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On the revolutionary poetry of Bertolt Brecht.

‘ The poet has watched the people’s mouth.’ - Bertolt Brecht.

Bertolt Brecht is probably best known for his experimental plays and the dramatic theory he developed around them. But he was also one of the most important poets of the 20th century and arguably the most significant Marxist poet of this epoch, he wrote 1,500 poems. But he also entered into debates over the nature of ‘Socialist Realism’, which he deplored, with Lukacs in the 1920s/30s, a polemic which divided Marxist aesthetics into the 1960’s and beyond. Therefore this analysis will address these issues: 1) what were the conditions and circumstances that moulded Brecht’s creative work and aesthetics 2) the debate between Brecht and Lukacs on the nature of socialist writing 3) the content and nature of Brecht’s Marxist poetry and 4) Brecht’s great error of not actively supporting a worker’s uprising in East Berlin in 1953 which was crushed by Russian military power and his subsequent withdrawal from the field of Marxist poetry and aesthetics and 6) Brecht’s impact on the Situationalist International.

Brecht was born in 1898 and would therefore experience all the major events which shaped the 20th century until 1956. Of course the first crisis was the First World War which Lenin had correctly analysed as the result of competing Capitals exporting ‘finance capital’ in an attempt to stabilize and expand their own capitalist economies and the inevitable conflict which would ensue i.e. World War 1. Brecht was a military orderly towards the end of the war and this experience of imperialist war and its bloody results were an important developmental factor for the young Brecht. No longer would the tradition of Goethe and Romanticism dominate German literature; the world had been objectively changed. An early poem by Brecht captures his horror of and the hypocrisy of the war (Brecht had not had access to Marxist or Leninist writing at this time) called:

'The Legend of the Dead soldier' 'And when the war was four springs old And of peace there was not a breath The soldier took the logical step And died a hero's death.

The war however was not yet done So the Kaiser was displeased to be sure That the soldier had given up like that To him it seemed premature.

The soldier is then dug up and pronounced fit for active service. Accompanied by an army Chaplin and draped in a German flag he is escorted through cheering crowds on his way back to the front line. So many were dancing around him now That the soldier could hardly be seen You could only see him from the sky above And there only stars can gleam

...

The stars are not forever there. Daylight gives new breath.' - Bertolt Brecht.

The next significant stage was Brecht being introduced, by two women who were both committed communists and also lovers of Brecht named Helene Weigel and Elisabeth Huaptmann, too classical Marxist texts. Huaptmann noted in her workbook on 25th October 1926:

'Brecht obtains works on socialism and Marxism and asks for lists of the basic works to study first.' - Elisabeth Huaptmann.

By 1929 and the Wall Street Crash which was followed by the Great Depression of the 1930's Brecht had studied Marxist economics and philosophy, some Lenin and early Mao Tse-tung on dialectics and the role of the artist in the revolutionary struggle. But fascism was on the rise throughout Europe; now Brecht was ideologically prepared for it and in this poem delineates what he believed should be the attitude of the poet towards it:

'Within me here is a conflict between delight in the blooming apple-tree And the horror of the painter's* speeches. But only the second Drives me to my desk.' - Bertolt Brecht

*Brecht always referred to Hitler as 'the painter' because he had been a house painter.

Therefore it is possible to discern four elements in the formation of Brecht's poetry: 1) imperialist war, 2) embracing Marxism as a world-view, 3) the inevitable decline of capitalism and 4) the rise of fascism. His aesthetic was rooted in the class-struggle; you can perceive his use of everyday language and form. Brecht's position became:

'For art to become "unpolitical" means only to ally itself with the 'ruling group" - Bertolt Brecht.

However during this period there was a debate within Marxism regarding the correct 'line' on literature. Lukacs argued, in the 1920/30's, that 19th century realist novels reveal the true horrors of capitalism with 'typical' characters, hence the need for 'socialist realist' novels. Brecht disagreed and argued that the 19th century realist form is outdated and has no capacity to radicalize the oppressed and that new 'dialectical' forms were necessary. He argued in the 1930's against those who pursued the official Moscow 'line' of socialist realism:

'They are, to put it bluntly, enemies of production*. Production makes them feel uncomfortable. You never know where you are with production; production is unforeseeable. you never know what's going to come out. And they themselves don't want to produce. They want to play the apparatchik *and exercise control over other people.' - Bertolt Brecht

* For Brecht all 'production' is artistic 'production', a free 'collective act' (Brecht) * Apparatchik: Communist Party functionary in the former Soviet Union. Marx and Engels were against 'applied tendency' in literature and Marx described it as: 'The most wretched offal of socialist literature.' - Karl Marx.

Brecht used everyday language in his poetry but he poses a dialectical question, it demands a response. In the poem: 'The Sixteen-Year Old Seamstress Emma Ries before the Magistrate' Brecht exhibits two essential aspects of his poetry; 1) that it is worker centered and 2) that it incorporates a knowledge and application of Dialectical Materialism, the science of the proletariat. The poem is about a sixteen year old working class woman who has been caught distributing revolutionary leaflets. She is in a material situation, not in the vacuous spheres of bourgeois speculation. It is also the inevitable dialectical situation workers are objectively drawn into...she is in conflict with the oppressors. So here is the dialectical contradiction and how Brecht does resolve this contradiction, of course in the same manner the working class must ultimately resolve it, by revolutionary synthesis:

'As reply, she stood up and sang the Internationale When the magistrate shook his head She shouted: 'Stand up! This is the Internationale!' - Bertolt Brecht.

Therefore it is clear that in his poetry Brecht is creating a new tradition in German poetry, moving away from the themes and methods of Goethe and the Romantics and towards the future of communism.

However once ensconced in the German Democratic Republic in the role of Staatsdichter (state poet), a role he was never comfortable in Brecht made the biggest mistake of his life. It was 1953 and a spontaneous workers uprising erupted in East Berlin, after hesitation he finally supported the Stalinist elite in calling for Russian tanks to crush the revolt. He never recovered from this error and retreated into rustic silence and a poetic wasteland. But Brecht was not entirely curbed by this error and in the aftermath of the rebellion wrote one of his best anti-Stalinist/anti-capitalist poems:

'The Solution.' ...Would it not be easier In that case for the government To dissolve the people And elect another.' - Bertolt Brecht.

Finally I would like to examine the relationship between Brecht and the Situationalist International's concept of detournement 'anything can be used' (Guy Debord) to disrupt the alienation within the 'Society of the Spectacle.' To put it more abruptly: 'Plagiarism is necessary. Progress implies it.' (Debord). It is necessary to place this in the context that for the Situationalists art was concluded when the Spartacus League failed to bring German dada to fruition in the workers revolution of 1919. They reflected with pleasure that Brecht had commented:

'That he had made some cuts in the classics of theatre in order to make the performances more educative...close to the revolutionary orientation we are calling for.' - Debord/Wolman.

Brecht encapsulates his aesthetic in the poem:

'Hymn to Communism'. 'It is so simple which is so difficult.' - Bertolt Brecht

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