BEYOND PERSONAL FRUSTRATION: The Poetry of Bertolt Brecht

POETRY has played a lesser role in modern German literature than prose. Bertolt Brecht, beyond a doubt the greatest living German poet and possibly the greatest living European playwright, is the only poet one can place in the same category of relevance as Kafka and Broch in German, Joyce in English, and Proust in French literature. Born in 1898, he is of T. E. Lawrence’s generation — the first generation, that is, of what one is tempted to call the “three lost generations,” hoping by this pluralization somewhat to mitigate the self-pitying attitude to political reality expressed in the usual phrase. Yet this sentimentality contains more than a grain of truth. If productivity depends upon a “placid pure development” (Hebbel’s *ruhige reine Entwicklung*), then every generation of our century has been equally “lost”; the first, because its initial experience was the battlefields of the First World War; the second, because the effective lesson of inflation and unemployment at once taught it the instability of whatever had been left intact after preliminary destruction, as it were, of the European world; the third had the choice of being educated by Nazism, or the Spanish Civil War, or the Moscow trials. Finally, all three generations went into the Second World War: as soldiers, as refugees and exiles, as resisters, as inmates of concentration camps, or as civilians under a rain of bombs. This last experience, the Second World War, was a potent aid to reconciling the age differences between the generations. They are today all in the same situation; and if they attempt to look at themselves, their lives, and their possibilities with the eyes of the 19th Century, they invariably produce a literature where individuals complain of psychological deformation and social torture, personal frustration and general disillusion.

This essentially individualistic attitude — individualistic though it frequently has as subject the decomposition of the individual — never entered into anything that Brecht wrote. At an early date he was more struck by the misfortunes of the time than his own unhappiness and solved all personal problems by adopting a stoic attitude with respect to every-

1 SELECTED POEMS. By Bertolt Brecht. Translated by H. R. Hays. Reynal & Hitchcock. $3.50
thing that might happen to himself. The first startling thing in the present selection (which gives a fair insight into the best of all his periods) is the consistency of this attitude. The first poem, "Concerning Poor B. B.," and the last, "To Posterity," are separated by more than twenty years; yet they read like two consecutive pieces. Brecht, in the early twenties, wrote:

Von diesen Staedten wird bleiben: der durch sie hindurchging, der Wind!
Froehlich machet das Haus den Esser: er leert es.
Wir wissen, dass wir Vorlauefige sind
Und nach uns wird kommen: nichts Nennenswertes.

Bei den Erdbeben, die kommen werden, werde ich hoffentlich
Meine Virginia nicht ausgehen lassen durch Bitterkeit,
Ich, Bertold Brecht, in die Asphaltstaedte verschlagen
Aus den schwarzen Wael dern in meiner Mutter in frueher Zeit.

The translator's English for this is:

There shall remain of these cities but the wind that blew through them!
The house maketh the feaster merry: it is emptied out.
We know that we are makeshift
And after us will come — practically nought.

In the earthquakes to come it is to be hoped
I shan't allow bitterness to quench my cigar's glow,
I, Bertolt Brecht, astray in cement cities
Brought from the woods in my mother long ago.

And he only sums it up in one of his latest poems, perhaps the most beautiful one in this present selection:

Wirklich, ich lebe in finsteren Zeiten!
Das arglose Wort is toericht. Eine glatte Stirn
Deutet auf Unempfindlichkeit hin. Der Lachende
Hat die furchtbare Nachricht
Nur noch nicht empfangen.

In die Staedte kam ich zu der Zeit der Unordnung,
Als da Hunger herrschte.
Unter die Menschen kam ich zu der Zeit des Aufruhrs
Und ich empordie mich mit ihnen.
So verging meine Zeit
Die auf Erden mir gegeben war.

Ihr, die ihr auftauchen werdet aus der Flut
In der wir untergegangen sind,
Gedenkt
Wenn ihr von unsern Schwaechen sprucht
Auch der finsteren Zeit
Der ihr entronnen seid.

Gedenkt unsrer
Mit Nachsicht.
Which is translated:

Indeed I live in the dark ages!
A guileless word is an absurdity. A smooth forehead betokens
A hard heart. He who laughs
Has not yet heard
The terrible tidings.

. . . .
I came to the cities in a time of disorder
When hunger ruled.
I came among men in a time of uprising
And I revolted with them.
So the time passed away
Which on earth was given me.
. . . .
You, who shall emerge from the flood
In which we are sinking,
Think—
When you speak of our weaknesses,
Also of the dark time
That brought them forth.
. . . .
Do not judge us
Too harshly.

Before going on, I should like to justify my quotation of the German
din. original together with Hays's translation. It is, of course, needless
to insist upon the fact that poetry defies translation if the translator is
not the equal of the poet he is translating. (Who would dare to translate
Hoelderlin? and how many, alas, have dared to translate Goethe?)
Hays certainly has done his best, yet accuracy and Brecht's peculiar
precision are so often sacrificed to not very successful English verse that
one wonders whether a good prose translation would not have been more
useful in a bi-lingual edition. The translation problem has an especially
sad aspect in Brecht's case. There is not only the fact that he has remained,
as the jacket rightly states, "one of the least known" figures in contempo-
rary literature, overshadowed by dozens of mediocrities and a few good
writers who yet are of lesser relevance; this inevitable fate of the poet was

2. Compare Hays's translation of "Concerning Poor B. B." and "Legend of the Dead
Soldier" with the prose translation by Clement Greenberg in a remarkably good essay
on Brecht in Partisan Review. (March/April 1941). Greenberg is never forced into such
serious distortions as the following: The first line of "Poor B. B." mentions "black
forests" and not the "Black Forest," a mountain range in Southern Germany. The
second line, "Meine Mutter trug mich in die Staedte hinein," Hays translates as "My
mother carried me to town," thereby sacrificing the subject of the poem, which treats
of cities, to the English idiom. In the third stanza, Brecht is "zu den Leuten freundlich,"
which indicates aloofness and does not mean "I make friends with people"—Greenberg
says, correctly, "I am friendly with people." Difficult to understand, moreover, is why
"Litany of Breath" and "Grand Chorale of Thanksgiving" were included at all. The
poetic effect of both depends upon the reader's knowing by heart certain well-known
German verses ironically quoted in an incongruous context.
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formerly compensated for to a certain degree by the existence of an educated audience fluent in two or three languages in addition to its own. This audience no longer exists; multi-lingual people of today have learnt their languages when forced by events, as Brecht says, to change their "country more often than (their) shoes"; and though they may carry an understanding of foreign literatures along with them, such an itinerant audience is never an adequate substitute for an appreciation rooted in its own soil. As far as Brecht is concerned, there is the further unhappy irony that no other writer has so consistently attempted to reach an international audience. Brecht has eagerly borrowed from English and French poetry (once to the point of being accused, stupidly, of plagiarism), from the formalism of Japanese drama, and from Chinese sayings. The "moon of Alabama," the "Island of Manhattan," "Lake Erie," the "wet Ohio," the "City Mahagonny," the "ricebarge coolies" are not the backdrop of cheap romanticism; they are the precise expression of his conviction that the experiences and conclusions of the men of this century are roughly the same everywhere, that "man needs help from every creature born," and that this borrowing is one of the necessary preparations "to lay the foundations of kindness" until "at last it comes to pass that man can help his fellow man."

Brecht's personal stoicism, based on the profound insight that "if my luck leaves me I am lost," corresponds to his general view of human life as having the meaning of a task in the world. What for others was the feeling of belonging to a "lost generation," for him is simply life in "dark times" when "street led to the quicksand, speech betrayed me to the slaughterer," so that "there was little I could do." He is lost because the task is too big; if he feels himself sinking in the flood, he appeals to those who will emerge from it, and does not glance longingly backward at those who are not yet endangered. There is not the slightest trace in him of envy of the past, nor even irritation at the great crowd of happy fools who have "not yet heard the terrible tidings." Brecht escapes all the temptations of mere psychology by realizing that it would be deadly, as well as ridiculous, to measure the flood of events in which he is caught up by the yardstick of individual aspirations — to meet, for instance, the international catastrophe of unemployment with the bourgeois concept of success or failure in a job, or the catastrophe of war with the ideal of a well-rounded personality, or exile with a complaint about lost fame.

This anti-psychological insistence upon the events themselves is the
chief reason for Brecht's employing the poetic forms he does: the ballad (as contrasted with the lyric) in poetry, and the "epic theatre" (as contrasted with tragedy) in drama. His plays break with a tradition that insisted on the conflict or development of one character in the world; they concentrate on a logical course of events in which men, abstracted into types, under circumstances which the audience is supposed to recognize immediately as their own, behave rightly or wrongly and are judged by the objective requirements of the events themselves; or, as in the Dreigroschenoper, they lay bare the functioning of a world in which businessmen behave like criminals, by showing a dramatic world in which criminals behave like businessmen. The exception to the rule is Galileo (in the play Galileo), who is less of a type and more of a character, who loves the world and its goods more than any of Brecht's very puritanical heroes ever could afford, who can't resist "an old wine and a new thought" simply because he is genuinely fond of both and not because he wants to put forth a few anti-hypocritical reflections on the "invigorating power of money." Galileo is more mature, more relaxed, so to speak, than anything Brecht ever wrote. (America may have had this effect upon his work; it is after all no small matter to live for years in a country where you only hear of starving children overseas but don't meet them every other day around the corner.) But Galileo is also a type though a new one in Brecht's repertoire; he is the type of the man who is concerned only with truth, a truth that has become the active ingredient in the whole structure of life and the world. And strange as it may seem in a poet, there are any number of indications that a passion for truth is the central passion of the "wissensdurstigen Brecht."

A similar insistence on events is evident in Brecht's poetry, which avoids individual moods and their lyrical transformation into all-fascinating, all-convincing modes of existence of everything that is. In his ballads Brecht takes some single momentous event and shows men not as types who act upon the world, but as sufferers of some extremity, some natural or man-made catastrophe. Man's virtue is invariably a mixture of half-cynical courage, stoic pride, and curiosity in the face of gruesome and destructive forces. It is obvious that this form owes its revival to the authentic experience of the First World War, which indeed was mainly an experience of helplessness. The ballad with its folk tradition of great sadness and the unhappy ending fitted this experience so well that the ballad form survived all the merely experimental modernistic efforts of
post-war German poetry. The heroes of the early pieces of the *Hauspostille* are adventurers, pirates, professional soldiers, but also mothers who murdered their children, or children who murdered their parents. Brecht's sympathy for them had at that time hardly a social note; it did not yet need justification, it was a matter of course to side with the "Moerdern denen viel Leides geschah" ("murderers sorely afflicted with grief").

Preoccupation with murder, destruction, death and decay was a common characteristic of the time and in Brecht's case is easily misunderstood. Its most prominent literary exponents, Gottfried Benn in Germany and Céline in France (both later enthusiastic admirers of Nazism), with their bitter resentful and half-pathological glorification of decay for its own sake, have little if anything in common with Brecht's wild and beautiful songs full of a glorious and triumphant vitality.

Von Sonne krank und ganz von Regen zerfressen  
Geraubten Lorbeer im zerrauften Haar  
Hat er seine ganze Jugend, nur nicht ihre Traueme vergessen  
Lange das Dach, nie den Himmel, der drueber war.

("Sick from sun, by rainy weather battered,/With stolen laurels, his fierce hair torn,/ His youth, not its dreams, he has forgotten,/ The roof, not the sky, under which he was born.") Brecht's early violent cynicism was a rather belated reaction to the overwhelming discovery that, as Nietzsche had said, "God was dead" — and man was free to live and love howsoever he pleased, thanking whomsoever he pleased for the existence of the world. Brecht's pirates and adventurers have the hellish pride of absolutely carefree men, men who will yield only to catastrophic forces but never to the daily worries of a respectable life nor to the higher worries concerning a future eternity. He realized that in Nietzsche's dictum there might be contained the possibility of a radical liberation from fear; at any rate he obviously thought (in the "Grand Chorale of Thanksgiving") that anything would be preferable to hoping for paradise and fearing hell.

Lobet die Kaelte, die Finsternis und das Verderben!  
Schauet hinan:  
Es kommt nicht auf euch an  
Und ihr koennt unbesorgt sterben.

("Praise ye the cold, the darkness and ruin! Look into the heaven: You don't matter. And you may die without fear.")

The intimate relationship long perceived between the experience of war and slaughter and this peculiar glorification of life amidst death and
darkness has recently been very well explained by Sartre: "When the instruments are broken and unusable, when plans are blasted and effort is useless, the world appears with a childlike and terrible freshness, without support, without paths" ("What is Literature," Partisan Review, January 1948). To this quality of "terrible freshness" with which the world emerged after the slaughter, corresponded the horrible innocence (best represented in the ballad, "Apfelboeck, or the Lily of the Field") of men who had lost all past tasks and had not yet found new ones. Compared to this jubilant cynicism, all poetry that simply went along the beaten paths of a rich tradition, taking part in what one used to call the "inventory sale of all values," was not only inadequate but immediately sounded like mere literature.

This does not mean that Brecht had no sense of tradition; he simply did not believe in it any longer. His masterful, elaborate parodies (see "Litany of Breath" and "Grand Chorale of Thanksgiving" in this selection and the choruses in the play Die Heilige Johanna der Schlachthoefe) would defeat their own purpose if they were simply parody. Brecht's travesty has many meanings and many purposes: it forces open the old forms by adapting them to a new, revolutionary content, and thereby not only destroys but also preserves; it shows by its very mastery that every poet worthy of the name must, as a matter of craftsmanship, know how to handle the traditional forms; but it also contains a definite destructive element: the new content given traditional forms is meant to expose the old poets, to reveal what they did not say, to unmask their silence. Thus, in "The Litany of Breath," Brecht uses Goethe's "Ueber allen Wipfeln ist Ruh" in order to show that this is also the quiet of those who look quietly on while an old woman starves; and that the silence of the birds — "die Voeglein schweigen im Walde" — is also that same silence in which people watch one man who did not keep quiet and was killed. In other words, Brecht's very effective rebellion against classical forms and tradition never is the rebellion of the up-to-date against the outdated and is never prompted by a desire to express a new kind of sensibility. It simply claims that beauty has also beautified a hideous reality. Respect and reverence for the undeniable greatness of tradition is paid very delicately by the purity and poetically irreproachable quality of the parody itself.

The deepest motive underlying Brecht's break with tradition, however, is neither the cause of social justice nor, certainly, his dialectical-materialist approach to history. Much more genuine in him is a passionate
anger at the course of the world, where it has always been only the victors who have chosen what is to be recorded and remembered by mankind. His poetry is written not only for the underprivileged, but for all those, living or dead, whose voice has never been heard on earth.

Denn die Einen stehn im Dunklen
Und die andern stehn im Licht;
Und man sieht nur die im Lichte,
Die im Dunklen sieht man nicht.

This is translated by Martin Greenberg:

For some stand in the shadow
And others in the light;
You don’t see those in the shadow —
Only those standing in the light.

Brecht’s whole philosophy, in so far as it bears on his poetry, is formulated in these four lines from the *Dreigroschenoper*. The same theme recurs in the “Ballad of the Waterwheel.” These are not songs of “social significance,” not plaiidoyers for the poor, but the expression of a passionate longing for a world in which all can be seen and heard, the passionate wrath against a history that remembered a few and forgot so many, a history that under the pretense of remembering caused us to forget. And here too lies the most valid reason for his choice of the ballad, which in German tradition had always been the folk form of poetry, the tradition of unrecorded poetry, in which the people, condemned to darkness and oblivion, attempted to record their own history and create their own poetical eternity.

IT IS ONLY NATURAL that the limitations of a poetry so intimately tied up with a very precise and intelligent way of thinking should be limitations of understanding. It is entirely to Brecht’s credit that he writes badly when he does not see the truth — however distressing it may occasionally be to see how badly he can write. Here the conscious loss of sensibility has taken its revenge.

One is tempted to draw up a list of the subjects which Brecht understands, and a list of those which he misses. In the first category belong all pre-war phenomena, such as hypocrisy, exploitation, and poverty; all war phenomena, such as senseless violence and the ridiculous helpfulness of the individual; all post-war phenomena such as unemployment, rebellion, and exile. In the second category belong all fascist and totalitarian
events, such as terror, concentration camps, anti-Semitism. (The last instance is well illustrated in "The Jew, A Misfortune for the People," where he tries to explode an antisemitic argument by a *reductio ad absurdum* and produces an argument which, to an anti-Semite, is highly plausible: "Since all misfortunes are produced by Jews, it must be that the Regime is a product of the Jews. Is this not obvious!" There are quite a few anti-Semites in Germany and elsewhere who have discovered that Hitler was a Jew or the product of a Jewish conspiracy.) During the 'thirties when Hitler had eliminated unemployment and the standard of living of all classes had considerably risen, Brecht wrote against Nazism in terms of hunger and unemployment. It speaks for the present selection and the literary judgment of its editor that only a few songs of this period have been included. Of these, the "Burial of the Agitator in a Zinc Coffin" is most representative. The mutilated corpses of the people who died in concentration camps were shipped home to their families for burial in sealed zinc coffins. The sealed zinc coffin was obviously intended to conceal and reveal at the same time, and is a perfect example of those hide-and-show tactics of which the Nazis were masters. In addition to thus officially publicizing something whose mere mention was punished as *Greuelmaerchenpropaganda*, the zinc coffin was an effective warning to the population: Look what might happen to you! It has to be hidden in a zinc coffin because no one could stand the sight of it! Brecht deals with this subject as though it were simply the case of an agitator who "has agitated in favor of many things: for eating-your-fill, for a-roof-over-your-head, for feeding-your-children," etc. The point is, that an agitator with such slogans would have been so ridiculous in 1936 that nobody would have needed to put him out of the way. Moreover, the real horror, the *way* he died, is completely overlooked, and the reader is left with the impression that the agitator's fate was only slightly worse than the fate an opponent of any other form of government would undergo. This meant in practice that Nazism was made harmless and almost respectable.

In the meantime, however, or since the *Svendborger Gedichte*, Brecht has moved steadily away from mere propaganda slogans, and in the *Galileo* he is again dealing with one of the major predicaments of our time: the search for truth in freedom.

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