

Bertolt Brecht

Poems
1913-1956

Eyre Methuen

Bertolt Brecht: Plays, Poetry and Prose
Edited by JOHN WILLETT *and* RALPH MANHEIM

Poems 1913–1956

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Edited by
John Willett
and Ralph Manheim
with the co-operation of
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Disclosure of a Poet

I

Well after his death in 1956 Brecht the poet remained like an unsuspected time-bomb ticking away beneath the engine-room of world literature. This aspect of his writing had long been concealed by the mass of his dramas, together with his theories about them, not to mention other people's theories about what those theories might mean. And yet it was the primary aspect, both in time (for he was writing poems as a schoolboy, while his first play *Baal* was above all a transference of his poetic activity to the stage), and in terms of artistic importance. Anybody who fails to see that his language was that of a poet is missing the main motive force of all his work.

It is bad luck that so many of us have been led to approach Brecht from the wrong end: studying the theories first and then the plays, and only coming to the poems as a by-product of his theatre work; instead of seeing that the poems led into and permeated the plays, from which the theories in turn sprang. In part this is due to the unavoidable difficulties of translation, since it is always simpler to translate expository writing than dialogue, while great poetry is ten times harder than even the finest play. Even though Brecht was in some crucial respects unusually close to English literature and the English language, had read much about America and actually spent six years as an exile in the United States, his poetry is still hardly at all known in the English-speaking world. Just before he arrived in America in 1941 there was a first-rate study of it by Clement Greenberg in the *Partisan Review*, then in 1947 H. R. Hays published his translation of fifty *Selected Poems* (his account of this pioneering event will be found in the notes to the present book). Since then however only two further collections have appeared: a bilingual edition of his first book of poems, the *Hauspostille*, in a translation by Eric Bentley; and John Berger's and Anya Bostock's small selection of *Poems on the Theatre*. Not surprisingly, then, his influence has been little felt, though where it has the effects have been important. Auden, for instance, lists (and misspells) him in his *Commonplace Book* along with Cavafy, Graves, Bridges, Owen and nine others as constituting the 'elder modern poets . . . from whom I have learned most'.

Yet in reality the translation problem has only been a subsidiary one, since for many years the explosive force of Brecht's poetry was not fully felt even within his own country. It was never easy to get hold of, for a start. Because the Nazis so disapproved of it, his first book virtually disappeared from view within six or seven years of publication, while his second and third were only published in small editions by émigré firms, and could not be brought into the country until after 1945. The only other poems to appear in book form prior to the 1950s were those included in the *Versuche* booklets where he also published his current output of plays, aphorisms and theoretical notes; and the pre-1933 instalments of these were likewise a collector's item until their republication in 1959. So long as Brecht himself was alive, in other words, there was scarcely any way for those who had remained in Nazi Germany (or been born there) to study even those poems which he had been willing to publish. And then it turned out that this was only a small proportion of his total poetic output. Out of approximately one thousand items in the collected edition of his poems in 1967 no more than 170 had appeared in the three collections made by himself – and even they included a score or more of songs from the plays. More perhaps than any other major writer except Kafka, Brecht was content that the greater part of his achievement should remain unknown.

Roughly five hundred poems are included in the present volume. Just over a quarter of them were in the three collections, while as much as 64 per cent had (so far as we know) never been published in any form, however ephemeral, before the 1960s, when the first collected edition began to come out in Frankfurt and East Berlin. This staggering indifference to much of his own work was typical of Brecht right through; there were also essays and unfinished plays which he was quite happy to shelve and forget. But he did in a special sense feel that his poetry was private to him, and he seems to have been aware that it was so natural and fluent as to represent a dangerously seductive distraction from the real hard work of writing and staging the plays. Thus in 1928, when the novelist Alfred Döblin wanted him to give a public reading, we find him refusing on the ground that

my poetry is laid so heavily to my account that for some time now the least rhyme has stuck in my craw. The thing is that my poetry is the strongest argument against my play-writing activities. Everyone heaves a sigh of relief and says that my

father should have put me into poetry and not into the business of writing plays.

Such an attitude of self-denial, of yielding to the tougher and less natural job, was never enough to prevent him from writing poems, even rhymed ones. But it helped to discourage him from letting them be seen.

And so the discovery of Brecht the lyric poet has been a gradual process on all sides. Even the songs and the unrhymed political poetry – which are probably the two most familiar categories of his verse – took time to penetrate to postwar German writers, so much so that their influence in both halves of Germany is still an active one: on Enzensberger, Fried and Karsunke in the West for example, or on Biermann, Kunert and Hacks in the East. How much longer, then, must it take to assimilate the opening-up of the complete poetic works in the course of the 1960s, which brought entire new areas of Brecht's character and achievement into view? The Psalms, for instance, of which a first batch of four appeared in a memorial issue of an East German magazine, seemed to marry Rimbaud's prose poems and the Bible in a manner startlingly like that of some of André Breton's early poems. Then there was the submerged bulk of that incomplete iceberg, the 'Reader for those who live in cities', previously known only through ten poems in the pre-1933 *Versuche*, together with the small group of Epistles which foreshadowed it, suggesting that Brecht's distinctively spare, unrhymed verse style was a direct reaction to the stony hostility of Berlin. There were forty-odd sonnets of unexpected formal skill, largely expressive of the poet's wholly unromantic, sometimes patronising yet often perceptive attitudes to the women around him. There were far more children's poems and theatre poems than anyone had imagined, both of these emerging as significant sub-sectors of Brecht's work; (not all that many leading German poets have bothered to write for children). There was the strange persistent thread of the 'Visions': prose poems more intensely imaginative than the later Brecht had ever been thought capable of, making new sense of his reputed interest in Kafka. There were the American poems, only faintly hinted at in the Hays selection, together with the huge unfinished Lucretian project of which the versified *Communist Manifesto* was to form part. There were the missing Buckow Elegies of 1953, which helped reveal this cycle as a set of tightly compressed critical reflections on the poet's countrymen, caught between their recent Nazi past and

their still Stalinist present. And then there was a good deal else which, while less startling in itself, added greatly to our total view of the writer and his work: songs, ballads, love lyrics, epigrams, classic statements like 'Bad time for poetry' or politically crucial ones like 'Is the People infallible?'

Nothing else in Brecht's literary remains can compare with this great mass of previously unknown verse, which has gradually pushed his weight (as it were) away from the theatre towards the poetry shelf. Previously Brecht, for all his evident genius, had seemed a rather limited poet, restricted (whether by choice or by a sense of his own shortcomings) to comparatively few themes and styles. Even Auden who, thanks to their collaboration on the *Duchess of Malfi* adaptation and the translation of the *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, probably knew him better than any other English writer, saw him above all as the writer of the *Hauspostille* poems and the *Threepenny Opera* songs, and this is how he had long appeared to many of his warmest admirers. Where they split was over the poems of his ensuing Communist period, when he had apparently decided to deny himself rhyme except for certain militantly political songs with a fairly simple message, and generally to subordinate his imagination to the needs of the class struggle. Depending roughly on their view of the politics in question, they regarded this change (and with it the greater part of his second and third collections) either as a development or as a kind of betrayal. The new material, however, showed that Brecht's work simply could not be divided in this clear-cut way, even though he himself had encouraged it; that the chilly sentiments of the unrhymed poems began far sooner, the cryptic and subjective themes persisted far later than his own collections had seemed to suggest. The output ebbed and flowed, certainly, but was limited only in so far as Brecht had decided to publish what was limited (or perhaps merely consistent) about it. This is true of its form as well as its content, for the range of styles which he had at his command was always much wider than he permitted to appear, and nearly always well adapted to the sense and function of the poem in question. His gifts, like his interests, turned out to be unexpectedly rich.

For instance he was writing his unrhymed verse in 1921, five years before the appearance of his first collection, which contained none of it, while the political poems of 1926 show him already envisaging a set of 'songs of the proletariat' some three years before his full identification with the Communist cause. The formal

sonnets, the lyrics, the intensely imaginative 'visions' likewise recur at almost any time, so that the picture Brecht himself gave, of a self-denying poet gradually pushed into verbal penury by the horror of the times, can be seen to be a gross over-simplification. Not that the reflection of those times in his poetry seems any less compelling for that. Particularly when his own arrangements are disregarded and the whole body of poems looked at in chronological order, the pressure of recent German history on the sensitive individual, and through him on the verse, comes to seem overpowering. Thus one sees first how his early sense of sympathy for society's victims and rejects, interlocked with his feeling for the warm south German landscape, is succeeded by the shock of contact with the big city and its granite indifference. Then follows the satirical, more and more political attack on that society and on the Nazis who arrive to take it over, leading after 1933 to an exile which many Germans shared but few could express so tellingly. The screw tightens still further as the Soviet purges of the later 1930s are followed by the Second World War (nowhere more desperately than in 'In times of extreme persecution'), after which come the American experience with its many frustrations, and then the return to a battered, divided Germany misunderstood by its occupiers and still haunted by Nazi and Stalinist ghosts. It all moves past with a terrible clarity, particularly when the poet is not bothering to make the moral explicit or to suppress his own personal concerns. For Brecht's intelligibility, like his self-abnegation, was natural to him, and never more impressive than when it could be seen to be so.

In 1928, when Brecht was thirty, Kurt Tucholsky called him a master of language with something *to* him, to be ranked with Gottfried Benn as the country's most gifted living poets. In 1941, when he came to the United States, Clement Greenberg wrote that he was 'all poet': 'the most original literary temperament to have appeared anywhere in the last twenty years'. In 1956, when he died, Lion Feuchtwanger reckoned him the one German 'Sprachschöpfer', or originator of language, in this century; it was thanks to Brecht, he said, 'that German is now in a position to express feelings and thoughts which it was unable to utter when Brecht began writing'. Impressive as they are, these tributes by his contemporaries were based on what he himself had allowed to be published, and today we can see that he was also something more: that he was all the time finding the words, the forms and the images for the disastrous history of Germany between the First World War

and the aftermath of Stalin's death. More painfully (and in the long run more powerfully) than in any of his stage works, he was writing the tragedy of our time.

2

Many of the earliest poems were written to be sung to the guitar, like the *Baal* songs which Brecht included in his first collection. Here he was following a tradition established by the Munich playwright Frank Wedekind and maintained by such other performers in that city as the clown Karl Valentin and the sailor-poet Joachim Ringelnatz. 'I was always thinking of actual delivery', says his essay 'On Rhymeless Verse' (see p. 465), and indeed it is surprising how many of those poems prove to have still untranscribed melodies in Brecht's quasi-plainchant notation. This concern with performance, which was later to allow him to exert a quite exceptional influence on the composers with whom he worked, lay at the root of his conception of the *Gestus* or 'gest', which became for him the criterion of effective wording. Long before he formulated his principles in theoretical terms, he knew that language (and music too) had to be gestic: that is to say, to convey the attitude of the speaker and the precise force and weight of the thing said. Though there was also much that he wrote primarily for silent reading – the Psalms, for instance, and the very Psalm-like letters which he wrote around the same time – his characteristic directness and avoidance of ambiguities could always be traced back to the same need: to put the poem across in the most effective possible way.

He found his models in the narrative ballad – at that time a quite unfashionable genre – and the unassuming, genuinely popular (as opposed to folksy) song, no matter how the literary pundits might look down on it. Though he was orthodox enough in those days to make use of *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, the classic collection of folk poetry from Goethe's day, which is internationally known from Mahler's settings, he already seems to have had his tongue in his cheek, assigning four of the poems in one of his early notebooks to a 'Plunderhorn' series of pilfered verse. From then on, as can be seen from his essay 'Where I have learned' (p. 472), he spurned the arty or artificial folk tradition, as revived by middle-class enthusiasts at the end of the nineteenth century, in favour of the despised pop songs of the same period, such as came to inspire poems like the 'Ballad of the pirates' and 'Remembering Marie A.' with its beautifully slushy tune. The People, he wrote again, has no wish

to be Folk: an important distinction which was often thereafter in his mind, though it hardly accorded with the Soviet cultural dogmas of the 1930s to which he paid occasional lip-service. This sympathy for supposedly inferior lowbrow art developed naturally enough into a liking for American-inspired jazz, such as underlay the first Mahagonny Songs written in the mid-20s – these will be in the second volume of the Collected Plays – and resulted in the collaboration with Kurt Weill. But even as a boy he had made his preferences clear, writing in his Augsburg school magazine of the ‘marvellously naïve mode of expression’ of the now forgotten love poetry of a certain Karl Lieblich: ‘fresh songs, free of all pretensions’. The same respect for true naïvety, the same contempt for orthodox literary criticism and the type of modernist innovation which it found acceptable, were to remain with him all his life.

At the same time of course he had his highbrow models, but apart from Wedekind (whom the Establishment were just starting to assimilate when Brecht first heard him) they too came from outside the sanctified corpus of German literature. Villon, who set the pattern for the *Threepenny Opera* songs and is commemorated by two of the poems in our collection, seems to have been known to him by 1918 as a master of the right form and tone for the kind of anarchic, asocial themes that Brecht was beginning to make his own. Whitman he is thought to have discovered while at school – *Leaves of Grass*, of which there were several German translations, was a potent influence on the Expressionists at that time – while Rimbaud too he read in German very early on. Both these poets accorded in their own ways with the influence which Brecht himself felt as the strongest of all, that of the Lutheran Bible whose language and themes (like the protestant hymns which it inspired) are time and again echoed, however invertedly, in his writings. His first book of *Devotions* (as we shall call the *Hauspostille*), for instance, is not only mock-ecclesiastical in structure and presentation but includes a number of individual poems where this occurs: thus William Booth of the Salvation Army inspired the ‘Exemplary conversion of a grog-seller’ (p. 64), a seventeenth-century chorale the ‘Great hymn of thanksgiving’ (p. 74), the violet-clad figure of God, the ‘Report on a tick’ (p. 34). Not surprisingly then his other great exemplar, even in those early days, was Rudyard Kipling, who not only reflects much the same influences, ranging from the odes of Horace to the Salvationist hymn and the music-hall song, but relates (however unexpectedly by English standards) to the exotic Rimbaud of the ‘Bateau ivre’. At that time

Brecht so far as we know did not read English, but a volume of Kipling's *Soldatenlieder und andere Gedichte* had appeared in translation in 1910, and he had some acquaintance at least with *Barrack Room Ballads*, *Soldiers Three* and *The Light that Failed* before leaving Munich University in 1921.

A year later the *Devotions* were virtually complete, and Brecht was beginning to be known outside his immediate Augsburg circle as a new voice in German poetry: a mixture of grimness and irony, objectivity and isolation. Up till then the verse had simply poured out of him in the way so vividly described in Hans-Otto Münsterer's recollections *Bert Brecht: Erinnerungen aus den Jahren 1917-1922*: the writing on folded scraps of paper while walking round the old town; the countryside, the summer diversions, the parties of friends, the occasional public event – all adding up to the single, self-consistent poem whose stage expression was *Baal*. The nation-wide success of his second play *Drums in the Night* broke into this, absorbing Brecht for the first time entirely in the theatre, temporarily blocking his poetic output, then in 1924 luring him to Berlin while all the time putting off the final revision and publication of the *Devotions*. What got him going once more seems to have been a combination of factors: first the failure of the Deutsches Theater in Berlin to give him anything definite to do; then the arrival of a gifted new collaborator in Elisabeth Hauptmann, whose first task was to get the *Devotions* out; above all the impact of the massive Prussian capital, which already on the occasion of his previous visit had shown its power to squeeze the verse out of him in a new gritty form. 'Of poor B.B.', one of the best known of all his poems (p. 107), was transitional, for our notes show it to have been written on the return journey from that visit in 1921 and then drastically revised after Brecht's final farewell to Bavaria. But this was something of a freak, and the characteristic style of his Berlin poetry was that of the 'Reader for those who live in cities': the seemingly quite original rhymeless irregular verse which he used often enough thereafter but never to such flinty effect.

When I speak to you
Coldly and impersonally
Using the driest words
Without looking at you . . .

Such aggressively plain, severe, syncopated language, with its perceptible break in delivery at the end of each line staggering the

rhythm and stressing the first words of the next, was different at once from the *Devotions* poems and from the brasher pseudo-American satire of *Mahagonny*, with both of which the 'Reader' series chronologically overlapped. In this painfully hardened urban sensitivity lay another aspect, perhaps the more authentic one, of Brecht's mid-1920s face.

By then he had already begun writing the occasional political ballad inspired (like 'Eight thousand poor people assemble outside the city') by some item in the news. This was the time of reportage and of Brecht's own collaboration with the documentary theatre of Erwin Piscator, and his growing political interests kept him writing poems even when around 1928-9 his more private inspirations again seemed to dry up. Though the immediate reason was perhaps the sudden success of the *Threepenny Opera*, which kept him fully involved in the theatre during those two years, there were at the same time other pressures in the form of the world economic crisis and the growth of the Nazi movement. Coming to a head in May 1929 shortly before the Wall Street crash (commemorated in the 'Late lamented fame of the giant city of New York', p. 167), they did not lead him right into the Communist party, but an extremely close working relationship developed, resulting in the 'Lehrstück' *Die Massnahme* and a number of individual political songs with the composer Hanns Eisler. Eisler, like the working-class girl Margarete Steffin who became Brecht's main literary aide in the 1930s, was a key influence on his poetic work, for he would not only query its political sense but also make Brecht cut and change for the sake of greater directness or exactitude, while his settings brought out the gestic nature of the verse as never before, giving musical shape to its meaning (and even its phrasing and punctuation) with quite extraordinary insight. This was in contrast to the practice of most contemporary musicians, who in Brecht's view chose rather to reduce verse texts first to prose, hoping to reinject the poetry by musical means.

For about the next five years, while the Nazis came to power in Germany and most of Brecht's friends and associates found their way into exile in different parts of the globe, his poetry was almost wholly devoted to political objectives. The main aim at first was the promotion of a revolution which in fact never looked like getting off the ground, then after 1933 came the encouragement of resistance to Hitler; in pursuit of which Brecht undoubtedly wrote a good deal of fairly ephemeral, even trivial verse not all of which is now worth translating. All the same, and quite apart from such

clear exceptions as 'His end' (p. 180) and 'Of all the works of man' (p. 192), his output of that period not only includes a number of powerful satires which remain models of their kind, but also succeeds in developing certain intense political insights which had never before become matter for poetry. Moreover, it was decisive for the view of Brecht henceforward taken by his friends and enemies alike: the judgement that he was, as Walter Benjamin put it, the one living poet who 'asks himself where he ought to apply his talent, who applies it only where he is convinced of the need to do so, and who abstains on every other occasion'.

Though he continued to write on such themes, as the 30s moved on the principles laid down in 'Solely because of the increasing disorder' (p. 225) became less and less dominant in Brecht's work as its centre of gravity shifted away from the day-to-day struggle. There was not only a still mystifying rift with Eisler which interrupted the political songs after 1935; there were also much more serious misgivings about Communist aesthetic policy and (with the launching of the great purges) Soviet justice. At the same time exile itself gave the poet the opportunity and also the stimulus to write a great deal more, presenting him with a whole range of new, politically-grounded private experience. In that great outpouring of Brecht's mature poetry, to which we owe the majority of the *Svendborg Poems*, he came to temper his directly political concerns – still evident in the 'German war primer' and 'German satires' of that collection – on the one hand with large-scale parables from antiquity and on the other with subtle, yet hard-headed observation of his own situation and surroundings. The Chinese influence in his work, filtering through the translations of Arthur Waley on which he based a series of 'Chinese poems', is henceforward often to be seen, leading to an increasing compression of the unrhymed verse and a new eye for the telling detail. Without growing any less political (which would have been against his nature) he could even look dispassionately back at his youthful poems, revising some of them for republication and comparing them critically with his current austere approach. Later he was to come to terms with that phase of his past, writing the extraordinary short poem 'Once' (p. 404) – one of his rare ventures in self-exploration. But already the canvas was getting wider, and once again it was Benjamin who put his finger on it when he told Brecht that 'the contrast between the political and the private poems made the experience of exile particularly explicit'.

The same spell of intense productivity lasted right through

what Brecht called 'the dark times', in other words the steady march to war, the Stalinist purges and the Nazi victories of 1939-41. It continued in fact well past the publication of the *Svendborg Poems* till after he finally left Scandinavia for the United States. Then for a time the flow once more almost stopped. Two things seem at first to have had a paralysing effect on him there: Margarete Steffin's death on the journey through Russia, and the vain effort to adjust to the movie market where he hoped to get work. Though he did his best to overcome this, with the result that the American years do none the less occupy a distinctive place in his oeuvre, his poetry now settled at a rather more subdued level. There was (most obviously) less of it; the directly political poems soon ran out; instead the reader could glimpse the odd reflection of politics in concrete objects (like 'The fishing-tackle', p. 386), or as a remote background to social observation: the manoeuvring warships, the bombers taking off, the sting of war in the tail of the poem. The most striking thing here was the exile's-eye view of the Californian scene: his scepticism about its 'cheap prettiness' and refusal to forget the harsh desert just over the horizon, only waiting to come back. There was also the new domesticity of verses like 'On sprinkling the garden', which surprised even the poet himself, together with the unrealised possibilities implied in one or two of the more allusive (and elusive) poems such as 'The new Veronica' and the version given in our notes of 'The transformation of the gods'. However, much of Brecht's imagination towards the end of the war, and the bulk of his poetic energies, went instead into that most un-American of projects, the great unfinished 'Didactic poem on Human Nature' which was to have fused Lucretius (long a favourite author of Brecht's) with the Marx of the *Communist Manifesto*, presenting the result in more or less classical German hexameters. Both Eisler and Feuchtwanger discouraged him from pursuing this most ambitious of all his schemes to an end, the former in particular arguing that it would not be entirely appropriate luggage to take back to a defeated Germany - a view he later regretted as 'too pragmatic'.

After that, in the immediate post-war years, there was at first a much more serious dearth of inspiration, with the Shelleyesque satire of 'The anachronistic procession' as the only poem of note before Brecht left America late in 1947. There was a rather faint renewal of interest once he had reached Germany a year later, followed by another small crop of poems in 1950 when the Berliner Ensemble had been set securely on its feet, and of course

he was still enough his old self to want to harness all his various talents to his country's reconstruction. None the less there is something a bit unconvincing about his more consciously committed poetry of that time, while the children's verses to which he now turned (as part of a general concern with young people) tend to ring false and artificial. Eisler too felt that Brecht had lost his ability to write good political songs; and certainly the well-intentioned poem 'To my countrymen' (which he thought important enough to dedicate to the first East German President, Wilhelm Pieck) is obvious in its sentiments and structure alike, while *Die Erziehung der Hirse*, the major poem of 1950, with its fifty-two stanzas in praise of the generally discredited genetic theories of Trofim Lysenko and its one mildly flattering reference to Stalin ('our great harvest-leader') is hard to stomach for all its technical skill. Possibly Brecht saw these weaknesses himself, for another year of virtual silence followed (the year of the *Lucullus* controversy) before he began writing of more concrete, small-scale and immediate matters in the condensedly reflective vein of the 'Buckow Elegies', his last substantial sequence. From then to the end of his life the poetry was still rather thin in quantity but acutely observant of the East German scene, sometimes packing a sharp punch as in the belatedly published 'The solution' from the Buckow set. Torn between his loyalties and his doubts, he seems to have come to think twice about every utterance; but utter he did. And once again he seems, however containedly, to have arrived at the poetic style for what was most in his mind.

3

Brecht's special quality, all through this long evolution, was his ability to deal with precise tangible facts. 'The truth is concrete', said his favourite quotation from Hegel, and indeed many of the physical details in his poems are as solid and as carefully picked as the weapons mentioned in the Greek Anthology (another of his sources of inspiration) or the objects listed in 'Weigel's props'. Similarly his themes, particularly in the narrative poems which he sometimes termed 'chronicles', were often taken from reports in books or in the press, and this gives a common dispassionate, documentary flavour to poems as widely apart in other ways as 'Apfelböck' (based on a Munich murder case of 1919), 'The carpet-weavers of Kuyan-Bulak' (a report from Turkestan in 1924) and 'The democratic judge' (an as yet untraced story of about 1943

which surely came from the *Los Angeles Times*). That this desire for firm points of reference in the real world was not incompatible with an active imagination is shown above all by the 'Visions', but similar qualities can be found in compressed form in even quite simple poems, from 'The bread and the children' (1920) to the sudden visualising of the Nazi past in 'The one-armed man in the undergrowth' (1953). Such a use of the imagination to explain and expand bald reality is one of Brecht's genuinely scientific gifts. All the same, precision and accuracy are not quite the same thing, and the difference needs to be borne in mind. Just as the exact dates and times in *The Jungle of Cities* are a decorative afterthought, introduced in order to lend that wildly imaginative play a factual, 'scientific' flavour, so the concrete detail of the poems occasionally proves to be wrong, the manipulation of the material described in the note to 'How the ship "Oskawa" was broken up by her own crew' being a case in point.

With this not unimportant reservation, Brecht as a political poet was all of a piece. Far from being himself a politician, he generally held back from political action, even of that kind which involves writers in committees, round-robins, public meetings and the like. But he had from the first an intense sympathy both with the victims and rejects of organised society and with the despised literary forms which seemed to accord with them. In Weimar Germany with its many authoritarian elements this made him quick to dig out what was going on below the surface of events. Much – perhaps most – of what was political in his poetry was absolutely natural to him, the logical consequence of his interests, tastes and sensitivities; he could not have stifled it even if he had tried. For politics were not some imposed obligation but what he liked to discuss with his friends, certainly from the late 1920s on: what he followed morning and evening on the portable radio of his exiled years. And so in a sense he was deceiving both us and himself when he tried to rationalise this attitude, as in 'Bad time for poetry' (for he *did* go on writing rhymed verse, however incongruous it might seem), or in the famous lines in 'To those born later' which argue that 'A talk about trees is almost a crime/ Because it implies silence about so many horrors' (since when Brecht himself talked about trees it did not). Indeed as the day-to-day twists of our history in the second quarter of this century fade from men's minds it begins to look as if some of his least outwardly political poems had most to say about the horrors, 'The fishing-tackle' being a moving instance.

‘The dark times . . .’ There were plenty of other poets who lived in them or died because of them, but none to whose writings they seemed so central. One of the most desperate moments of the world’s history – for that is what it was, however easy it may be to belittle the issues now – was also a high point in this man’s work. Yet how does his own poem about them, ‘In dark times’, conclude? ‘They won’t say: the times were dark/Rather: why were their poets silent?’ Once given the full significance of this concept for Brecht – a significance made clear not only by the posthumous poems and journals but also by Benjamin’s notes of their conversations at Svendborg just when the darkness seemed thickest – the question becomes a double-edged one. The times had darkened for him, we now see, even where they had turned red; so why was he himself silent wherever the dark places of the USSR and the international Communist movement were concerned? Certainly there were friends with whom he would discuss such matters, and now and again he would feel forced to write something, though more or less guardedly and subsequently blotting out tell-tale names (for whose eyes, it is still not clear). But the poems in question remained private, even more so than those theoretical disagreements with Georg Lukács and other Moscow aestheticians which he began belatedly releasing in the 1950s: he was not prepared to wash such murky linen in public or, in a world threatened by Hitler, to weaken men’s will to resist.

From today’s perspective even this can be seen to have been a mistake, since it helped to create unrealistic assumptions, and nowhere more so than in Brecht’s own camp. How much harder then must it be to justify the maintenance of the same attitude after Hitler’s defeat. None the less Brecht did maintain it, so that his subsequent criticisms of East Germany too, though nothing like as powerful as the poems about the fates of Sergei Tretiakoff and Carola Neher in the USSR, were only very partially made public at the time. Even now there are poems which have been withheld from publication and/or withdrawn from the material in the Brecht Archive: two of the ‘Buckow Elegies’ for a start, together with a well-authenticated poem attacking Stalin as ‘honoured murderer of the people’; nor can we be sure that there are no others unknown to records and rumour alike. One trivial instance is a light poem about President Pieck which exists in a setting by Eisler but was omitted from the collected poems: freely rendered, it goes

Willum's got a palace, much as had the Kaiser.
 The inside's rather nice, the outside rather nicer.
 Willum's seldom there; he finds his flat less testing.
 That's where he sees his friends or puts his feet up, resting.
 Does the State require the presidential presence? –
 Then Willum's back in t'palace, shaking hands by dozens.

Such mild, even affectionate *lèse-majesté*, though it shows how unsuited Brecht was to be the Communist poet laureate as which cold war propaganda depicted him, hardly seems an adequate pretext for withholding the poem. None the less this, like other contested aspects of the executors' publishing policy, almost certainly accords with what Brecht himself would have decided. For it must be remembered that if he was at bottom a doubter and a critic, a doggedly stoic pessimist, in the moment of crisis he was one who had chosen to take sides.

4

Among the poems which we for our part have had to leave out of the present selection are some of the longest: the 'Didactic poem on Human Nature', 'Die Erziehung der Hirse' and the so-called children's poem *Die drei Soldaten* of 1930–2. There is also the wartime *Kriegsfibel* set of sixty-nine four-line epigrams (much in the style of 'I read about tank battles', p. 352), where the poems are in effect captions to photographs cut from *Life* and other illustrated magazines: something that demands a comparable form of presentation. In our original choice of poems for translation we actually listed the first two of these, whose political content we had no wish to play down. However, it soon became a matter not only of deciding which were the essential poems but also of seeing which of them the various translators cared enough about to translate, and, over and above that, which could be translated into adequate English. This both eliminated certain poems which we would have liked to include and suggested others which succeeded particularly well in translation. It has not, however, stopped us from getting versions of much the greater part of what we wanted, so that the final selection is not all that far from what we meant it to be.

Where ours differs from the German collected editions of the 1960s is first in omitting those poems that are also to be found in the plays, notably the *Baal* and *Mahagonny* songs from the *Devotions*

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