

# Bertolt Brecht

## Against Georg Lukács

### I

#### [The Essays of Georg Lukács]

I have occasionally wondered why certain essays by Georg Lukács, although they contain so much valuable material, nevertheless have something unsatisfying about them. He starts from a sound principle, and yet one cannot help feeling that he is somewhat remote from reality. He investigates the decline of the bourgeois novel from the heights it occupied when the bourgeoisie was still a progressive class. However courteous he is in his treatment of contemporary novelists, in so far as they follow the example of the classic models of the bourgeois novel and write in at least a formally realistic manner, he cannot help seeing in them too a process of decline. He is quite unable to find in them a realism equal to that of the classical novelists in depth, breadth and attack. But how could they be expected to rise above their class in this respect? They inevitably testify, too, to a decay in the technique of the novel. There is plenty of technical skill; it is merely that technique has acquired a curious technicality – a kind of tyranny if you like. A formalistic quality insinuates itself even into realistic types of construction on the classical model.

Some of the details here are curious. Even those writers who are conscious of the fact that capitalism impoverishes, dehumanizes, mechanizes human beings, and who fight against it, seem to be part of the same process of impoverishment: for they too, in their writing, appear to be less concerned with elevating man, they rush him through events, treat his inner life as a *quantité négligeable* and so on. They too rationalize, as it were. They fall into line with the 'progress' of physics. They abandon strict causality and switch to statistical causality, by aban-

doning the individual man as a causal nexus and making statements only about large groups. They even – in their own way – adopt Schrödinger's uncertainty principle. They deprive the observer of his authority and credit and mobilize the reader against himself, advancing purely subjective propositions, which actually characterize only those who make them (Gide, Joyce, Döblin).<sup>1</sup> One can follow Lukács in all these observations and subscribe to his protests.

But then we come to the positive and constructive postulates of Lukács's conception. With a wave of his hand he sweeps away 'inhuman' technique. He turns back to our forefathers and implores their degenerate descendants to emulate them. Are writers confronted by a dehumanized man? Has his spiritual life been devastated? Is he driven through existence at an intolerable pace? Have his logical capacities been weakened? Is the connection between things no longer so visible? Writers just have to keep to the Old Masters, produce a rich life of the spirit, hold back the pace of events by a slow narrative, bring the individual back to the centre of the stage, and so on. Here specific instructions dwindle into an indistinct murmur. That his proposals are impracticable is obvious. No one who believes Lukács's basic principle to be correct, can be surprised at this. Is there no solution then? There is. The new ascendant class shows it. It is not a way back. It is not linked to the good old days but to the bad new ones. It does not involve undoing techniques but developing them. Man does not become man again by stepping out of the masses but by stepping back into them. The masses shed their dehumanization and thereby men become men again – but not the same men as before. This is the path that literature must take in outrage when the masses are beginning to attract to themselves everything that is valuable and human, when they are mobilizing people against the dehumanization produced by capitalism in its fascist phase. It is the element of capitulation, of withdrawal, of utopian idealism which still lurks in Lukács's essays and which he will undoubtedly overcome, that makes his work, which otherwise contains so much of value, unsatisfactory; for it gives the impression that what concerns him is enjoyment rather than struggle, a way of escape rather than an advance.

<sup>1</sup> Alfred Döblin (1878–1957): German novelist and exponent both of Expressionism and *Neue Sachlichkeit* (Neo-Objectivity). His major work was *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929), written under the influence of Joyce and Dos Passos.

## II

## On the Formalistic Character of the Theory of Realism

The formalistic nature of the theory of realism is demonstrated by the fact that not only is it exclusively based on the form of a few bourgeois novels of the previous century (more recent novels are merely cited in so far as they exemplify the same form), but also exclusively on the particular genre of the *novel*. But what about realism in lyric poetry, or in drama? These are two literary genres which – specially in Germany – have achieved a high standard.

I shall continue in a personal vein so as to provide concrete material for my argument. My activity is, as I see it myself, much more diverse than our theorists of realism believe. They give a totally one-sided picture of me. At the present time I am working on two novels, a play and a collection of poems. One of the novels is historical and requires extensive research in the field of Roman history. It is satirical. Now the novel is the chosen sphere of our theorists. But I am not being malicious if I say that I am unable to get the smallest tip from them for my work on this novel: *The Business Affairs of Herr Julius Caesar*. The procedure, taken over by 19th century novelists from the drama, of massing all manner of personal conflicts in long, expensive drawing-room scenes, is of no use to me. For large sections I use the diary form. It has proved necessary for me to change the point of view for other sections. The montage of the points of view of the two fictitious authors incorporates my point of view. I suppose that this sort of thing ought not to have proved necessary. Somehow it does not fit the intended pattern. But this technique has proved to be necessary for a firm grasp of reality, and I had purely realistic motives in adopting it. My play, on the other hand, is a cycle of scenes which deals with life under the Nazis. So far I have written 27 separate scenes. Some of them fit roughly into the 'realistic' pattern X, if one shuts one eye. Others don't – absurdly enough, because they are very short. The whole work doesn't fit into it at all. I consider it to be a realistic play. I learnt more for it from the paintings of the peasant Breughel than from treatises on realism.

I scarcely dare to speak about the second novel, on which I have been working for a long time, so complicated are the problems involved and so primitive is the vocabulary which the aesthetic of realism – in its

present state – offers me. The formal difficulties are enormous; I have constantly to construct models. Anyone who saw me at work would think I was only interested in questions of form. I make these models because I wish to represent reality. As far as my lyric poetry goes, there too I take a realistic point of view. But I feel that one would have to proceed with extreme caution if one wished to write about it. On the other hand, there would be a great deal to be learnt about realism in the novel and drama.

While I am looking through a stack of historical tomes (they are written in four languages, in addition to translations from two ancient languages) and attempting, full of scepticism, to verify a particular fact, rubbing the sand from my eyes the whole time, so to speak, I have vague notions of colours at the back of my mind, impressions of particular seasons of the year; I hear inflections without words, see gestures without meaning, think of desirable groupings of unnamed figures, and so on. The images are extremely undefined, in no way exciting, rather superficial, or so it seems to me. But they are there. The 'formalist' in me is at work. As the significance of Clodius's Funeral-Benefit Associations slowly dawns on me and I experience a certain pleasure in the discovery, I think: 'If one could only write a very long, transparent, autumnal, crystal-clear chapter with an irregular curve, a kind of red wave-form running through it! The City puts its democrat Cicero into the consulate; he bans the armed democratic street clubs; they turn into peaceful Funeral-Benefit Associations; the leaves are golden in the autumn. An unemployed man's funeral costs ten dollars; you pay a subscription; if you are too long in dying, it is a bad bargain. But we have the wave-form; sometimes weapons suddenly appear in these Associations; Cicero is driven from the city; he has losses; his villa is burnt down; it costs millions; how many? Let us look it up – no – it's not relevant here. Where were the street clubs on 9 November 91 BC? 'Gentlemen, I cannot give any guarantees' (Caesar).

I am at an early stage of my work.

Since the artist is constantly occupied with formal matters, since he constantly forms, one must define what one means by *formalism* carefully and practically, otherwise one conveys nothing to the artist. If one wants to call everything that makes works of art unrealistic *formalism*, then – if there is to be any mutual understanding – one must not construct the concept of formalism in purely aesthetic terms. Formalism on the one side – contentism on the other. That is surely too primitive and metaphysical. Looked at purely in terms of aesthetics, the concept

presents no special difficulties. For instance if someone makes a statement which is untrue – or irrelevant – merely because it rhymes, then he is a formalist. But we have innumerable works of an unrealistic kind which did not become so because they were based on an excessive sense of form.

We can remain entirely comprehensible and yet give the concept a further, more productive, more practical meaning. We have only to look aside from literature for a moment and descend into 'everyday life'. What is formalism there? Let us take the expression: *Formally he is right*. That means that actually he is not right, but he is right according to the form of things and only according to this form. Or: *Formally the task is solved* means that actually it is not solved. Or: *I did it to preserve the form*. That means that what I did is not very important; I do what I want to do, but I preserve outward forms and in this way I can best do what I want. When I read that the autarky of the Third Reich is perfect *on paper*, then I know that this is a case of political formalism. National Socialism is socialism in form – another case of political formalism. We are not dealing with an excessive sense of form.

If we define the concept in this way, it becomes both comprehensible and important. We are then in a position, if we return to literature (without this time abandoning everyday life altogether), to characterize and unmask as formalistic even works which do not elevate literary form over social content and yet do not correspond to reality. We can even unmask works which are realistic in form. There are a great many of them.

By giving the concept of formalism this meaning, we acquire a yardstick for dealing with such phenomena as the *avant-garde*. For a vanguard can lead the way along a retreat or into an abyss. It can march so far ahead that the main army cannot follow it, because it is lost from sight and so on. Thus its unrealistic character can become evident. If it splits off from the main body, we can determine why and by what means it can reunite with it. *Naturalism* and a certain type of *anarchistic montage* can be confronted with their social effects, by demonstrating that they merely reflect the symptoms of the surface of things and not the deeper causal complexes of society. Whole tracts of literature which seem, judging by their form, to be radical, can be shown to be purely reformist, merely formal efforts which supply solutions *on paper*.

Such a definition of formalism also helps the writing of novels, lyric poetry and drama, and – last but not least – it does away once and for all with a certain formalistic style of criticism which appears to be interested

only in the formal, which is dedicated to particular forms of writing, confined to one period, and attempts to solve problems of literary creation, even when it 'builds in' occasional glances at the historical past, in purely literary terms.

In Joyce's great satirical novel, *Ulysses*, there is – besides the use of various styles of writing and other unusual features – the so-called interior monologue. A petty-bourgeois woman lies in bed in the morning and meditates. Her thoughts are reproduced disconnectedly, criss-crossing, flowing into each other. This chapter could hardly have been written but for Freud. The attacks which it drew upon its author were the same as Freud in his day suffered. They rained down: pornography, morbid pleasure in filth, overestimation of events below the navel, immorality and so on. Astonishingly, some Marxists associated themselves with this nonsense, adding in their revulsion the epithet of petty-bourgeois. As a technical method the interior monologue was equally rejected; it was said to be *formalistic*. I have never understood the reason. The fact that Tolstoy would have done it differently is no reason to reject Joyce's method. The criticisms were so superficially formulated that one gained the impression that if Joyce had only set his monologue in a session with a psycho-analyst, everything would have been all right. Now the interior monologue is a method which is very difficult to use, and it is very useful to stress this fact. Without very precise measures (again of a technical sort) the interior monologue by no means reproduces reality, that is to say the totality of thought or association, as it superficially appears to do. It becomes another case of *only formally*, of which we should take heed – a falsification of reality. This is not a mere formal problem that could be solved by the slogan 'Back to Tolstoy'. In purely formal terms we did once have an interior monologue, which we actually prized very highly. I am thinking of Tucholsky.<sup>2</sup>

For many people to recall expressionism is to be reminded of a creed of libertarian sentiments. I myself was also at that time against 'self-expression' as a vocation. (See the instructions for actors in my *Versuche*.) I was sceptical of those painful, disturbing accidents in which someone was found to be 'beside himself'. What does this position feel like? It was very soon evident that such people had merely freed themselves from grammar, not from capitalism. Hašek won the highest honours for *Schweik*. But I believe that acts of liberation should also always be taken seriously. Today many people are still reluctant to see wholesale assaults

<sup>2</sup> Kurt Tucholsky (1890–1938): radical publicist and novelist of the Weimar period, and editor of *Die Weltbühne*.

on expressionism because they are afraid that acts of liberation are being suppressed for their own sake – self-liberation from constricting rules, old regulations which have become fetters; that the aim of such attacks is to preserve methods of description which suited land-owners even after land-owners themselves have been swept aside. To take an example from politics; if you want to counter putsches, you must teach revolution, not evolution.

Literature, to be understood, must be considered in its development, by which I do not mean self-development. Experimental phases can then be noted, in which an often almost unbearable narrowing of perspective occurs, one-sided or rather few-sided products emerge, and the applicability of results becomes problematic. There are experiments which come to nothing and experiments which bear late fruits or paltry fruits. One sees artists who sink under the burden of their materials – conscientious people who see the magnitude of the task, do not shirk it, but are inadequate for it. They do not always perceive their own errors; sometimes others see the errors at the same time as the problems. Some of them become wholly absorbed in specific questions – but not all of these are busy trying to square the circle. The world has reason to be impatient with these people and it makes abundant use of this right. But it also has reason to show patience towards them.

In art there is the fact of failure, and the fact of partial success. Our metaphysicians must understand this. Works of art can fail so easily; it is so difficult for them to succeed. One man will fall silent because of lack of feeling; another, because his emotion chokes him. A third frees himself, not from the burden that weighs on him, but only from a feeling of unfreedom. A fourth breaks his tools because they have too long been used to exploit him. The world is not obliged to be sentimental. Defeats should be acknowledged; but one should not conclude from them that there should be no more struggles.

For me, expressionism is not merely an 'embarrassing business', not merely a deviation. Why? Because I do not by any means consider it to be merely a 'phenomenon' and stick a label on it. Realists who are willing to learn and look for the practical side of things could learn a great deal from it. For them, there was a lode to be exploited in Kaiser, Sternberg, Toller and Goering.<sup>3</sup> Frankly I myself learn more easily where problems similar to my own are tackled. Not to beat about the bush, I learn with more difficulty (less) from Tolstoy and Balzac. They had to master

<sup>3</sup> Georg Kaiser, Leo Sternberg, Ernst Toller and Reinhard Goering were all expressionist playwrights and authors of the immediate post-World War One period.

other problems. Besides – if I may be allowed to use the expression – much of them has become part of my flesh and blood. Naturally I admire these people and the way in which they dealt with their tasks. One can learn from them too. But it is advisable not to approach them singly, but alongside other authors with other tasks, such as Swift and Voltaire. The diversity of aims then becomes clear, and we can more easily make the necessary abstractions and approach them from the standpoint of our own problems.

The questions confronting our politically engaged literature have had the effect of making one particular problem very actual – the jump from one kind of style to another within the same work of art. This happened in a very practical way. Political and philosophical considerations failed to shape the whole structure, the message was mechanically fitted into the plot. The 'editorial' was usually 'inartistically' conceived – so patently that the inartistic nature of the plot in which it was embedded, was overlooked. (Plots were in any case regarded as more artistic than editorials.) There was a complete rift. In practice there were two possible solutions. The editorial could be dissolved in the plot or the plot in the editorial, lending the latter artistic form. But the plot could be shaped artistically and the editorial too (it then naturally lost its editorial quality), while keeping the jump from one idiom to another and giving it an artistic form. Such a solution seemed an innovation. But if one wishes, one can mention earlier models whose artistic quality is beyond dispute, such as the interruption of the action by choruses in the Attic theatre. The Chinese theatre contains similar forms.

The issue of how many allusions one needs in descriptions, of what is too plastic and what not plastic enough, can be dealt with practically from case to case. In certain works we can manage with fewer allusions than our ancestors. So far as psychology is concerned, the questions as to whether the results of newly established sciences should be employed, is not a matter of faith. It is in individual cases that one has to test whether the delineation of a character is improved by incorporating scientific insights or not, and whether the particular way in which they are utilized is good or not. Literature cannot be forbidden to employ skills newly acquired by contemporary man, such as the capacity for simultaneous registration, bold abstraction, or swift combination. If a scientific approach is to be involved, it is the tireless energy of science that is needed to investigate in each individual case how the artistic adoption of these skills has worked out. Artists like to take short cuts, to conjure things out of the air, to work their way through large sections

of a continuous process more or less consciously. Criticism, at least Marxist criticism, must proceed methodically and concretely in each case, in short scientifically. Loose talk is of no help here, whatever its vocabulary. In no circumstances can the necessary guide-lines for a practical definition of realism be derived from literary works alone. (Be like Tolstoy – but without his weaknesses! Be like Balzac – only up-to-date!) Realism is an issue not only for literature: it is a major political, philosophical and practical issue and must be handled and explained as such – as a matter of general human interest.

### III

#### [Remarks on an Essay]

One must not expect too much from people who use the word 'form' too fluently as signifying something other than content, or as connected with content, whatever, or who are suspicious of 'technique' as something 'mechanical'. One must not pay too much attention to the fact that they quote the classics (of Marxism) and that the word 'form' occurs there too; the classics did not teach the technique of writing novels. The word 'mechanical' need frighten no one, as long as it refers to technique; there is a kind of mechanics that has performed great services for mankind and still does so – namely technology. The 'right thinking' people among us, whom Stalin in another context distinguishes from creative people, have a habit of spell-binding our minds with certain words used in an extremely arbitrary sense.

Those who administer our cultural heritage decree that no enduring figures can be created without 'reciprocal human relationships in struggle', without 'the testing of human beings in real action', without 'close interaction between men in struggle'. But where in Hašek are the 'complicated' (!) methods with which old authors set their plots in motion. Yet his Schweik is certainly a figure who is hard to forget. I do not know whether it will 'endure'; nor do I know whether a figure created by Tolstoy or Balzac will endure; I know no more than the next man. To be frank, I do not set such an excessively high value on the concept of endurance. How can we foresee whether future generations will wish to preserve the memory of these figures? (Balzac and Tolstoy will scarcely be in a position to oblige them to do so, however ingenious the methods with which they set their plots in motion.) I suspect it will depend on whether it will be a socially relevant statement if someone says: 'That'

(and 'that' will refer to a contemporary) 'is a Père Goriot character.' Perhaps such characters will not survive at all? Perhaps they arose in a web of contorted relationships of a type which will by then no longer exist.

#### Characters and Balzac

I have no reason to advocate the montage technique used by Dos Passos, against wind or tide. When I wrote a novel I myself tried to create something in the nature of 'close interactions between human beings in struggle'. (Whatever elements of the montage technique I used, lay elsewhere in this novel). But I should not like to allow this technique to be condemned purely in favour of the creation of durable characters. First of all, Dos Passos himself has given an excellent portrayal of 'close interactions between human beings in struggle', even if the struggles he depicts are not the kind Tolstoy created, or his complexities those of Balzac's plots. Secondly, the novel certainly does not stand or fall by its 'characters', let alone with characters of the type that existed in the 19th century. We must not conjure up a kind of Valhalla of the enduring figures of literature, a kind of Madame Tussaud's panopticon, filled with nothing but durable characters from Antigone to Nana and from Aeneas to Nekhlyudov (who is he, by the way?).<sup>4</sup> I see nothing disrespectful in laughing at such an idea. We know something about the bases on which the cult of the individual, as practised in class society, rested. They are historical bases. We are far from wishing to do away with the individual. But we nevertheless notice with a certain pensiveness how this (historical, particular, passing) cult has prevented a man like André Gide from discovering any individuals among Soviet youth.<sup>5</sup> Reading Gide, I was on the point of discarding Nekhlyudov (whoever he may be) as an enduring figure, if – as certainly seemed possible – this was the only way those figures among Soviet youth, whom I have seen myself, could endure. To come back to our basic question: it is absolutely false, that is to say, it leads nowhere, it is not worth the writer's while, to simplify his problems so much that the immense, complicated, actual life-process of human beings in the age of the final struggle between the bourgeois and the proletarian class, is reduced to a 'plot', setting, or background for the creation of great individuals. Individuals should not occupy much more space in books and above all not a different kind of space,

<sup>4</sup> Nekhlyudov: liberal aristocrat who is the central figure of Tolstoy's novel *Resurrection*.

<sup>5</sup> Reference to Gide's *Retour de l'URSS*, which had been translated into German the previous year (1937).

than in reality. To talk in purely practical terms; for us, individuals emerge from a depiction of the processes of human co-existence and they can be 'big' or 'small'. It is absolutely false to say that one should take a great figure and allow it to respond in manifold ways, making its relationships with other figures as significant and lasting as possible.

The drama (force of collision), the passion (degree of heat), the range of the characters – none of this can be separated from social functions, and portrayed or propagated apart from it. Those close interactions between human beings in struggle are the competitive struggles of developing capitalism, which produced individuals in a quite particular way. Socialist emulation produces individuals in a different way and shapes different individuals. Then there is the further question whether it is as individuating a process as the competitive struggle of capitalism. In a certain sense, we hear from our critics the fateful slogan, once addressed to individuals: 'Enrich yourselves'.

Balzac is the poet of monstrosities. The multiplex character of his heroes (the breadth of their sunlit side, the depth of their shadowy side) reflects the dialectic of the progress of production as the progress of misery. 'With him business became poetical' (Taine) but: 'Balzac was first of all a businessman, indeed a businessman in debt . . . he took to speculation . . . suspended payments and wrote novels to pay his debts.' So in his case poetry in its turn became a business. In the primeval forest of early capitalism individuals fought against individuals, and against groups of individuals; basically they fought against 'the whole of society'. This was precisely what determined their individuality. Now we are advised to go on creating individuals, to recreate them, or rather to create new ones, who will naturally be different but made in the same way. So? 'Balzac's passion for collecting things bordered on monomania.' We find this fetishism of objects in his novels, too, on hundreds and thousands of pages. Admittedly we are supposed to avoid such a thing. Lukács wags his finger at Tretyakov on this account. But this fetishism is what makes Balzac's characters individuals. It is ridiculous to see in them a simple exchange of the social passions and functions which constitute the individual. Does the production of consumer goods for a collective today construct individuals in the same way as 'collecting'? Naturally one can answer 'yes' here too. This process of production does take place and there are individuals. But they are such very different individuals that Balzac would not have recognized them as such (and Gide today does not do so). They lack the element of monstrosity, the combination in one person of the lofty and the base, of criminality and

sanctity, and so on.

No, Balzac does not indulge in montage. But he writes vast genealogies, he marries off the creatures of his fantasy as Napoleon did his marshals and brothers; he follows possessions (fetishism of objects) through generations of families and their transference from one to the other. He deals with nothing but the 'organic': his families are organisms in which the individuals 'grow'. Should we therefore be reconstructing such cells, or the factory or the soviet – given that, with the abolition of private ownership of the means of production, the family is generally supposed to have ceased to shape individuals? But these new institutions which undoubtedly shape individuals today are precisely – compared to the family – the products of montage, quite literally 'assembled'. For example in contemporary New York, not to speak of Moscow, woman is less 'formed' by man than in Balzac's Paris; she is less dependent on him. So far this is quite simple. Certain struggles 'to a fever-pitch' therefore cease; other struggles which take their place (naturally others do take their place) are just as fierce but perhaps less individualistic. Not that they have no individual characteristics, for they are fought out by individuals. But allies play an immense part in them, such as they could not in Balzac's time.

## IV

### Popularity and Realism

Whoever looks for slogans to apply to contemporary German literature, must bear in mind that anything that aspires to be called literature is printed exclusively abroad and can almost exclusively be read only abroad. The term *popular* as applied to literature thus acquires a curious connotation. The writer in this case is supposed to write for a people among whom he does not live. Yet if one considers the matter more closely, the gap between the writer and the people is not as great as one might think. Today it is not quite as great as it seems, and formerly it was not as small as it seemed. The prevailing aesthetic, the price of books and the police have always ensured that there is a considerable distance between writer and people. Nevertheless it would be wrong, that is to say unrealistic, to view the widening of this distance as a purely 'external' one. Undoubtedly special efforts have to be made today in order to be able to write in a popular style. On the other hand, it has become easier; easier and more urgent. The people have split away

more clearly from their upper layers; their oppressors and exploiters have stepped out and joined a bloody battle with them of vast dimensions. It has become easier to take sides. An open battle has so to speak broken out among the 'public'.

The demand for a realistic style of writing can also no longer be so easily dismissed today. It has acquired a certain inevitability. The ruling classes use lies oftener than before – and bigger ones. To tell the truth is clearly an ever more urgent task. Suffering has increased and with it the number of sufferers. In view of the immense suffering of the masses, concern with little difficulties or with difficulties of little groups has come to be felt as ridiculous, contemptible.

There is only one ally against growing barbarism – the people, who suffer so greatly from it. It is only from them that one can expect anything. Therefore it is obvious that one must turn to the people, and now more necessary than ever to speak their language. Thus the terms *popular art* and *realism* become natural allies. It is in the interest of the people, of the broad working masses, to receive a faithful image of life from literature, and faithful images of life are actually of service only to the people, the broad working masses, and must therefore be absolutely comprehensible and profitable to them – in other words, popular. Nevertheless these concepts must first be thoroughly cleansed before propositions are constructed in which they are employed and merged. It would be a mistake to think that these concepts are completely transparent, without history, uncompromised or unequivocal. ('We all know what they mean – don't let's split hairs.') The concept of *popularity* itself is not particularly popular. It is not realistic to believe that it is. There is a whole series of abstract nouns in 'ity' which must be viewed with caution. Think of *utility*, *sovereignty*, *sanctity*; and we know that the concept of *nationality* has a quite particular, sacramental, pompous and suspicious connotation, which we dare not overlook. We must not ignore this connotation, just because we so urgently need the concept *popular*.

It is precisely in the so-called poetical forms that 'the people' are represented in a superstitious fashion or, better, in a fashion that encourages superstition. They endow the people with unchanging characteristics, hallowed traditions, art forms, habits and customs, religiosity, hereditary enemies, invincible power and so on. A remarkable unity appears between tormenters and tormented, exploiters and exploited, deceivers and deceived; it is by no means a question of the masses of 'little' working people in opposition to those above them.

The history of the many deceptions which have been practised with this concept of the people is a long and complicated one – a history of class struggles. We do not intend to go into it here – we only wish to keep the fact of the deception in sight, when we say that we need popular art and mean thereby art for the broad masses, for the many who are oppressed by the few, 'the people themselves', the mass of producers who was for so long the object of politics and must now become the subject of politics. Let us recall that the people were for long held back from any full development by powerful institutions, artificially and forcefully gagged by conventions, and that the concept *popular* was given an ahistorical, static, undevelopmental stamp. We are not concerned with the concept in this form – or rather, we have to combat it.

Our concept of what is popular refers to a people who not only play a full part in historical development but actively usurp it, force its pace, determine its direction. We have a people in mind who make history, change the world and themselves. We have in mind a fighting people and therefore an aggressive concept of what is *popular*.

Popular means: intelligible to the broad masses, adopting and enriching their forms of expression / assuming their standpoint, confirming and correcting it / representing the most progressive section of the people so that it can assume leadership, and therefore intelligible to other sections of the people as well / relating to traditions and developing them / communicating to that portion of the people which strives for leadership the achievements of the section that at present rules the nation.

Now we come to the concept of *realism*. This concept, too, must first be cleansed before use, for it is an old concept, much used by many people and for many ends. This is necessary because the people can only take over their cultural heritage by an act of expropriation. Literary works cannot be taken over like factories; literary forms of expression cannot be taken over like patents. Even the realistic mode of writing, of which literature provides many very different examples, bears the stamp of the way it was employed, when and by which class, down to its smallest details. With the people struggling and changing reality before our eyes, we must not cling to 'tried' rules of narrative, venerable literary models, eternal aesthetic laws. We must not derive realism as such from particular existing works, but we shall use every means, old and new, tried and untried, derived from art and derived from other sources, to render reality to men in a form they can master. We shall take care not to describe one particular, historical form of novel of a particular epoch as realistic – say that of Balzac or Tolstoy – and thereby erect

merely formal, literary criteria for realism. We shall not speak of a realistic manner of writing only when, for example, we can smell, taste and feel everything, when there is 'atmosphere' and when plots are so contrived that they lead to psychological analysis of character. Our concept of realism must be wide and political, sovereign over all conventions.

Realistic means: discovering the causal complexes of society / unmasking the prevailing view of things as the view of those who are in power / writing from the standpoint of the class which offers the broadest solutions for the pressing difficulties in which human society is caught up / emphasizing the element of development / making possible the concrete, and making possible abstraction from it.

These are vast precepts and they can be extended. Moreover we shall allow the artist to employ his fantasy, his originality, his humour, his invention, in following them. We shall not stick to too detailed literary models; we shall not bind the artist to too rigidly defined modes of narrative.

We shall establish that the so-called sensuous mode of writing – where one can smell, taste and feel everything – is not automatically to be identified with a realistic mode of writing; we shall acknowledge that there are works which are sensuously written and which are not realistic, and realistic works which are not written in a sensuous style. We shall have to examine carefully the question whether we really develop a plot best when our ultimate objective is to reveal the spiritual life of the characters. Our readers will perhaps find that they have not been given the key to the meaning of the events if, led astray by various artistic devices, they experience only the spiritual agitation of the heroes. By adopting the forms of Balzac and Tolstoy without testing them thoroughly, we might weary our readers – the people – as much as these writers often do themselves. Realism is not a mere question of form. Were we to copy the style of these realists, we would no longer be realists.

For time flows on, and if it did not, it would be a bad prospect for those who do not sit at golden tables. Methods become exhausted; stimuli no longer work. New problems appear and demand new methods. Reality changes; in order to represent it, modes of representation must also change. Nothing comes from nothing; the new comes from the old, but that is why it is new.

The oppressors do not work in the same way in every epoch. They cannot be defined in the same fashion at all times. There are so many means for them to avoid being spotted. They call their military roads

motor-ways; their tanks are painted so that they look like MacDuff's woods. Their agents show blisters on their hands, as if they were workers. No: to turn the hunter into the quarry is something that demands invention. What was popular yesterday is not today, for the people today are not what they were yesterday.

Anyone who is not a victim of formalistic prejudices knows that the truth can be suppressed in many ways and must be expressed in many ways. One can arouse a sense of outrage at inhuman conditions by many methods – by direct description (emotional or objective), by narrative and parable, by jokes, by over- and under-emphasis. In the theatre, reality can be represented both in objective and in imaginative forms. The actors may not use make-up – or hardly any – and claim to be 'absolutely natural' and yet the whole thing can be a swindle; and they can wear masks of a grotesque kind and present the truth. It is hardly open to debate that the means must be questioned about the ends they serve. The people understand this. Piscator's great theatrical experiments in which conventional forms were constantly destroyed, found their greatest support in the most advanced cadres of the working class; so have my own. The workers judged everything according to the truth of its content; they welcomed every innovation which helped the representation of truth, of the real mechanism of society; they rejected everything that seemed theatrical, technical equipment that merely worked for its own sake – that is to say, that did not yet fulfil, or no longer fulfilled, its purpose. The workers' arguments were never literary or stated in terms of theatrical aesthetics. One never heard it said that one can't mix theatre and film. If the film was not inserted properly in the play, then the most that was said was: 'We don't need that film. It's distracting.' Workers' choirs spoke verse-parts with complicated rhythms ('If it was in rhyme it would go down like water and nothing would be left'), and sang difficult (unfamiliar) compositions by Eisler ('That's strong stuff').<sup>6</sup> But we had to change certain lines whose sense was not clear or which were wrong. In the case of marching-songs, which were rhymed so that they could be learnt more quickly, and had a simpler rhythm so that they sank in better, certain refinements were introduced (irregularities, complications). Then they said: 'There's a little twist there – that's fun.' Anything that was worn out, trivial, or so commonplace that it no longer

<sup>6</sup> Reference to Brecht's work *Die Massnahme* (1930), intended as a vindication of party discipline and Comintern policy in China. The play was sharply criticized by the KPD itself, for its exaltation of expedient sacrifice. Lukács dismissed it in 1932 for reducing strategic and tactical problems of class struggle to ethical issues.

made one think, they did not like at all ('You get nothing out of it'). If one needed an aesthetic, one could find it here. I shall never forget how a worker looked at me when I replied to his suggestion that I should add something to a chorus about the Soviet Union ('It has to go in - otherwise what's the point?'), that it would destroy the artistic form. He put his head on one side and smiled. A whole area of aesthetics collapsed because of this polite smile. The workers were not afraid to teach us and they were themselves not afraid to learn.

I am speaking from experience when I say that one need not be afraid to produce daring, unusual things for the proletariat so long as they deal with its real situation. There will always be people of culture, connoisseurs of art, who will interject: 'Ordinary people do not understand that.' But the people will push these persons impatiently aside and come to a direct understanding with artists. There is high-flown stuff, made for cliques, and intended to create new cliques - the two-thousandth re-blocking of an old felt hat, the spicing of old, rotting meat: this the proletariat rejects ('What a state they must be in!') with an incredulous, yet tolerant shake of the head. It was not the pepper that was rejected, but the decaying meat: not the two-thousandth blocking, but the old felt. When they themselves wrote and produced for the stage they were wonderfully original. So-called agitprop art, at which people, not always the best people, turned up their noses, was a mine of new artistic methods and modes of expression. From it there emerged magnificent, long-forgotten elements from ages of genuine popular art, boldly modified for new social aims: breathtaking contractions and compressions, beautiful simplifications, in which there was often an astonishing elegance and power and a fearless eye for the complex. Much of it might be primitive, but not in that sense in which the spiritual landscapes of bourgeois art, apparently so subtle, are primitive. It is a mistake to reject a style of representation because of a few unsuccessful compositions - a style which strives, frequently with success, to dig down to the essentials and to make abstraction possible. The sharp eyes of the workers penetrated the surface of naturalistic representations of reality. When the workers in *Driver Henschel* said of spiritual analyses, 'We don't want to know all that', they were expressing a desire to receive a more accurate image of the real social forces at work under an immediately visible surface. To cite my own experience, they did not object to the fantastic costumes and the apparently unreal milieu of the *Threepenny Opera*. They were not narrow - they hated narrowness (their homes were narrow and cramped). They did things on a grand scale; the entrepreneurs were

mean. They found some things superfluous which the artists declared to be necessary; but then they were generous and not against excess; on the contrary they were against those who were superfluous. They did not put on a muzzle on a willing horse but they saw that it pulled its weight. They did not believe in such things as 'the' method. They knew that many methods were necessary to attain their goal.

The criteria for popular art and realism must therefore be chosen both generously and carefully, and not drawn merely from existing realistic works and existing popular works, as often happens; by so doing, one would arrive at formalistic criteria, and at popular art and realism in form only.

Whether a work is realistic or not cannot be determined merely by checking whether or not it is like existing works which are said to be realistic, or were realistic in their time. In each case, one must compare the depiction of life in a work of art with the life itself that is being depicted, instead of comparing it with another depiction. Where popularity is concerned, there is one extremely formalistic procedure of which one must beware. The intelligibility of a literary work is not guaranteed merely if it is written exactly like other works which were understood in their time. These other works which were understood in their time were also not always written like the works before them. Steps had been taken to make them intelligible. In the same way, we must do something for the intelligibility of new works today. There is not only such a thing as *being popular*, there is also the process of *becoming popular*.

If we wish to have a living and combative literature, which is fully engaged with reality and fully grasps reality, a truly popular literature, we must keep step with the rapid development of reality. The great working masses are already on the move. The industry and brutality of their enemies is proof of it.

*Translated by Stuart Hood*

# Walter Benjamin

## Conversations with Brecht

1934

4 July. Yesterday, a long conversation in Brecht's sickroom about my essay 'The Author as Producer'. Brecht thought the theory I develop in the essay – that the attainment of technical progress in literature eventually changes the function of art forms (hence also of the intellectual means of production) and is therefore a criterion for judging the revolutionary function of literary works – applies to artists of only one type, the writers of the upper bourgeoisie, among whom he counts himself. 'For such a writer,' he said, 'there really exists a point of solidarity with the interests of the proletariat: it is the point at which he can develop his own means of production. Because he identifies with the proletariat at this point, he is proletarianized – completely so – at this same point, i.e. as a producer. And his complete proletarianization at this one point establishes his solidarity with the proletariat all along the line.' He thought my critique of proletarian writers of Becher's type too abstract, and tried to improve upon it by analysing a poem of Becher's which appeared in a recent issue of one of the proletarian literary reviews under the title '*Ich sage ganz offen*' ('I say quite openly'). Brecht compared this poem, first, with his own didactic poem about Carola Neher, the actress and secondly with Rimbaud's *Bateau Ivre*. 'I taught Carola Neher all kinds of things, you know,' he said, 'not just acting – for example, she learned from me how to wash herself. Before that she used to wash just so as not to be dirty. But that was no way to do things. So I taught her how to wash her face. She became so perfect at it that I wanted to film her doing it, but it never came to that because I didn't feel like doing any filming just then and she didn't feel like doing it in front of anybody else. That didactic poem was a model. Anyone who learned from it was supposed to put himself in place of the "I" of the poem. When Becher says "I", he considers himself – as president of

the Union of German Proletarian-Revolutionary Writers – to be exemplary. The only trouble is that nobody feels like following his example. He gets nothing across except that he is rather pleased with himself.' In this connection Brecht said he had been meaning for a long time to write a series of such model poems for different trades – the engineer, the writer. Then he compared Becher's poem with Rimbaud's. He thinks that Marx and Engels themselves, had they read *Le Bateau Ivre*, would have sensed in it the great historical movement of which it is the expression. They would have clearly recognized that what it describes is not an eccentric poet going for a walk but the flight, the escape of a man who cannot bear to live any longer inside the barriers of a class which – with the Crimean War, with the Mexican adventure – was then beginning to open up even the more exotic continents to its mercantile interests. Brecht thinks it is impossible to turn Rimbaud's attitude – the attitude of the footloose vagabond who puts himself at the mercy of chance and turns his back upon society – into a model representation of a proletarian fighter.

6 July. Brecht, in the course of yesterday's conversations: 'I often imagine being interrogated by a tribunal. "Now tell us, Mr Brecht, are you really in earnest?" I would have to admit that no, I'm not completely in earnest. I think too much about artistic problems, you know, about what is good for the theatre, to be completely in earnest. But having said "no" to that important question, I would add something still more important: namely, that my attitude is *permissible*.' I must admit he said this after the conversation had been going on for some little time. He had started by expressing doubt, not as to whether his attitude was permissible, but whether it was effective. His first remark was in answer to something I had said about Gerhart Hauptmann. 'I sometimes ask myself,' he said, 'whether writers like Hauptmann aren't, after all, the only ones who really get anywhere: I mean the *substance writers* [*Substanz-Dichter*].' By this he means those writers who really are completely in earnest. To explain this thought he proceeds from the hypothesis that Confucius might once have written a tragedy, or Lenin a novel. That, he thinks, would be felt as improper, unworthy behaviour. 'Suppose you read a very good historical novel and later you discover that it is by Lenin. You would change your opinion of both, to the detriment of both. Likewise, it would be wrong for Confucius to have written a tragedy, say one of Euripides's tragedies; it would be felt as unworthy. Yet his parables are not.' All this leads, in short, to a differentiation

between two literary types: the visionary artist, who is in earnest, and the cool-headed thinking man, who is not completely in earnest. At this point I raised the question of Kafka. To which of the two groups does he belong? I know that the question cannot be answered. And it is precisely its unanswerability which Brecht regards as an indication of the fact that Kafka, whom he considers to be a great writer, is, like Kleist, Grabbe or Büchner, a failure. Kafka's starting point is really the parable, which is governed by reason and which, therefore, so far as its actual wording is concerned, cannot be entirely in earnest. But then this parable has, all the same, to be given form. It grows into a novel. And if you look closely, you see that it contained the germ of a novel from the start. It was never altogether transparent. I should add that Brecht is convinced that Kafka would not have found his own special form without Dostoyevsky's Grand Inquisitor or that other episode in *The Brothers Karamazov* where the holy *starets* begins to stink. In Kafka, then, the parabolic element is in conflict with the visionary element. But Kafka as a visionary, says Brecht, saw what was coming without seeing what is. He emphasizes once more (as earlier at Le Lavandou, but in terms which are clearer to me) the prophetic aspect of Kafka's work. Kafka had one problem and one only, he says, and that was the problem of organization. He was terrified by the thought of the empire of ants: the thought of men being alienated from themselves by the forms of their life in society. And he anticipated certain forms of this alienation, e.g. the methods of the GPU. But he never found a solution and never awoke from his nightmare. Brecht says of Kafka's precision that it is the precision of an imprecise man, a dreamer.

12 July. Yesterday, after playing chess, Brecht said: 'You know, when Korsch comes, we really ought to work out a new game with him. A game in which the moves do not always stay the same; where the function of a piece changes after it has stood on the same square for a while: it should either become stronger or weaker. As it is the game doesn't develop, it stays the same for too long.'

23 July. Yesterday a visit from Karin Michaelis, who has just returned from her trip to Russia and is full of enthusiasm. Brecht remembers how he was taken round Moscow by Tretyakov. Tretyakov showed him the city and was proud of everything, no matter what it was. 'That isn't a bad thing,' says Brecht, 'it shows that the place belongs to him. One isn't proud of other people's property.' After a while he added: 'Yes, but in the end I got a bit tired of it. I couldn't admire everything, nor

did I want to. The point is, they were his soldiers, his lorries. But not, alas, mine.'

24 July. On a beam which supports the ceiling of Brecht's study are painted the words: 'Truth is concrete.' On a window-sill stands a small wooden donkey which can nod its head. Brecht has hung a little sign round its neck on which he has written: 'Even I must understand it.'

5 August. Three weeks ago I gave B. my essay on Kafka. I'm sure he read it, but he never alluded to it of his own accord, and on two occasions when I steered the conversation round to it, he replied evasively. In the end I took the manuscript away again without saying a word. Last night he suddenly began speaking of this essay. The rather abrupt transition took the form of a remark to the effect that I, too, could not be completely acquitted of a diaristic style of writing *à la* Nietzsche. My Kafka essay, for instance. It treated Kafka purely from the phenomenal point of view – the work as something that had grown separately, by itself – the man, too: it detached the work from all connections, even with its author. In the end everything I wrote always came down to the question of *essence*. Now what would be the correct way of tackling the problem of Kafka? The correct way would be to ask: what does he do? how does he behave? And, at the start, to consider the general rather than the particular. It would then transpire that Kafka lived in Prague, in an unhealthy milieu of journalists, of self-important literati; in that world, literature was the principal reality, if not the only one. Kafka's strengths and weaknesses were bound up with this way of seeing the world – his artistic value, but also his feebleness in many respects. He was a Jew-boy – one could just as well coin the term 'Aryan boy' – a sorry, dismal creature, a mere bubble on the glittering quagmire of Prague cultural life, nothing more. Yet there were also some very interesting sides to him. One could bring these out. One might imagine a conversation between Lao Tzu and his disciple Kafka. Lao Tzu says: 'And so, Disciple Kafka, you have conceived a horror of the organizations, property relations and economic forms within which you live?' – 'Yes.' – 'You can't find your way about them any more?' – 'No.' – 'A share certificate fills you with dread?' – 'Yes.' – 'And so now you're looking for a leader you can hold on to, Disciple Kafka.' 'Of course such an attitude won't do,' says Brecht. 'I don't accept Kafka, you know.' He went on to speak about a Chinese philosopher's parable of 'the tribulations of usefulness'. In a wood there are many different kinds of tree-trunk. From the thickest

they make ship's timbers; from those which are less thick but still quite sturdy, they make boxes and coffin-lids; the thinnest of all are made into whipping-rods; but of the stunted ones they make nothing at all: these escape the tribulations of usefulness. 'You've got to look around in Kafka's writings as you might in such a wood. Then you'll find a whole lot of very useful things. The images are good, of course. But the rest is pure mystification. It's nonsense. You have to ignore it. Depth doesn't get you anywhere at all. Depth is a separate dimension, it's just depth – and there's nothing whatsoever to be seen in it.' To conclude the discussion I told B. that penetrating into depth is my way of travelling to the antipodes. In my essay on Kraus I actually got there. I know that the one on Kafka doesn't come off to the same degree: I can't dismiss the charge that it has landed me in a diaristic style of notation. It is true that the study of the frontier area defined by Kraus and, in another way, by Kafka preoccupies me a great deal. In Kafka's case I haven't yet, I said, completed my exploration of this area. I am aware that it contains a lot of rubbish and waste, a lot of pure mystification. But I can't help thinking that the important thing about Kafka is something else, and some of this I touched upon in my essay. B.'s approach should, I said, be checked against interpretations of specific works. I suggested *The Next Village*, and immediately saw that this suggestion worried B. He resolutely rejected Eisler's view that this very short story is 'worthless', but neither could he get anywhere nearer to defining its value. 'One ought to study it more closely,' he said. Then the conversation broke off, as it was ten o'clock and time to listen to the news from Vienna.

31 August. The night before last a long and heated debate about my Kafka. Its foundation: the charge that it promotes Jewish fascism. It increases and spreads the darkness surrounding Kafka instead of dispersing it. Yet it is necessary to clarify Kafka, that is to say, to formulate the practicable suggestions which can be extracted from his stories. It is to be supposed that such suggestions *can* be extracted from them, if only because of their tone of superior calm. But these suggestions should be sought in the direction of the great general evils which assail humanity today. Brecht looks for the reflexion of these evils in Kafka's work. He confines himself, in the main, to *The Trial*. What it conveys above all else, he thinks, is a dread of the unending and irresistible growth of great cities. He claims to know the nightmare of this idea from his own intimate experience. Such cities are an expression of the boundless maze of indirect relationships, complex mutual dependencies and compart-

mentations into which human beings are forced by modern forms of living. And these in turn find expression in the longing for a 'leader'. The petty bourgeois sees the leader as the only man whom, in a world where everyone can pass the buck to someone else, he can make responsible for all his ills. Brecht calls *The Trial* a prophetic book. 'By looking at the Gestapo you can see what the Cheka may become.' Kafka's outlook is that of a man caught under the wheels. Odradek is characteristic of this outlook: Brecht interprets the caretaker as personifying the worries of a father of a family. The petty bourgeois is bound to get it in the neck. His situation is Kafka's own. But whereas the type of petty bourgeois current today – that is, the fascist – has decided to set his indomitable iron will against this situation, Kafka hardly opposes it; he is wise. Where the fascist brings heroism into play, Kafka responds with questions. He asks for safeguards for his situation. But the nature of his situation is such that the safeguards he demands must be unreasonable. It is a Kafkaesque irony that the man who appears to be convinced of nothing so much as of the frailty of all safeguards should have been an insurance agent. Incidentally, his unlimited pessimism is free from any tragic sense of destiny. For not only is his expectation of misfortune founded on nothing but empiricism (although it must be said that this foundation is unshakable), but also, with incorrigible naivety, he seeks the criterion of final success in the most insignificant and trivial undertakings – a visit from a travelling salesman, an inquiry at a government office. From time to time our conversation centred on the story *The Next Village*. Brecht says it is a counterpart to the story of Achilles and the tortoise. One never gets to the next village if one breaks the journey down into its smallest parts, not counting the incidental occurrences. Then a whole life is too short for the journey. But the fallacy lies in the word 'one'. For if the journey is broken down into its parts, then the traveller is too. And if the unity of life is destroyed, then so is its shortness. Let life be as short as it may. That does not matter, for the one who arrives in the next village is not the one who set out on the journey, but another. – I for my part offer the following interpretation: the true measure of life is memory. Looking back, it traverses the whole of life like lightning. As fast as one can turn back a few pages, it has travelled from the next village to the place where the traveller took the decision to set out. Those for whom life has become transformed into writing – like the grandfather in the story – can only read the writing backwards. That is the only way in which they confront themselves, and only thus – by fleeing from the present – can they understand life.

27 September. *Dragør*. In a conversation a few evenings ago Brecht spoke of the curious indecision which at the moment prevents him from making any definite plans. As he is the first to point out, the main reason for this indecision is that his situation is so much more privileged than that of most other refugees. Therefore, since in general he scarcely admits that exile can be a proper basis for plans and projects, he refuses all the more radically to admit it as such in his own particular case. His plans reach out to the period beyond exile. There, he is faced with two possibilities. On the one hand there are some prose projects waiting to be done: the shorter one of the *Ui* – a satire on Hitler in the style of the Renaissance biographers – and the long one of the *Tui* novel. This is to be an encyclopedic survey of the follies of the Tellectual-Ins (intellectuals); it seems that it will be set, in part at least, in China. A small-scale model of this work is already completed. But besides these prose works he is also preoccupied with other plans, dating back to very old studies and ideas. Whereas he was able, at a pinch, to set down in his notes and introductions to the *Versuche* the thoughts which occurred to him concerning epic theatre, other thoughts, although originating in the same interests, have become combined with the study of Leninism and also of the scientific tendencies of the empiricists, and have therefore outgrown that rather limited framework. For several years past they have been subsumed, now under one key concept, now under another, so that non-Aristotelian logic, behaviourist theory, the new encyclopedia and the critique of ideas have, in turn, stood at the centre of his preoccupations. At present these various pursuits are converging upon the idea of a philosophical didactic poem. But he has doubts about the matter. He wonders, in the first instance, whether, in view of his output to date and especially of its satirical elements, particularly the *Threepenny Novel*, the public would accept such a work. This doubt is made up of two distinct strands of thought. Whilst becoming more closely concerned with the problems and methods of the proletarian class struggle, he has increasingly doubted the satirical, and especially the ironic, attitude as such. But to confuse these doubts, which are mostly of a practical nature, with other, more profound ones would be to misunderstand them. The doubts at a deeper level concern the artistic and playful element in art, and above all those elements which, partially and occasionally, make art refractory to reason. Brecht's heroic efforts to legitimize art *vis-à-vis* reason have again and again referred him to the parable in which artistic mastery is proved by the fact that, in the end, all the artistic elements of a work cancel each other out. It is precisely his efforts

connected with this parable, which are at present becoming visible in a radical form in his conception of the didactic poem. In the course of the conversation I tried to explain to Brecht that such a poem would not have to seek approval from a bourgeois public but from a proletarian one, which, presumably, would find its criteria less in Brecht's earlier, partly bourgeois-oriented work than in the dogmatic and theoretical content of the didactic poem itself. 'If this didactic poem succeeds in enlisting the authority of Marxism on its behalf,' I told him, 'then your earlier work is not likely to weaken that authority.'

4 October. Yesterday Brecht left for London. Whether it is that my presence offers peculiar temptations in this respect, or whether Brecht is now generally more this way inclined than before, at all events his aggressiveness (which he himself calls 'baiting') is now much more pronounced in conversation than it used to be. Indeed, I am struck by a special vocabulary engendered by this aggressiveness. In particular, he is fond of using the term *Würstchen* (little sausage). In *Dragør* I was reading Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. To start with he blamed this choice of reading for my being unwell. As confirmation he told how, in his youth, a prolonged illness (which had doubtless been latent for a long time) had begun when a schoolfellow had played Chopin to him on the piano and he had not had the strength to protest. Brecht thinks that Chopin and Dostoyevsky have a particularly adverse effect on people's health. In other ways, too, he missed no opportunity of needling me about my reading matter, and as he himself was reading *Schweyk* at the time, he insisted on making comparative value judgements of the two authors. It became evident that Dostoyevsky simply could not measure up to Hašek, and Brecht included him without further ado among the *Würstchen*; only a little more and he would have extended to Dostoyevsky the description he keeps on hand, these days, for any work which lacks, or is said by him to lack, an enlightening character. He calls such a work a *Klump* (lump, or clot).

1938

28 June. I was in a labyrinth of stairs. This labyrinth was not entirely roofed over. I climbed; other stairways led downwards. On a landing I realized that I had arrived at a summit. A wide view of many lands opened up before me. I saw other men standing on other peaks. One of these men was suddenly seized by dizziness and fell. The dizziness spread; others were now falling from other peaks into the depths below. When I too became dizzy, I woke up.

On 22 June I arrived at Brecht's.

Brecht speaks of the elegance and nonchalance of Virgil's and Dante's basic attitude, which, he says, forms the backdrop to Virgil's majestic *gestus*. He calls both Virgil and Dante 'promeneurs'. Emphasizing the classic rank of the *Inferno*, he says: 'You can read it out of doors.'

He speaks of his deep-rooted hatred of priests, a hatred he inherited from his grandmother. He hints that those who have appropriated the theoretical doctrines of Marx and taken over their management will always form a clerical camarilla. Marxism lends itself all too easily to 'interpretation'. Today it is a hundred years old and what do we find? (At this point the conversation was interrupted.) "'The State must wither away.'" Who says that? The State.' (Here he can only mean the Soviet Union.) He assumes a cunning, furtive expression, stands in front of the chair in which I am sitting – he is impersonating 'the State' – and says, with a sly, sidelong glance at an imaginary interlocutor: 'I know I ought to wither away.'

A conversation about new Soviet novels. We no longer read them. The talk then turns to poetry and to the translations of poems from various languages in the USSR with which *Das Wort* is flooded. He says the poets over there are having a hard time. 'If Stalin's name doesn't occur in a poem, it's interpreted as intentional.'

29 June. Brecht talks about epic theatre, and mentions plays acted by children in which faults of performance, which produce alienation effects, impart epic characteristics to the production. Something similar may occur in third-rate provincial theatre. I mentioned the Geneva production of *Le Cid*, where the sight of the crown worn crookedly on the king's head gave me the first inkling of the ideas I eventually developed in the *Trauerspiel* book nine years later. Brecht in turn quoted the moment at which the idea of epic theatre first came into his head. It happened at a rehearsal for the Munich production of *Edward II*. The battle in the play is supposed to occupy the stage for three-quarters of an hour. Brecht couldn't stage-manage the soldiers, and neither could Asya [Lacis], his production assistant. Finally he turned in despair to Karl Valentin, at that time one of his closest friends, who was attending the rehearsal, and asked him: 'Well, what is it? What's the matter with these soldiers? What's wrong with them?' Valentin: 'They're pale, they're scared, that's what!' The remark settled the issue, Brecht adding: 'They're tired.' Whereupon the soldiers' faces were thickly made up with chalk. That was the day the style of the production was determined.

Later the old subject of 'logical positivism' came up. I adopted a somewhat intransigent attitude and the conversation threatened to take a disagreeable turn. This was avoided by Brecht admitting for the first time that his arguments were superficial. This he did with the delightful formula: 'A deep need makes for a superficial grasp.' Later, when we were walking to his house (the conversation had taken place in my room): 'It's a good thing when someone who has taken up an extreme position then goes into a period of reaction. That way he arrives at a half-way house.' That, he explained, was what had happened to him: he had become mellow.

In the evening: I should like to get somebody to take a small present – a pair of gloves – to Asya. Brecht thinks this might be tricky. It could happen that someone thought the gloves were Jahnn's<sup>1</sup> way of repaying Asya for her espionage services. 'The worst thing is when whole sets of directives<sup>2</sup> are withdrawn en bloc, but the instructions they contain are still supposed to remain in force.'

1 July. Whenever I refer to conditions in Russia, Brecht's comments are highly sceptical. When I inquired the other day whether Ottwald was still 'doing time' in gaol, the answer came: 'If he's still got time, he'll be doing it.' Yesterday Gretl Steffin expressed the opinion that Tretyakov was no longer alive.

4 July. Brecht in the course of a conversation on Baudelaire last night: 'I'm not against the asocial, you know; I'm against the non-social.'

21 July. The publications of Lukács, Kurella *et al* are giving Brecht a good deal of trouble. He thinks, however, that one ought not to oppose them at the theoretical level. I then put the question on the political level. He does not pull his punches. 'A socialist economy doesn't need war, and that is why it is opposed to war. The "peace-loving nature of the Russian people" is an expression of this and nothing else. There can't be a socialist economy in one country. Rearmament has inevitably set the Russian proletariat back a lot, back to stages of historical development which have long since been overtaken – among others, the monarchic stage. Russia is now under personal rule. Only blockheads can deny this, of course.' This was a short conversation which was soon interrupted. – I should add that in this context Brecht emphasized that

<sup>1</sup> The name, presumably that of the proposed intermediary, cannot be deciphered with absolute certainty; perhaps Hans Henny Jahn?

<sup>2</sup> Uncertain reading of the manuscript.

as a result of the dissolution of the First International, Marx and Engels lost active contact with the working-class movement and thereafter only gave advice – of a private nature, not intended for publication – to individual leaders. Nor was it an accident – although regrettable – that at the end of his life Engels turned to the natural sciences.

Béla Kun, he said, was his greatest admirer in Russia. Brecht and Heine were the only German poets Kun studied [*sic*]. (Occasionally Brecht hints at the existence of a certain person on the Central Committee who supports him.)

25 July. Yesterday morning Brecht came over to my place to read me his Stalin poem, which is entitled 'The Peasant to his Ox'. At first I did not get its point, and when a moment later the thought of Stalin passed through my head, I did not dare entertain it. This was more or less the effect Brecht intended, and he explained what he meant in the conversation which followed. In this conversation he emphasized, among other things, the positive aspects of the poem. It was indeed a poem in honour of Stalin, who in his opinion had achieved great things. But Stalin is not yet dead. Besides, a different, more enthusiastic manner of honouring Stalin is not incumbent upon Brecht, who is sitting in exile and waiting for the Red Army to march in. He is following developments in Russia and also the writings of Trotsky. These prove that there exists a suspicion – a justifiable one – demanding a sceptical appraisal of Russian affairs. Such scepticism is in the spirit of the Marxist classics. Should the suspicion prove correct one day, then it will become necessary to fight the regime, and *publicly*. But, 'unfortunately or God be praised, whichever you prefer', the suspicion is at present not yet a certainty. There is no justification for constructing upon it a policy such as Trotsky's. 'And then there's no doubt that certain criminal cliques really are at work in Russia itself. One can see it, from time to time, by the harm they do.' Finally Brecht pointed out that we Germans have been especially affected by the setbacks we have suffered in our own country. 'We have had to pay for the stand we took, we're covered with scars. It's only natural that we should be especially sensitive.'

Towards evening Brecht found me in the garden reading *Capital*. Brecht: 'I think it's very good that you're studying Marx just now, at a time when one comes across him less and less, especially among people like us.' I replied that I prefer studying the most talked-about authors when they were out of fashion. We went on to discuss Russian literary policy. I said, referring to Lukács, Gábot and Kurella: 'You can't put

on an act with people like this.' Brecht: 'You might put on an Act but certainly not a whole play. They are, to put it bluntly, enemies of production. Production makes them uncomfortable. You never know where you are with production; production is the 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. Every one of their criticisms contains a threat.' We then got on to Goethe's novels, I don't remember how; Brecht knows only the *Elective Affinities*. He said that what he admired about it was the author's youthful elegance. When I told him Goethe wrote this novel at the age of sixty, he was very much surprised. The book, he said, had nothing philistine about it. That was a tremendous achievement. He knew a thing or two about philistinism; all German drama, including the most significant works, was stamped with it. I remarked that *Elective Affinities* had been very badly received when it came out. Brecht: 'I'm pleased to hear it. – The Germans are a lousy nation [*ein Scheissvolk*]. It isn't true that one must not draw conclusions from Hitler about Germans in general. In me, too, everything that is German is bad. The intolerable thing about us Germans is our narrow-minded independence. Nowhere else were there Imperial Free Cities, like that lousy Augsburg. Lyons was never a free city; the independent cities of the Renaissance were city states. – Lukács is a German by choice, and he's run completely out of steam.'

Speaking of *The Finest Legends of Woynek the Brigand* by Anna Seghers, Brecht praised the book because it shows that Seghers is no longer writing to order. 'Seghers can't produce to order, whereas without an order, I wouldn't even know how to start writing.' He also praised the stories for having a rebellious, solitary figure as their central character.

26 July. Brecht, last night: 'There can't be any doubt about it any longer: the struggle against ideology has become a new ideology.'

29 July. Brecht read to me some polemical texts he has written as part of his controversy with Lukács, studies for an essay which is to be published in *Das Wort*. He asked my advice whether to publish them. As, at the same time, he told me that Lukács's position 'over there' is at the moment very strong, I told him I could offer no advice. 'There are questions of power involved. You ought to get the opinion of somebody from over there. You've got friends there, haven't you?' – Brecht: 'Actually, no, I haven't. Neither have the Muscovites themselves – like

the dead.'

3 August. On 29 July in the evening, while we were in the garden, the conversation came round to the question whether a part of the *Children's Songs* cycle should be included in the new volume of poems. I was not in favour, because I thought that the contrast between the political and the private poems made the experience of exile particularly explicit, and this contrast would be diminished by the inclusion of a disparate sequence. In saying this, I probably implied that the suggestion once again reflected the destructive aspect of Brecht's character, which challenges everything almost before it has been achieved. Brecht: 'I know; they'll say of me that I was manic. When the present is passed on to the future, the capacity to understand my mania will be passed on with it. The times we live in will make a backdrop to my mania. But what I should really like would be for people to say about me: he was a *moderate* manic.' – His discovery of moderation, Brecht said, should find expression in this volume of verse: the recognition that life goes on despite Hitler, that there will always be children. He was thinking of the 'epoch without history' of which he speaks in his poem addressed to artists. A few days later he told me he thought the coming of such an epoch more likely than victory over fascism. But then, with a vehemence he rarely shows, he added yet another argument in favour of including the *Children's Songs* in the *Poems from Exile*: 'We must neglect nothing in our struggle against that lot. What they're planning is nothing small, make no mistake about it. They're planning for thirty thousand years ahead. Colossal things. Colossal crimes. They stop at nothing. They're out to destroy everything. Every living cell shrinks under their blows. That is why we too must think of everything. They cripple the baby in the mother's womb. We must on no account leave out the children.' While he was speaking like this I felt a power being exercised over me which was equal in strength to the power of fascism, a power that sprang from depths of history no less deep than the power of the fascists. It was a very curious feeling, and new to me. Then Brecht's thoughts took another turn, which further intensified this feeling I had. 'They're planning devastations on a mind-chilling scale. That's why they can't reach agreement with the Church, which is also geared to thousands of years. And they've proletarianized me too. It isn't just that they've taken my house, my fish-pond and my car from me; they've also robbed me of my stage and my audience. From my own vantage-point I can't admit that Shakespeare's talent was categorically greater than mine. But

Shakespeare couldn't have written just for his desk drawer, any more than I can. Besides, he had his characters before his eyes. The people he depicted were running around in the streets. He just observed their behaviour and picked out a few traits; there were many others, just as important, that he left out.'

Early August. 'In Russia there is dictatorship *over* the proletariat. We should avoid dissociating ourselves from this dictatorship for as long as it still does useful work for the proletariat – i.e. so long as it contributes towards a reconciliation between the proletariat and the peasantry, giving prime recognition to proletarian interests.' A few days later Brecht spoke of a 'workers' monarchy', and I compared this creature with certain grotesque sports of nature dredged up from the depths of the sea in the form of horned fish or other monsters.

25 August. A Brechtian maxim: 'Don't start from the good old things but the bad new ones.'

Translated by Anya Bostock