luxemburg appears directly only once in the play, in the very first scene: in a superimposition of temporal levels, the historical leaders of the Communist Party of Germany (later SED, *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*), Ernst Thälmann and Walter Ulbricht are discussing the failure of the socialist state when Rosa Luxemburg goes across the stage, escorted by her executioners.²² To the figure of the Polish revolutionary, although absent, point the references to the Nibelungen legend included in the play; first of all, through the title of the third scene – the set is again the Stalingrad Cauldron – *Siegfried eine Jüdin aus Polen* ('Siegfried a Jewess from Poland').²³ The surprising identification of the Medieval hero with the communist leader not only reminds the audience of the treacherous murder of Rosa Luxemburg, but at the same time it sounds like a ghastly omen of the consequences of such murder. These consequences are revealed later on, as Kriemhild and Hagen meet on the battlefield: the two characters' cues are, for the most part, extrapolated from Hebbel's *Nibelungen*, but what actually confers meaning to the encounter is the fact that Hagen is dressed like a German officer, while Kriemhild wears a uniform of the Red Army, and Stalin's shadow is visible behind her. Kriemhild, the mild princess of the first part of the *Nibelungenlied*, changed into the ruthless she-devil at the court of Attila; in a similar way the spectre of Rosa Luxemburg comes back

²¹ Müller [1977 (2004: 20-24)].

²² Müller [1996 (2004: 61)].

²³ Müller [1996 (2004: 66)].

now as an enraged Stalinist soldier, with a catastrophic outcome both for Germany and the socialist project.²⁴

While Heiner Müller inserts short, compact rewrites of the Nibelungen legend into broader texts, Volker Braun's *Siegfried Frauenprotokolle Deutscher Furor* is a rewrite of the whole legend, assuming the *Nibelungenlied* as main hypotext and introducing references to the Norse tradition and to Heibel's dramatic trilogy. As Heiner Müller does, so too does Volker Braun sharpen the conflicts implicit in the sources and makes use of anachronisms to emphasize the destructiveness of behavioural patterns inherited from the past and passively accepted. Braun's use of anachronism is, however, quite peculiar, and the writer himself rejects the correctness of this definition with respect to his literary technique. In a conversation with Hans Kaufmann he explains:

Das liegt am Anachronismus der heutigen Zeit, nicht an dem Anachronismus des Mittels. Denn du hast recht: die Gegenwart schleppt soviel Altes mit, alte Verlaufsformen, Strukturen, Denkweisen, daß die alten Vorgänge als Modell für heutige dienen können. Ein Umstand, der zu bedauern ist, der aber Geschichte für die Kunst darstellbar macht.²⁵

It is because so many social and psychological archaisms live on in our own society and in our own mind that the old myths and legends can be superimposed on contemporary life and reveal themselves useful to its interpretation. Playing with associations, following the logic of dreams, Volker Braun establishes connections between the legendary past and the conflicts of the present, stressing some points of the old narrative and emphasizing its inherent violence, yet without transporting it into our own time. On the contrary, the explicit references to the real historical vicissitudes of the Burgundians, crushed in a "stellvertreterkrieg"²⁶ between the superpowers, Romans and Huns, strengthen the relevance of the staged action to the audience, especially to an audience in the German Democratic Republic in the mid-1980s, as shortly before nuclear warheads had been located on the territory of the neighbouring Federal Republic.

The threat of possible self-destruction of mankind as a consequence of an insane aggressiveness rooted in the greed for power and the sense of honour;

²⁴ Müller [1966 (2004: 70-73)].

²⁵ "It depends on the anachronism of the present, not on the anachronism of the means. You are right, indeed: the present drags so much of the old – old patterns, structures, outlooks – that the ancient events can be useful as models to today's ones. This circumstance is regrettable, but it makes history representable in the arts" [Braun 1984 (1992: 257-258)].

²⁶ "war by proxy" [Braun 1983-1986 (1992: 251)].

the self-mutilation of one's own affectivity and sensitivity aimed at self-control and effectiveness in reaction and revenge; the brutal patriarchal oppression of men on women: these are the focuses of this rewrite of the *Nibelungenlied*, a "heroic" text which the playwright chooses as hypotext among many other legendary and heroic tales exactly because of its "schonungslose Darstellung des gräßlichen Geschehens".²⁷ The overlapping of temporal planes and the re-reading of the ancient massacre as an omen of the impending future (or rather, as Volker Braun writes, of the impending *Nicht-Zukunft*, or "not-future")²⁸ signal Braun's profound pessimism. The old patterns can reproduce themselves with any generation, and a radical break with the inherited ideas and behaviours is necessary in order to avoid self-annihilation. In a view of history which appears deeply indebted to Walter Benjamin's reflection, Volker Braun recognizes the necessity and the possibility of change: the voice of his Volker echoes the potentially redeeming question of Heiner Müller's Gernot as he asserts "wir müssen anders denken".²⁹ Like Gernot in Müller's *Germania*, however, even Volker is accused by his comrades of being a traitor and a spy of the enemies, and the possibility of an alternative future – or of a future tout-court – which is glimpsed for only a short moment and radiates an almost messianic hope, is overwhelmed by the inexorable power of the *Unerledigte* (the 'unsolved', the 'not-overcome'),³⁰ the inherited destructive patterns handed down through history.

Volker Braun's – as well as Heiner Müller's – purpose is apparently not about making a myth of the legend in order to guarantee the identity and/or the glory of a community: their project is thus radically opposed to Raupach's or even Ibsen's. Their purpose is rather to dismember the traditional narrative in order to show the vacuity and danger of every exaltation of war, supremacy and glory. They both disintegrate and revitalize the myth, making out of it a literary instrument able to disconnect traditions and common sense, establishing new connections among visions of the past, analyses of the present, and perspectives on the future.

²⁷ "Pitiless representation of the horrible facts" [Braun 1984 (1992: 256)].

²⁸ Braun [1984 (1992: 258)].

²⁹ "we have to think in a different way" [Braun 1987 (1992: 240)].

³⁰ Braun [1983-1986 (1992: 254)]; [1984 (1992: 258)].

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In the 18th century, romanticism is eclipsed by the Age of Enlightenment, where everything is perceived through the prism of science and reason. In the 19th century, « romantic » means sentimental : lyricism and the expression of personal emotions are emphasized. Feelings and sentiments are very much present in romantic works. Thus, so many things are called romantic that it is difficult to see the common points between the novels by Victor Hugo, the paintings by Eugène Delacroix or the music by Ludwig Von Beethoven. The romantic international. Romanticism is not limited to one country, it was