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 Excerpt  
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## *Introduction: the collection, its structure and context*

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It has become a commonplace of Brecht criticism to claim that, whatever weaknesses he may have had as a playwright, he was a poet through and through.<sup>1</sup> Surprisingly, however, very few of the various collections of poems Brecht assembled during his lifetime have been studied in their entirety. His first collection, the *Hauspostille* [*Devotions for the Home*], has fared rather better than most,<sup>2</sup> but studies of his poetry have generally had the character of surveys, selecting poems from different periods for detailed study,<sup>3</sup> or of monographic analyses of technical features such as irregular metre or rhetoric.<sup>4</sup> The aim of the present volume is to do something to correct this imbalance by subjecting one particular collection from the middle of Brecht's writing career to detailed critical examination.

That examination mostly took place, not in the isolation of each contributor's study, but during a series of seminars at Birkbeck College, London, and latterly at the University of Birmingham. Our host at Birkbeck was Philip Brady, whose idea it was to work on these poems in much the same way as a number of us had come together a few years previously (also at Birkbeck) to study Günter Grass's *Der Butt*.<sup>5</sup> It was not just Philip's readiness to organise a venue and wine for these occasions, it was above all his unflagging energy and infectious enthusiasm for what he believed to be one of the richest and most varied collections of poems this century by a German poet, which ensured that we all kept working on the project even when the discussions went from lively to heated. Whenever this happened it was Philip's wisdom, disarming humour and concern for the matter at hand – what Brecht called 'die dritte Sache' – that brought our disagreements into perspective and proportion. Sadly, Philip died from a recurrence of the cancer he had been fighting for three years just as we were all revising our contributions for publication. It was characteristic of Philip to want to get things finished before he left but time ran out on him. His verbally delivered observations on the overall

organisation of the collection, which were to have formed a separate chapter, have been included in this introduction.

Our interest in the *Svendborger Gedichte* [Svendborg Poems] was sustained above all by a number of signal qualities and certain stubborn questions. We shared the view that these poems, or at least a good number of them, were indeed good poetry. But what was it that made them work? After all, they offered few of the blandishments with which most poets win the reader's ear: seldom a rhyme, rarely any metrical virtuosity, hardly any bold metaphors and none of the obscurity with which so much modern poetry transfixes the imagination. And yet they *work*. Why? How? In every case? One of their claims to attention, it was clear, lay in their documentary value. Following his own advice to other artists,<sup>6</sup> Brecht's poetry documents much more fully and precisely than most some of the key aspects of life in the 1930s. The *Svendborg Poems* document, for example, the experience of exile, not simply in its personal dimensions, but in relation to the larger political issues which drove so many Germans out of the country at that time. They also document the preparations for war and their impact on German industry, the National Socialists' treatment of Jews, political opponents or critics, their reliance on propaganda and censorship, the deteriorating living conditions for ordinary people when 'great things' are afoot.

All six sections of the *Svendborg Poems* are unified by two main, interrelated thematic complexes. One is that of the 'dark times' themselves. By this is meant the seizure of power in Germany by the fascists who are now preparing to spread war and disinformation across the continent. The other is the poet's determination to bring the light of reason to bear on these dark times, the true nature of which the new power-holders and their financial backers are intent on keeping obscure, in a process of teaching and learning. For this project of enlightenment to succeed, the poetry demands a certain kind of reader – the 'worker who reads' and who, as he does so, will ask the kind of penetrating, beautifully formulated questions rehearsed in the opening poem of the 'Chronicles' section, 'Fragen eines lesenden Arbeiters' ['Questions of a worker who reads']. If the world were full of sharply intelligent worker-readers with such a firm grasp of their own class interests, it is implied, the poet would not have had the unwelcome task of describing such dark times in the first place. Since the world is as it is, however, the poet must reckon with other, less well-informed and less alert readers who have allowed it to become like this. The creation of the critical type of reader out of the other type, through the very process of reading, is

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therefore one of the prime tasks the poet sets himself in the *Svendborg Poems*.

This is presumably why the first section of the collection takes the form of a 'Deutsche Kriegsfiibel' ['German war primer']. A 'primer' is a first reading book, the kind of book which, above all, teaches how to read. Correspondingly, the preferred sentence structure throughout this section is that of the 'simple sentence' (subject, verb, predicate) and the relation between the sentences is mostly paratactical:

Das Brot der Hungernden ist aufgegessen  
 Das Fleisch kennt man nicht mehr. Nutzlos  
 Ist der Schweiß des Volkes vergossen.  
 Die Lorbeerhaine stehen abgeholzt

Aus den Schloten der Munitionsfabriken  
 Steigt Rauch

(BFA xii, 9)<sup>7</sup>

The bread of the hungry has all been eaten  
 Meat has become unknown. Useless  
 The pouring out of the people's sweat.  
 The laurel groves have been  
 Lopped down.

From the chimneys of the arms factories  
 Rises smoke.

(WM, 286)

Old though the world may be, and long the history of its wars, people – and the German people in particular – are apparently still in need of the most elementary instruction about war, since the current preparations for war indicate they have plainly learnt nothing from the wars of the past. So the primer not only teaches some facts about war, about the crucial relationship between international warfare and class warfare, for example; it also teaches how to read: how to read poems and how to read the world. Like many a good teacher before him, the poet's preferred method of achieving this objective is to combine simplicity with a degree of challenge or difficulty. Nothing could be (seemingly) simpler in diction or structure than the following brief poem:

Auf der Mauer stand mit Kreide:  
 Sie wollen den Krieg  
 Der es geschrieben hat  
 Ist schon gefallen

(BFA xii, 12)

On the wall was chalked:  
 They want war.  
 The man who wrote it  
 Has already fallen. (WM, 288)

The slogan once 'stood' on the wall; traces of it may even still be there, since chalk is notoriously difficult to erase from brick; the man who wrote it there has since 'fallen'. Yet war proper has not yet broken out. Why, then, has this man died already? Why has the peaceful act of writing led to a war-like death? In what circumstances could the act of writing be construed, and responded to, as an act of war? Because no answers are given, the poet's elliptical method demands that we become 'readers who work'. We must discover for ourselves what is unstated. The eye that makes connections between the lines of the poem (or between this poem and its companion, 'Die unbesieglige Inschrift' [The invincible inscription]) is being trained at the same time to make connections in the world and thus to uncover what there too goes unsaid.

Running through the six sections of the collection is a wave-like rhythm which moves between registering the way things are (and how they are likely to develop) in these dark times, and summoning up various forms of resistance to this state of affairs.<sup>8</sup> The 'German war primer', for example, begins, not with a poem about war as it is generally understood, but about the inequalities in society produced by the class warfare that allows 'those in high places' to maintain their position precisely because too few of 'the low' are aware that this kind of war is permanently being waged against them. The last poem in this cycle foresees the time when 'the drummer'<sup>9</sup> will have begun to wage 'his' war but when politically enlightened Germans, following Lenin's injunction to transform imperialist war into civil (i.e. *class*) war, will show their patriotism precisely by sabotaging Hitler's plans. As if to acknowledge that the pendulum has already swung too far in the direction of permitting hope to triumph over experience, however, the second group of poems (the 'songs') immediately takes the reader back down again into the hopelessly false optimism amongst those Germans who refuse to believe that the war will be as bad as it is painted or that the anti-Semitism of the Nazis deserves to be taken seriously. The low-point on this trajectory is reached with the 'Lied der Starenschwärme' ['Song of the flocks of starlings'] whose inability to do other than follow their instinct and fly south in search of warmth causes them to fly into the nets of the waiting bird-catchers. From here the curve begins to rise again via the 'children's songs', such as 'Ulm 1592' ['The

tailor of Ulm'], where young minds are taught to distinguish between what is supposedly 'natural' and what can in fact be changed in the course of history.<sup>10</sup> The section ends with an up-beat group of political marching songs.

In section III, the 'Chroniken' ['Chronicles'], this optimistic mood is generally sustained. The tone is set by the 'Questions of a worker who reads', an understated celebration of a new, apparently incidental but in fact momentous, stage in history when those who were once the illiterate, passive objects of historical change begin to ask the kind of questions which will enable them to become the active subjects or masters of history. The Chronicles then move forwards through history, documenting the progress of reason and human solidarity. Even in this group, however, a darker strain is introduced with the 'Besuch bei den verbannten Dichtern' [A visit to the banished poets], a poem originally intended for the last section, the poems of exile.<sup>11</sup> The darkest section of the whole collection is the one which follows the 'Chronicles', beginning with the address 'An den Schwankenden' ['To a waverer'] whose hope and faith have begun to falter as the darkness ('Finsternis') increases on all sides.<sup>12</sup> By the end, admittedly, the poet's determination to keep the torch of hope alight re-emerges in poems in praise of Lenin and Gorki.

However urgent the need for revolutionary change, the poet chooses to approach it via the detour of laughter, by switching to the satirical mode in section V, the 'Deutsche Satiren', in each of which denunciation of present evils is balanced by the mocking voice of a poet who knows that he stands in a long and powerful tradition. A moment of laughter can have consequences long after it has passed. Simply by his choice of genre the poet puts the age of the 'house-painter' (i.e. Hitler, so-called because he merely whitewashes over the deep cracks in the collapsing capitalist system)<sup>13</sup> into proper perspective by aligning the present with the many other dark periods of tyranny which have attracted the perennial scorn of satirists. All of them have risen only to fall again without being able to halt the slow advance of reason, like water gradually cutting a channel through stone. Without some such millennial perspective most satire, throughout the ages, would have remained unwritten. Sharing this same trust, and knowing that he is not the first and probably not the last to be exiled, the political poet is able to continue writing even through an as yet indefinite period of separation from home and countrymen, and to end the collection with its most celebrated poem, the address 'An die Nachgeborenen' ['To those born

later’], which envisages the return of civilised values even after this latest upsurge of barbarism.

Far from simply recording the events of those dark times, then, the poems in the Svendborg collection clearly attempt to act in their turn upon the historical and political processes affecting society and individual alike. In theme, treatment, structure and style this kind of poetry embodies Brecht’s notion of ‘interventionist thinking’ (eingreifendes Denken) with its requirement that each individual, when reflecting on cause and effect in society, should include him- or herself in the range of factors capable of determining the outcome of developments.<sup>14</sup> The poems illustrate, for example, the wide range of possible modes of address or ‘gesture’ (Gestus) available to a poet bent on influencing events: information, criticism, exhortation, sarcasm, variations of focus or perspective, directness, indirectness, plain style and high style, the contemporary and specific alongside the historically distant and general. The thought Brecht gave to the gestural aspect of the poetry is evident, for example, in the minor but important detail of changing the title of one poem from a statement, ‘In unserm Lande’ (In our country), into a question, ‘Und in eurem Lande?’ (And in your country?), between the first and the ultimately published version; a simple assertion was thereby transformed into a challenge.<sup>15</sup>

The poems show the poet thinking not just about the contemporary relevance and effectiveness of his themes and modes of address but also about form as something with a political dimension, both in individual poems and in the overall structure of the collection and its component parts. Thus the second section of the *Svendborg Poems*, for example, is united formally by the (sociable) genre of song. The types of song range from ‘children’s songs’ to ballads and marching songs for political rallies, but all of them, some directly, others much less obviously so, bear out the motto at the head of this section, namely that ‘in the dark times’ there will indeed still be singing – ‘of the dark times’ themselves. In such times even to sing about a ‘child who wouldn’t wash’ implies a not-singing about so many other things (such as the well-scrubbed, drum-beating little boys beloved of Nazi propaganda) that the little song becomes charged with political significance. On the other hand, it belongs equally to Brecht’s overall design that this poem resists being completely politicised, insisting as it does on the right of little children *not* to want to wash and to care not a fig about whether or not they ever see ‘the emperor’, i.e. the world of politics.<sup>16</sup>

The poet’s refusal to allow his literary agenda to be dictated entirely

by the darkeners of the times who have forced themselves on his attention can be seen in the way he organises the collection as a whole. By dividing the *Svendborg Poems* into six sections Brecht repeats the structure he had given to the *Devotions for the Home* some ten years previously. Both collections open with an address to the reader, advising on the attitudes to adopt while reading the poems. Whereas in the earlier collection the 'instructions for use' could still afford to be playfully blasphemous and tongue-in-cheek, the introit of the *Svendborg Poems* is constrained to warn readers, solemnly and apologetically, that they would be unwise to place too much reliance on writings based on partial, imperfect and outdated sources of information. The contrast thereby initiated between the two collections implicitly draws attention to the self-denying ordinance which the poet has accepted for the sake of the fight, a kind of vow of poverty (affecting his diction and imaginative freedom) which is a minor form of the much greater poverty, both material and moral, that has struck the exiled poet's homeland during this period. Yet the comparison between the two collections does not operate only in the direction of pointing up what politics has taken away from poetry. Anyone who reads the two books of poetry side by side will discover new aesthetic qualities which the diction has gained in the very process of being honed and polished for the purposes of political struggle.<sup>17</sup> Attentive reading will also reveal that the earlier playfulness of the poet, though now constrained, has not been completely knocked out of him. His formal – and intellectual and moral – independence of the enemy who has invaded the territory of poetry is evident in the decision to put poems of a 'personal' nature in the last section of both collections; to respond to the cynical self-centredness of 'Vom armen B.B.' ['Of poor B.B.'] – 'Nach uns wird kommen: nichts Nennenswertes' (after us will come – nothing worthy of mention) – with the humane address 'To those born later' at the end of the *Svendborg Poems*; to place at the centre of each collection a group of poems called 'Chronicles'; and to have the 'grinning', hard-drinking pirates of the *Devotions for the Home* re-appear in the *Svendborg Poems* in the guise of the grinning, champagne-drinking saboteurs who demolish the (bad) ship Oskawa.

The political context and presuppositions of the *Svendborg Poems* require perhaps some introductory comment. Brecht's understanding of political developments in the 1930s was based on his study of the 'classics', Marx, Engels and Lenin, but also, to some extent, on the pronouncements issued by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union which, at that

time, sought to promote a (Communist-led) 'United Front' of opposition to fascism. The fullest, if somewhat unsystematic, exposition of Brecht's political thinking in these years is contained in *Buch der Wendungen* [The Book of Twists and Turns] (usually referred to as *Me-ti*), a set of reflections composed over a number of years, many of them at the same time as Brecht was writing the poems assembled in the Svendborg volume. As a result of its lengthy genesis *Me-ti* shows Brecht having to revisit and re-examine certain issues, particularly the role of the Soviet Communist Party under Stalin's leadership. Because it reflects critically on these matters it was not, however, a book Brecht wanted to publish at the time for fear of seeming to betray the one country where, he believed, opposition to fascism was deeply and reliably rooted in an irreconcilably contrary political and economic order. Nevertheless, to know the thoughts Brecht set down in *Me-ti* is helpful to the reader of the *Svendborg Poems* since it alerts one to issues, tensions and implications of which some of today's readers might be unaware.

Brecht was convinced that capitalism (or the Great Disorder, as it is called in *Me-ti*) was inherently a belligerent form of economic and social organisation based on internal class warfare between the exploiters and the exploited and on external aggression towards competitors for markets or for sources of raw material or cheap labour: 'The nation took the road of war to which the Great Disorder inevitably leads.'<sup>18</sup> In line with Moscow's 'agent theory', Brecht interpreted fascism as merely a symptom of capitalism in crisis, fascist leaders being in essence, regardless of any ideological banner they might wave, the puppets of the most powerful capitalist interests who financed fascism in order to deal with a radical challenge from the working class and/or to pursue international competition 'by other means': 'Thus those above were forced to have the people oppressed by Hui [Hitler]'.<sup>19</sup> Conversely Brecht/*Me-ti* regarded Communism (the Great Order) as the diametrical opposite of fascism, which, as dialectical materialism (the Great Method) predicted, would bring about the true resolution of the crisis of capitalism by means of a revolutionary takeover of the means of production and distribution. Thanks to the revolution of 1917 the Soviet Union had attained a qualitatively different stage of development from all previous societies, but this did not mean that it had transcended the history of class struggle overnight. The dictatorship of the proletariat, under the leadership of its 'advance guard', the Communist Party ('the Club'), was just the first stage in the socialisation of production. Thereafter a further, prolonged period of class struggle (against counter-



revolutionary forces, against the remnants of reactionary thought amongst the masses, against the 'rich peasants' or kulaks, against the foreign enemies of the Union) would be required before dictatorial socialism could produce a truly communist society in which all conflicts between the needs of the individual and the needs of society as a whole would have disappeared: 'The oppression of the blacksmiths was replaced, not by no oppression but by the oppression of the forgemasters'.<sup>20</sup> At this stage, Brecht/Me-ti maintained, freedom did not and could not yet exist for the individual: 'This is the time when the producing collectives acquire their legal form. In these circumstances the task of the individual is first to take up his position in the ranks of the collective. Only later can it become useful for him to separate himself from them again... The collectives have become free and can now move'.<sup>21</sup> The radical change of control over the means of production was a moral achievement of the first order, to which all other moral questions were subordinate: 'By moral behaviour I can only understand productive behaviour. The relations of production are the sources of all morality and immorality'.<sup>22</sup>

Brecht's conviction that the revolution of 1917 had set free the massive productive forces of the proletariat was fundamental to his understanding and evaluation of the most contentious question in current Soviet politics: whether Stalin had developed or betrayed Lenin's legacy. His view was in effect an inversion of the 'agent theory' of fascism, in that he saw the Communist leadership and the party bureaucracy as the instruments of an impersonal historical process with a momentum of its own, like a locomotive of which they were temporarily the drivers. In this view the leadership was capable of making errors, but such mistakes had always to be seen in proper proportion: the revolution had been effected in a country with a backward economy where attitudes had been moulded by violent Tsarist personal rule and where both industry and agriculture needed to be developed rapidly to feed the people and supply the country's defence needs. What mattered above all, Brecht insisted, was that the working class had succeeded in seizing power in one great country, and from this event would flow ultimately the revolution of the entire world, always provided that the Soviet Union remained strong enough to defeat its enemies on all sides.

Because Brecht saw in Stalin a man of action, bent above all on building up production in the Soviet Union, he almost always tended to put the best gloss he could on whatever Stalin [Ni-en] did: 'Ni-en is building up the Great Production. That is a most audacious undertaking

... How else but by means of production are the people to become more clever and self-confident?'<sup>23</sup> Not everyone took this position, of course, not even amongst the Communists. Notoriously, Trotski refused to accept that it was possible to build the revolution successfully in a single country. In *Me-ti* Trotski (To-tsi) is characterised as a theoretical purist who comes off rather badly in comparison to the 'usefulness' of Stalin's readiness to roll up his sleeves and get his hands dirty: 'To-tsi declared it was impossible to construct order in a single country. Ni-en set about the construction. To-tsi always found that this or that was lacking. Ni-en created it... As a pupil of Ka-meh [Karl Marx] Ni-en believed in the importance of the economy, of industry, of the firm organisation of the largest possible masses on the basis of a new economic order in one country for the achievement of revolution in every country'; 'Me-ti took the side of Ni-en'.<sup>24</sup> Stalin's error of defending everything in the Soviet Union was admittedly the mirror-image of Trotski's criticism of everything that happened there, but more important than the mistakes of these individuals was the dynamism of an autonomous process which was more powerful than either of them: 'In reality many things happened which To-tsi wanted and many things which Ni-en did not want to happen'.<sup>25</sup>

Brecht/Me-ti claimed that the one thing which justified his support for the Great Order in the Soviet Union was the fact that he had doubted it frequently enough (BFA xviii, 151). Stalin is criticised, for example, for forcing the pace of events and for the casualties produced by his attempts to accelerate food production: 'The progressive tendencies are making the people stumble. Bread is being thrown at the people with such force that it is killing many of them'.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, Brecht is more interested in the end achieved than in the dubious means used to achieve it, and he sides with progress rather than with any unfortunate virtuous individuals who may be blocking its path: 'The most beneficial institutions are being created by criminals. Not a few virtuous people are standing in the way of progress'.<sup>27</sup> Stalin is criticised for the fact that the Great Method (dialectics) decayed under his regime, for causing the decay of the Party both inside and outside the Union, so that it became unable to criticise itself or to take account of unpalatable facts (BFA xviii, 168), for preferring commands to persuasion, for being able to co-operate with too few people (BFA xviii, 108), for making the organisation of planned work into an economic rather than a political matter (BFA xviii, 168). Stalin further damaged the people by condemning his enemies in the Party in trials where insufficient evidence was offered, so that too much