

Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal

Volume 9

Issue 1 *New Work in Caribbean Literary and Cultural Studies*

Article 9

April 2012

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Recommended Citation

Bertholf, Garry J. (2012) "Drastic Prose, Gnostic Readers: On Buck-Morss and the Antinomies of Writing the Political," *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: <http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/anthurium/vol9/iss1/9>

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Drastic Prose, Gnostic Readers: On Buck-Morss and the Antinomies of Writing the Political

Garry J. Bertholf, University of Pennsylvania

Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009), 160 pp.

On Friday, September 30, 2011, Susan Buck-Morss' *Hegel, Haiti and Universal History* received the Caribbean Philosophical Association's highest distinction. What gives her Frantz Fanon Prize-winning book a particular resonance is its unambiguous, political timbre. Indeed, this brave and beautiful book has become something of a benchmark for all of us who have striven to work responsibly across disciplines, in the midst of multifarious literatures and languages, at the nexus between the academy and the quotidian world, within the uneven and unequal circumstances of our so-called postcolonial moment. Buck-Morss' courage has manifested itself in her marvelous ability to read against the grain of authoritarian and authoritative philosophies of history; and it is her own unabashed willingness to "raise the stakes of the controversy" (*Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* xi), as she puts it, that make Buck-Morss' encounter with Hegel and Haiti so apposite and exciting. What is left for a review such as this, then, is the effort to dig deeply into the kind of history that Buck-Morss has produced, and to come to grips with some of the alternatives toward which her narrative gestures.

My close reading of Buck-Morss' *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* is inspired and informed by the hermeneutic theory of Gayatri Spivak, who once described her "politics of reading" thusly:

Since it is impossible to find someone who is completely politically correct, even as I do not excuse, I also do not let the accusation throw out [*sic*] the thinking out of court. If it seems an important enough text, I try to enter its protocols, its private grammar, so that I can find a spot in the text where I can locate myself and turn it around, perhaps against its own grain, or perhaps to make it more faithful to itself, its declared convictions, as Mary Prince did for the abolitionists. Do not excuse, do not accuse. Enter, earn the right, turn it around and use. ("Du Bois and the General Strike")

Indeed, this idea of making a text “more faithful to itself” bears a very close resemblance to Friedrich Schleiermacher’s (or was it Schlegel’s?) own hermeneutical approach: “Kritisiren heißt einen Autor besser verstehn als er sich selbst verstanden hat” (*To criticize is to understand an author better than he understood himself*). The critique of Buck-Morss that follows, therefore, aims less to undermine than to locate in her text what Ludwig Feuerbach called “Entwicklungsfähigkeit” (or what Giorgio Agamben calls “potentiality”!)—that is to ask, what would a magnanimous reading of Buck-Morss reveal?; or, what would a critique of her work bring to light? And here, I am reminded of Judith Butler’s almost Kantian notion of the practice of critique, where “critique,” as she explains, “has to be dissociated from a sense of destruction or pure negation. What it’s really about is opening up the possibility of questioning what our assumptions are and somehow encouraging us to live in the anxiety of that questioning without closing it down too quickly [...] anxiety accompanies something like the witnessing of new possibilities” (“Changing the Subject” 331).

Many readers of *Critical Inquiry*, the journal where “Hegel and Haiti” (2000) debuted, and many whose paths *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (2009) has crossed since, already know well the gist of Buck-Morss’ argument. Nevertheless, before we make claims about Buck-Morss’ prose—that is to say, its drastic and gnostic qualities—we would do well to clarify her critical intervention, and appreciate its consequences for the humanities. In short, Hegel was reading *Minerva*, a journal which reported frequently on the Haitian Revolution since its inception; but Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Mind*, not least his so-called master-slave dialectic, does not acknowledge its debt to the Haitian Revolution; and, for more than two hundred years, scholars have betrayed an ignorance of the Haitian Revolution’s impact on Hegel’s thought. These facts, therefore, reveal a deep truth about the history of philosophy that philosophers themselves have not been willing to concede: that the history of philosophy has been effortfully and ideologically overdetermined by Eurocentrism. Just as we cannot tell the history of philosophy without Hegel’s *Phenomenology* in it, we cannot read *The Phenomenology* itself without thinking about those black bodies who inspired it in the first place, the European empires against which they rose in rebellion, or the impact of Haitian independence on European epistemologies and philosophy. However remarkable all of this, it is the prose in which this critical intervention is conveyed that is of particular interest here.

It is not only to indulge my own interest in the antinomies of writing the political that I raise Buck-Morss' ostensibly *drastic* prose, but also because her text exemplifies a gesture made frequently in Caribbean-philosophical discourse, where it has become commonplace to wax political. Often these preoccupations are lengthy, abounding in examples and discussion to which we would all no doubt do well to pay heed. That said, it is surprising, still, to find mention of Osama bin Laden, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Vladimir Lenin and George W. Bush in the same breath (*Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* 143). But when Buck-Morss' readers arrive finally at the end of her essay on "Universal History," s/he will already know well the author's drastic manner of delivery, which Buck-Morss anticipates in the very first page: "A second essay, 'Universal History' [...] changes what we think we know about the past, and therefore how we think the present. There is political urgency to this project" (ix). Surprising, perhaps; but the consequences, unintended or otherwise, of such drastic writing are especially telling when we consider its call number in the ivory tower of academia. An irony remains, then, for notwithstanding Buck-Morss' critical and political interventions here, it is precisely those political interventions that lose their impetus in the hands of gnostic readers. (And here I should note that I am using the words "drastic" and "gnostic" quite literally—that is, drastic from the Greek *drastikos*, "to do"; and "gnostic" from the Greek *gnōstikos*, "to know"). Needless to say, we cannot expect to find in the reception history of *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* an epiphany among scholars toward activism; but in so far as Buck-Morss broaches the contexts for Western philosophizing and history-writing, we, her readership, ought to come to grips with Europe's epochal imperialism since the fifteenth century. The cosmopolitical gaze of Buck-Morss, then, takes on new, global significance as soon as we link it to both the Enlightenment project and democratic experiment, which persist into our (post?)colonial present.

Chief among my concerns here is the relationship (dare I say dialectic?) between what I am calling Buck-Morss' "drastic prose" and "gnostic readership." If my title were still up for grabs, I might suggest "Writing the Political: Buck-Morss and the Problem with Clarion Calling," or, to paraphrase Malcolm Gladwell, "Why the revolution won't be [written]," or perhaps simply "The Regression of Reading." Unlike the pedantic "Drastic Prose, Gnostic Readers: On Buck-Morss and the Antinomies of Writing the Political," any one of these gives a better sense of what this reviewer is up to.

Here we have already moved well beyond the project that Susan Buck-Morss originally

set for herself. If it is fair to do so in a review such as this, it is because practices, not just theories, of cosmopolitanism beckon—practices that universal history and drastic writing alike might inspire. And I agree with Susan Buck-Morss, just as much now as I did when I first read her: “Humanity,” writes Buck-Morss, “can do better” (119). As we begin to pull epistemological rank over the material and ideological foundations of Eurocentric philosophies and reigning narratives about the European tradition, some shifting of sights in this new, universal history, this history of global reach across the *longue durée*, we ought to make room for drastic prose. To start, we need to look closely into the drastic ways by which Buck-Morss’ rhetoric arrests our attention. The following three passages offer a good point of entry:

We are left with only two alternatives. Either Hegel was the blindest of all the blind philosophers of freedom in Enlightenment Europe, surpassing Locke and Rousseau by far in his ability to block out reality right in front of his nose (the *print* right in front of his face at the breakfast table); or Hegel knew—knew about real slaves revolting successfully against real masters, and he elaborated his dialectic of lordship and bondage deliberately within this contemporary context. (50)

It seems crude to discuss Haiti as a bastion of historical significance, when today it is the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere, and when expressions of the political will of the Haitian people continue to this day, *after two hundred years*, to be hamstrung by the intervention of foreign powers. (137)

In the name of universal humanity, the vanguard justifies its own violence as higher truth. At this crossroads Osama bin Laden meets Jean-Jacques Dessalines, and Vladimir Lenin meets George W. Bush. If we do not wish to go that route—and I do not—then our tools of historical mapping are in need of radical refashioning. (143)

There is so much here that is typical of Buck-Morss’ effortful, drastic prose: its pithiness, candor, intelligibility and occasional cheekiness. But these passages are in stark contrast to some of her more gnostic ruminations. The antinomies of writing the political, for example, can be seen clearly as soon as we link this drastic, politicized writing to the following three passages:

What if every time that the consciousness of individuals surpassed the confines of present constellations of power in perceiving the concrete meaning of freedom, *this* were valued as a moment, however transitory, of the realization of absolute spirit? What other silences would need to be broken? What *undisciplined* stories would be told? (75)

Why do we write history? What truth is it evoked to reveal? Here the facts, which may or may not be carelessly reported, are incapable in themselves of providing an adequate answer. Moreover, because the central question of history's meaning cannot be asked outside of time but only in the thick of human action, the way the question is posed, the methods of the inquiry, and the criteria of what counts as a legitimate answer all have political implications. (109)

Is it possible to reimagine universal history out of bounds of exclusionary conceptual frames? (110)

Indeed, compared to those first three passages, these three are a different affair altogether. They presume a much deeper level of theoretical preparation and philosophical sophistication, not to mention their concern with disciplinary determinants after postcoloniality rather than refashioning the political futures of postcolonial bodies. The antinomy between these two sets of excerpts raises a question that rears its head time and again in the pages of *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*: for what readership, exactly, is this prose intended? It is as if the author were at times ambivalent as to her audience, as if her prose, ostensibly aimed at the academy, continually felt the pull of a different, more "drastic" discourse. To be sure, Buck-Morss' prose often seems to be targeting two different readerships. To the first her punditry must seem superfluous, to the second her critical theorizing must often seem overwhelming. But this has not affected the reach of Buck-Morss' text. Alongside scholars, Buck-Morss includes artists and activists among those with whom she has made common cause. "I am grateful," writes Buck-Morss, "for the interest and generosity of scholars, artists, and activists who found it useful in a variety of contexts, and from whom I have learned a great deal" (ix). But then, as I have made clear, is it precisely this sort of hermeneutical free-for-all, whereby scholars disavow the drastic

and activists the gnostic in exchange for the other, that I find problematic. The dichotomies between scholars and activists, drastic and gnostic, theory and praxis, therefore, need to be deconstructed so as to reveal their common telos.

I am in no way suggesting that we ought to forsake the gnostic in favor of the drastic. That is preposterous. The time is ripe, however, for a more meaningful discourse—one related to and shaped by the material world. And as extraordinary an achievement as *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* is, it is high time that we read politically as well. When was the last time that anyone reading political writing at leisure felt something of the anxiety that frightened the Frankfurt School? From all this and more a new, motivated readership might emerge—one that is drastic and gnostic all at once. “I believe the teacher,” writes Gayatri Spivak, “*while operating within the institution*, can foster the emergence of a committed collectivity by not making her institutional commitment invisible: outside in the teaching-machine” (*Outside in the Teaching Machine* 331).

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