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Bertolt Brecht

POETRY
AND
PROSE

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Bertolt Brecht
POETRY AND PROSE

The German Library: Volume 75

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Bertolt Brecht

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Introduction

Bertolt Brecht—A Modern Classic?

Let us begin with Dante Alighieri, with whom Bertolt Brecht was not altogether unfamiliar.

The political turmoil in Florence in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries—that is, the dispute between the Guelfs and the Ghibellines in which Dante was so deeply embroiled, and which drove him into exile for decades—all this is just a piece of local history that lies far in the past. Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, however, has remained one of the greatest testaments of world literature for over half a millennium.

To get an idea of Brecht and his importance in light of the most recent geopolitical events—specifically, the fall of a kind of socialism that never “actually existed,” but that took decades of laborious effort to construct—it will suffice to recall a Brechtian anecdote which, in its day, seemed almost disconcerting. When asked what would ever become of his writing, which was so obviously meant for a capitalistic society and could only be seen as antiquated and useless in a socialistic one, the dialectician (who had long since referred to himself as a “[modern] classic”) replied coolly: “My texts and theories are valid for a bourgeois, a capitalist society; they are also valid for socialist, communist, classless societies—and for all other forms of society in the future.” To be sure, the historical “turning point” (*Wende*) of 1989 came about quite differently than Brecht had expected or wished. But for his writing and its towering status within world literature, that historical event and its repercussions have just as much or as little importance as Dante’s political engagement and subsequently destroyed hopes.

Only in such a double perspective—as a temporally bound historical phenomenon and as a larger, lasting literary testament of classical dimensions—can the life and work of Bertolt Brecht be wholly understood and justly evaluated.

* * *

There can be no doubt that Brecht's basic experience of life was one of chaos. He experienced the universe as a seething hubbub of disorder: a desolate yet pleasurable frenzy out of which the individual emerges and into which he disappears again without a trace. Vultures and sharks, greased hangman's nooses and rotting wrecks, drunkards, pirates, and soldiers make up this world. Highly compelling is the image of the primeval forest, the all-nourishing, all-devouring jungle. This mythical forest is everywhere. In *In the Jungle of Cities* (one of Brecht's early plays), the same blind chaos rages that rages under the dripping leafy treetops of the jungle. The asphalt jungle and the tropical thicket intertwine.

The insatiable desire with which Brecht absorbed this experience of the world has often been documented. Even during his exile in California, many seem to have sensed this immense vitality. Quite correctly, too: for, contrary to the much-quoted assurance at the conclusion of *In the Jungle of Cities*, chaos, "the best of all times," was in Brecht's view never completely "used up." His impulsive desire to savor the orgiastic frenzy of the world and his delight in evoking images of it was, in fact, slowly sublimated to an unquenchable "curiosity about people," which, however, still persisted as desire, as a lust for life. Knowing that the thirst for pleasure is one of the greatest human virtues, as he paradoxically formulated it, Brecht never tired of indulging contentedly in the manifold pleasures of existence, the sensual as well as the intellectual. He praised whatever gives pleasure and thereby happiness. Baseness was no less important to him than the sublime. He praised the elegance of mathematical reasoning, the appreciative, critical sampling of a work of art, even the "joy of doubting." On the other hand, he praised girls' breasts; fresh, fragrant bread; goat cheese; beer; and the Finnish berry "plucked from the gray branch when

the early dew falls.” Brecht did not advocate indiscriminate guzzling, but rather an alert, sensitive, ever-increasing capacity for enjoyment, a quality that fills the spiritual sphere with solid sensuality and transfigures sensuality spiritually. In such pleasurable savoring of enjoyment—for “to create art is pleasurable”—Brecht’s experience of life appears in its most sublimated form.

This basic experience engendered a group of fundamental types that can be traced through all of Brecht’s works. The first of these incorporates the myth of an uninhibited thirst for existence: that is, the figure of Baal in Brecht’s first play of the same name, written between 1918 and 1919. Imbibing, stuffing himself, whoring, and singing dirty songs, Baal goes reeling through the “eternal forest” until its dark womb pulls him down. Galileo and the fat Ziffel from the *Refugee Dialogues* also show traces of Baal’s imprint. “I value the consolations of the flesh,” admits the Florentine; “I say: To enjoy yourself is an achievement.” For his part, Ziffel expounds on the advantages of the thirst for pleasure, believing in its moral value:

I have often wondered why leftist writers do not use juicy descriptions of human pleasures for the purpose of political agitation. . . . I always see only handbooks that inform us about the philosophy and morals of the upper class. Why are there no handbooks about eating to one’s heart’s content and the other comforts and conveniences that lower-class people never enjoy? As though the only thing missing in the lives of the lower class were Kant! It’s really sad that some people have never seen the pyramids of Egypt, but I find it even more oppressive that some people have never seen a filet in mushroom sauce. A simple description of the various types of cheese, palpably and vividly written, or an artistically conceived image of an authentic omelette would no doubt have a very educational effect.

Other figures personify not so much the enjoyment of life as its indestructibility. Highly significant in that respect is Brecht’s first and most famous collection of poems, his *Hauspostille* (“Domestic Breviary”) of 1927, to which was appended a plate showing a “water-fire-man,” drawn by Brecht’s friend Caspar Neher. This

hydatopyranthropus apparently is meant to illustrate the new species of man that is alone able to survive in the asphalt jungles, “which are burning below and already freezing on top.” The cunning, sensual survival artists that Brecht created later on are basically the same sort of indestructible elemental beings. All of them—Schweyk, Herr Keuner, or Azdak in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* of 1945—last longer than power. Partially by instinct, partially by persistent slyness, they adapt to all situations and, like Ziffel and Galileo, steadfastly refuse to become heroes. “I don’t have a backbone to crush,” explains Herr Keuner. Only the Chinese God of Happiness, about whom Brecht and the composer Paul Dessau wanted to write an opera in the 1940s, could have become a hero. Unfortunately, this work remained only a sketch. But in 1954, in the preface to the new edition of his early plays, Brecht gave at least an outline of the story. The short, fat, luxuriating god of “taste buds and testicles” comes, according to Brecht, after a great war to find the ruined cities, and incites the people to “fight for their personal happiness and well-being.” Arrested by the authorities and condemned to death, he resists all the arts of the executioners: he likes the taste of the poisons they give him; they cut off his head and it grows back; at the gallows, he performs a catchy, happy dance; and so on and so forth. “It is impossible to destroy completely man’s desire for happiness,” the poet summarizes. In other words, the God of Happiness, too, is an indestructible elemental being, a water-fire-man. One thing has changed since the 1920s, however. “Happiness is: Communism,” Brecht said to Dessau. The poet wishes to legitimize the barbaric triumph of senseless life and naked, blindly proliferating greed on the basis of socialism and ethics, and thereby achieve direction and meaning; egoism, materialism, and Marxism are to be identical.

Hence, Brecht argued that human pleasures and desires are essentially good and are to be promoted. What transforms them into their opposite is simply the jungle law of capitalistic society, which forces man to become either a beast of prey or a neighing clod of flesh. This insight and the conclusion to which it leads—namely, that human happiness can only be attained by over-

throwing the existing social order—describes the second basic experience that shaped Brecht's life. Retaining our terminology, it is Brecht's decisive educational experience (*Bildungserlebnis*) as opposed to his primal experience, or *Urerlebnis*. Contradictions, though, are certainly not lacking here. It was no accident that Brecht, three years before his death, was reluctantly forced to admit to himself that only the "tiger" qualified as an "artist of life." Verses written in exile reveal to what extent the fascination of chaos had remained alive within him: in these verses, the poet of class struggle voices his anxious concern that the sight of "so multifarious a world" could again meet with his "approval," with "pleasure at the contradictions of such a bloody life, you understand." By equating the desire for personal happiness of the individual with the fight for Communism, Brecht only covered over a dichotomy that in other instances had broken open all the more painfully.

As early as October 1926, Brecht began to lean toward Communism. At that time, the poet procured writings on socialism and Marxism, and asked for advice about which basic works he should study first. Shortly after, he wrote to his assistant Elisabeth Hauptmann: "I am eight feet deep in *Das Kapital*. I have to know this now exactly." Brecht, "thirsting for knowledge," and "searching through the years" for a model, as he himself wrote, had finally found what he needed. Full of eagerness and passion, he dedicated himself to this new experience. He demanded complete Marxism—not, as he mockingly put it in his *Refugee Dialogues*, "inferior" Marxism without Hegel or Ricardo. Brecht really wanted to "know it exactly." Thus, it is not unreasonable to compare his intensive study of Marxism with Schiller's lengthy study of Kant. Granted, the fact that the poet's first Marxist teachers, Fritz Sternberg and Karl Korsch, happened to be Communist heretics is not lacking in irony; yet it has an inner justification all the same. For Brecht the artist always remained, so to speak, a self-made Communist. Significantly, he never belonged to the party.

But just for that reason, we must be careful not to explain away Brecht's acceptance of Communism too quickly or easily. It is im-

possible to force the poet into the Procrustean bed of a simple psychological mechanism, as Martin Esslin tried to do. The motives which impelled Brecht were diverse. We have already spoken of his elemental “desire for pleasure” and the unrestricted intellectual curiosity that filled him. Artistic and philosophical considerations also play a part. Moreover, a certain predilection of the artist for the common people cannot be overlooked, either. In the “lower classes” and their struggles, the unaffiliated poet found the only thing with which he could “fully identify.” Last but surely not least, experiences like that of May 1, 1929, when the Berlin police shot recklessly at peacefully demonstrating workers, and over twenty people died, seem finally to have decided the issue for him.

Toward the end of his life, Bertolt Brecht described his motives for embracing Marxism in the following words: “At certain times in history, social classes struggle for the leadership of humanity, and the desire to be among the pioneers and forge ahead is very strong in those who are not completely degenerate.” Brecht’s partiality for the “lesser folk” had three roots: history, moral discernment, and spontaneous feeling. It is evident that this threesome, in reverse order, reflects exactly the connection between the two decisive experiences of the poet. What once appeared as an immutable world order now appears under the guise of historical evolution. No longer is the fate of humanity determined by an unknowable “attitude of this planet,” which man cannot influence, but by the state of society, created by man and therefore alterable by man. The “almost absolute determinism in which the young Brecht must have believed yields to the conviction that “man’s fate is man.” In consequence, for him, the born “describer of the world and behaviorist,” it was only a step from this point to the insight that the struggles of humankind take the form of class struggles.

This altered experience of the world also expresses itself in almost compulsively recurring images. Two of them are especially meaningful. According to whether examined in an ethical or historical aspect, original chaos—the primeval forest, the thicket, the jungle—becomes a “hell” or a “deluge.” The transition occurs slowly. For instance, in the opera *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, a work that

protests sharply against the “chaotic conditions of our cities” and the “unjust distribution of earthly possessions,” God suddenly appears in an interlude and condemns the drunken men to Hell. They answer:

Everyone’s striking. By our hair
You can’t drag us down to Hell
Because we’ve always been there.

Nevertheless, this work, written in 1928/29, ends with the bleak insight: “We can’t help ourselves or you or anyone.” Later works, on the other hand, such as *St. Joan of the Stockyards* (1929/30) or *The Good Woman of Sezuan* (1938/42), use the image of Hell in a completely Marxist manner. And Brecht treats the image of the Flood in exactly the same way: namely, at first in general terms, as a natural or historical catastrophe; finally, though, it clearly “breaks into the bourgeois world.” As he phrased it: “First, there is still land, but with puddles that are turning into ponds and straits; then, there is only the dark water far and wide, with islands that quickly crumble.”

Both conceptions (as well as the image of “paradise” for the promised new world) are biblical in origin. This is no coincidence. We know that Brecht answered an inquiry as to what had made the deepest impression on him with the statement: “You will laugh: the Bible.” It is less-well known that the fifteen-year-old Brecht wrote a play on this very theme. The play was “published” in the mimeographed Augsburg student magazine *The Harvest* in January 1914. *The Bible*, a short, six-and-a-half page one-act play, deals with nothing less than the imitation of Christ. A city in the Netherlands is under siege during the religious wars, and is threatened with destruction. The mayor’s daughter could save the city if she would yield herself up to the enemy captain. She is willing to sacrifice herself, but her grandfather’s legalistic rigorism forbids it. His self-righteousness wins out over the Cross. For a fifteen-year-old, to choose such a theme and work it out, however awkwardly, is a sign of poetic genius, but even more strikingly, an indication of the hold that Christian teachings had upon him.

As a friend of Brecht's tells us: "In his youth, at any rate, [he] hardly rejected the core of Christianity; he attacked what he perceived to be its falsification." A scene in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, showing the maid Grusha before the helpless child of the deposed governor, indicates what this genuine spirit of Christianity actually meant to Brecht. The poet could not possibly have overlooked the fact that the parable of the Good Samaritan is reiterated here. How else could he have written those moving lines, the conclusion of which is so foreign to a piece conceived as a celebration of two Soviet collective farms? Just listen:

Consider, woman, that one who does not hear a cry for help
But passes by with distracted ear will never
Hear again the hushed call of her lover nor
The blackbird in the dawn nor the contented
Sighs of the tired grape pickers at Angelus.

This natural morality was for Brecht the essence of Christianity. He called it *friendliness*, also *kindness*, but the proximity of such "words of the heart" (*Herzworte*) to Christian charity is unmistakable.

Otherwise, Brecht admittedly rejected the Christian heritage with scorn. Two of its traits enraged him most: the belief in a hereafter, and the church as an institution. Baptized and confirmed as a Protestant, he soon proceeded to demolish "the bourgeois belief in God." Brecht was not so much concerned with the existence of God as with the effect of belief in God on humanity. The poet weighed the value of God, as it were. For instance, his Herr Keuner answers the question about the existence of such a Being as follows:

I advise you to reflect whether, depending upon the answer to this question, your behavior would alter. If it would not, we can drop the question. If it would, then at least I can be of some help to you by telling you that your mind is already made up: you need a God.

Brecht himself no longer needed God. Explaining that he had no feeling whatsoever for metaphysics, he was convinced, along with Karl Marx, that the abolition of religion as the source of the illusory happiness of humankind was a necessary condition for true happiness.

Later on, Brecht's vital desire to abolish religion and to make happiness materialize in this world changes more and more into an ethical postulate. The wild rejoicing above the abyss is muted: the poet is now holding a trial. One of his most shattering accusations calling Christianity to account on the basis of its own spirit of charity is the parable play *The Good Woman of Sezuan*, the content of which, seemingly so Eastern, is in reality based on the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Brecht's reference to the fiery hail is unmistakable. Just as Lot receives the two angels of the Lord, so does the poor prostitute Shen Te receive the three wandering Chinese gods. But whereas in the Bible and in Brecht's like-named youthful play the town is actually destroyed by fire, the ending of *The Good Woman of Sezuan* is entirely different. No longer does God judge the world, which is Hell anyhow, but the world judges God. Since God (Who owes the good people a good world, as Shen Te sings) has organized His world so badly that even the best in it cannot be good, He is sentenced by the poet and condemned to nothingness. The scene in Brecht's parable play becomes a deadly tribunal, from which the three "illuminated ones" can extricate themselves only by means of a ridiculous ascension to Heaven—the very opposite of the *deus ex machina* solution.

This ambivalent relationship to Christianity is a hidden impulse that led to the poet's acceptance of Marxism. Without it, Brecht's encounter with Communism would never have attained its vital meaning. Precisely his Marxist inclinations, however, which Brecht felt had taught him absolute knowledge and perfectibility of the world, inevitably involved him from the start in tragedy. It manifested itself as an incurable dichotomy between the desire for personal happiness of the individual and the fight for Communism. Brecht realized, along with Shen Te:

To let none be destroyed, not even oneself
To bring happiness to all, including oneself
Is good.

But the attempt at transforming the categorical imperative of materialism into action not only split the good woman of Sezuan “like a lightning bolt in two,” but even more so the poet. Shen Te cannot be good since she lives in a world where no one can be good. Bertolt Brecht cannot be good because he fights for a world where everyone can finally be good—yet the road to this Paradise is through Hell.

Brecht the Marxist was faced with a terrible choice. In demanding the complete humanization of humankind—in which he believed—he was forced either to require also its complete dehumanization and objectification, or else to question the ideology itself, the highest value of his life and work. Indeed, he might even be faced with the necessity of negating this ideology. That schism comes to the fore most painfully in Brecht’s didactic play *The Measures Taken*, which, unbeknownst to the poet, evolved into a tragedy. It tells how four Communist agitators shoot one of their fellow fighters and throw him into a lime pit. This young comrade embodies natural morality, immediate succor here and now; the agitators embody ideology, the future and all-encompassing salvation of mankind. If the Marxist classics (i.e., Marx, Engels, and Lenin) do not concede that every individual is to be helped “at once and before everything else,” then, shouts the young comrade, they are “dirt” (*Dreck*). And he goes on: “I tear them up. For man, living man, cries out. His misery tears down the dikes of mere teaching.” The agitators, on the other hand, “empty pages” upon which “the Revolution writes its directions,” have stifled all spontaneous human feelings within themselves, and their sinister maxim is:

What baseness would you not commit
To root out baseness?

Such, if anything, are the ineluctable constraints of end and means.

Brecht could only cover over but not resolve this tragic dichotomy between ideology and natural morality. The Marxist poet must necessarily wish for both yet desire neither. Thus, in *The Measures Taken*, he decided in favor of the agitators and their “bloody hands,” but he banned all subsequent presentations of the play; and whereas he never tired of warning against pity and of making fun of self-sacrifice, he created touching female characters who not only take pity on their fellow humans but are even prepared to die for them, like Mute Kattrin in *Mother Courage and Her Children*. Only twice more, so it seems, did the poet express his profound misgivings about the highest value of his existence: during the infamous Stalinist purges and after the events of June 17, 1953, the workers’ uprising crushed by Russian tanks. One of the so-called *Buckow Elegies*, written at that time, ends with the lines:

Last night in a dream I saw fingers pointing at me
As a leper. They were worn with toil and
They were broken.

You don’t know! I shrieked
Conscience-stricken.

Did Bertolt Brecht, composing these lines, think also of the First of May, 1929? What might he have felt?

But Brecht shifted his glance from the Gorgonian visage of tragedy. He did not want to perceive it. Another poem from his later years reads:

Don’t believe your eyes
Don’t believe your ears.
What you see is darkness.
Perhaps it is light.

Instead of insisting on utter doubt and, in the long run, despair, Brecht accepted the ignominy of coming to terms with the frailty of

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