

Introduction

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As a playwright, poet, and intellectual, Bertolt Brecht experienced and helped shape the most tumultuous period of modern European history. He witnessed the collapse of the nineteenth-century world of imperial Germany in the catastrophe of World War I, the cultural ferment of the Weimar Republic to which he himself made fundamental contributions, the defeat of German democracy and the rise of the Nazi dictatorship, World War II, and ultimately the Cold War and the division of Europe. Brecht also went into exile in Denmark, Sweden, Finland, the United States, and Switzerland between 1933 and 1948. Always curious about the world around him, both near and far, he soaked up cultural influences wherever he went and even from many places to which he never actually traveled, such as Japan and China.

To study Brecht is therefore to study the tumultuous history of Germany, Europe, and the world in the twentieth century. Brecht registered this history with great linguistic acuity and intellectual acumen. He was an astute and articulate participant in his own era, seeking both to understand and shape it in his writing and thought. For him ratiocination itself – the process of thinking and, via thought, coming to terms with the complexity of the world – was deeply pleasurable. Even greater pleasure occurred when thinking produced not just understanding but also the potential for positive, intentional change. In his late poem “Pleasures,” understanding and dialectics are listed as two of eighteen pleasures, along with “comfortable shoes” and the “first look out of the window in the morning.”¹

The central idea underlying Brecht’s work – its content and, even more, its form – is that the world is constantly changing and never in stasis. As Brecht’s Galileo says to a pupil, not only the earth and the sun but also human beings are moving through space at great speed: “The old idea was always that the stars were fixed to a crystal vault to stop them falling down.

¹ Bertolt Brecht, “Pleasures,” in CPBB, 1044–1045.

Today we have found the courage to let them soar through space without support; and they are travelling at full speed just like our ships, at full speed and without support.”² A character in the earlier *Threepenny Opera* puts it slightly differently in the “Song of the Insufficiency of Human Endeavour”: “Aye, race for happiness / But don’t you race too fast. / When all start chasing happiness / Happiness comes in last.”³ Since Brecht believed that change was inevitable, a fundamental challenge for human beings, in his view, was how to steer change in a positive direction. Stasis was not a viable option.

Brecht’s influence on twentieth-century theater was pervasive. He is certainly the most influential German playwright of the twentieth century, easily outstripping any other figures, including his own heir Heiner Müller or his role model Frank Wedekind. And yet to qualify him as “German,” however accurate, is to risk understating his influence on modern theater and literature worldwide. After all, Brecht, his theater, and his theories, have had a major impact on the rest of the world, including Africa, Asia, South America, North America, and Australia. His work has been translated into many different languages. He was a global playwright and thinker, and in turn the entire globe has responded to and continued to develop his ideas and challenges.

Brecht would have been gratified by this. A poem written more than two decades before his death reads: “I have no need of a gravestone, but / If you should need one for me / I would want it to read: / He made suggestions. We / Took them on. / Such an inscription would / Honour us all.”⁴ In June 1956, only a few weeks before his untimely death at the age of fifty-eight, he spoke to an acquaintance about his own mortality. He rejected a conventional eulogy and instead suggested an honest accounting of what a difficult writer and person he actually was. “Don’t write that you admire me,” he insisted. “Write that I was an uncomfortable person and intend to remain that way after my death. Even then there are a few possibilities.”⁵

It was not just Brecht’s fellow Germans who were influenced and made – sometimes pleasurably – uncomfortable by his suggestions but the rest of the world as well. The community addressed by and through Brecht’s theater and ideas is large. There is probably no twentieth-century playwright worldwide who has had such extraordinary influence. Indeed,

² Bertolt Brecht, *Life of Galileo*, trans. John Willett, in CP 5, 1–105 (7–8).

³ Bertolt Brecht, *The Threepenny Opera*, trans. Ralph Manheim and John Willett, in CP 2, 91–16 (152).

⁴ Bertolt Brecht, “I Have No Need of a Gravestone . . .,” CPBB 483.

⁵ Werner Hecht, *Brecht Chronik 1898–1956* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997), 1242. My translation.

modern theater, with its episodic structures and interaction between audiences and actors, would be fundamentally unthinkable without Brecht and his “estrangement effects” that aimed at breaking through the “fourth wall” and encouraging a critical, skeptical attitude on the part of audiences. Neither Brecht specifically nor modern theater more generally wanted audiences to be too comfortable, passive, or complacent. He always thought in terms of oppositions and frictions, and wherever there was a proposition, he always sought to produce a counterproposition. It was resistance and friction that produced pleasure and also the possibility for change, in his view. In one of his key theoretical essays he declared simply: “Contradictions are our hope!”⁶

One testament to Brecht’s influence comes from a somewhat unlikely source: the singer-songwriter Bob Dylan, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2016. Toward the end of his 2004 book *Chronicles: Volume One*, Dylan writes that Brecht’s approach to lyrics had a transformative impact on his own career at a crucial early stage. Prior to his first exposure to Brecht in New York City in the early 1960s, the young Dylan’s major literary influences had been American. As a result of his encounter with Brecht, and specifically with the Brecht-Weill *Threepenny Opera*, Dylan writes, “my little shack in the universe was about to expand into some glorious cathedral, at least in songwriting terms.”⁷ What particularly impressed him about Brecht’s poetry was what the American songwriter calls his “tough language” and irreverent approach. Brecht’s lyrics, coupled with Weill’s music, “were erratic, unrhythmical and herky-jerky – weird visions,” Dylan remembers. Moreover, the protagonists of the opera were not praiseworthy heroes. On the contrary, they “were thieves, scavengers or scallywags and they all roared and snarled.”⁸ Dylan recounts: “every song seemed to come from some obscure tradition, seemed to have a pistol in its hip pocket, a club or a brickbat and they came at you in crutches, braces and wheel chairs. They were like folk songs in nature, but unlike folk songs, too, because they were sophisticated.”⁹ This had a profound and anything-but-comforting impact on the young American: “Within a few minutes I felt like I hadn’t slept or tasted food for about thirty hours, I was so into it.”¹⁰

Bob Dylan was particularly intrigued by one song in *The Threepenny Opera*, “Pirate Jenny,” which he calls “a nasty song, sung by an evil fiend, and when she’s done singing, there’s not a word to say. It leaves you

⁶ Bertolt Brecht, “The *Threepenny Lawsuit*,” in BFR, 147–199 (148).

⁷ Bob Dylan, *Chronicles: Volume One* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 272.

⁸ Dylan, *Chronicles*, 272–273. ⁹ Dylan, *Chronicles*, 273. ¹⁰ Ibid.

breathless.” As Dylan describes it, “this is a wild song. Big medicine in the lyrics. Heavy action spread out. Each phrase comes at you from a ten-foot drop, scuttles across the road and then another one comes like a punch on the chin.”¹¹ What fascinated Dylan about the song, in other words, was that it attacked him and made him uncomfortable, just as Brecht had intended. Dylan appreciated the fact that the song targets its own audience, refusing to let it go. “This piece left you flat on your back and it demanded to be taken seriously. It lingered. Woody [Guthry] had never written a song like that. It wasn’t a protest or topical song and there was no love for people in it.”¹² Dylan admits that, later on, he found himself “taking the song apart, trying to find out what made it tick, why it was so effective. I could see that everything in it was apparent and visible but you didn’t notice it too much.”¹³ Brecht’s work “was a new stimulant for my senses,” rather like a drug, Dylan acknowledged, and he found himself wanting to achieve the same kind of power in his own work that Brecht had achieved in his. “I wanted to figure out how to manipulate and control this particular structure and form.”¹⁴ What interested Dylan was not so much the specific content of the song as its unconventional form and language.

Bob Dylan’s tribute to Brecht’s use of language calls attention to the most important building block of the writer’s work. Above all, Brecht was a master of the German language. That language was the fundamental material that he used to create his plays, poems, novels, short stories, and essays. This is also true of other writers, of course, no matter what language they may use: by definition, any writer works with language. However, Brecht was without parallel in his approach to the German language of his day. Not only was he a master of lyric, drama, and prose to an extent achieved by no other German writer since Goethe, but he was also capable of transforming complex thoughts into a relatively simple, comprehensible form. In “Legend of the Origin of the Book *Tao Te Ching* on Lao-Tze’s Road into Exile” (1938), for example, he manages to compress the philosophy of Taoism – or, more precisely, what he finds useful in that philosophy – into a simple, lyrically beautiful ballad.¹⁵ In his short poem “The Solution,” written in the wake of the 1953 workers’ uprising against the East German socialist dictatorship, Brecht manages to capture the absurdity of a supposedly democratic socialist government that has lost

¹¹ Dylan, *Chronicles*, 274–275. ¹² Dylan, *Chronicles*, 275. ¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Dylan, *Chronicles*, 276.

¹⁵ Bertolt Brecht, “Legend of the Origin of the Book *Tao Te Ching* on Lao-tze’s Road into Exile,” CPBB, 678–681.

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confidence in the very people whom it purportedly represents and champions.¹⁶ Whereas in a normal democratic situation the parliament or government is dissolved and the people elect a new one, in Brecht's rhetorical vision it is the electorate that should be dissolved and the government that should elect a new population. Brecht uses normal language and expectations but turns them around, thus revealing the fundamental contradiction at the heart of the East German socialist project. At the same time, he exposes one of the basic challenges of any postwar German democracy: How is it possible to create a free republic on the basis of a nation and a people who only a decade earlier enthusiastically supported Hitler, the Nazis, and the invasion of foreign countries? He does all of this in ten short lines that contain one declarative sentence and one deceptively simple question. These ten lines became one of the most famous German poems of the twentieth century and certainly the most memorable literary response to the 1953 uprising in East Germany, which was the first major revolt against a socialist dictatorship anywhere behind the Iron Curtain.

Bob Dylan's description of "Pirate Jenny" also applies to "The Solution" and to many other works by Brecht: "everything in it was apparent and visible but you didn't notice it too much." Indeed, Brecht eschews obfuscation and lays everything out for audiences and readers to see. He hides nothing. Precisely because of the simplicity and openness of his language, however, it is easy to overlook the intellectual sophistication that undergirds it. The elegant simplicity of his language distinguishes Brecht from other famous German writers of the twentieth century, especially his arch-rival Thomas Mann, who wrote complex and sophisticated novels with long, syntactically difficult sentences.¹⁷ It also distinguishes him from the philosopher Hegel, whom he admired for his dialectics (one of life's main pleasures, in his view), but whose prose is notoriously murky.

Brecht's approach to the German language can be reasonably compared to that of Martin Luther, the Protestant reformer widely credited with having helped develop the modern German language by translating the Bible in such a way that it could readily be understood by ordinary people who had not mastered the Latin of the church fathers. Brecht, who was raised in a devout Lutheran family, knew Luther's Bible translation well, and it is the most pervasive influence on his work. After the extraordinary success

¹⁶ Bertolt Brecht, "The Solution," CPBB, 1013.

¹⁷ Brecht's dislike of Mann was considerable. See, for instance, Hans Mayer, "Thomas Mann and Bertolt Brecht: Anatomy of an Antagonism," trans. Jack Zipes, *New German Critique* 6 (Autumn 1975), 101–115.

of the *Threepenny Opera*, when he was asked by a journalist what book had influenced him more than any other, he responded quite seriously: “You’ll laugh: the Bible.”¹⁸ Of course in *The Threepenny Opera* and elsewhere the atheist Brecht did not simply accept the Bible or Luther’s Christian faith at face value; rather, he turned them on their head. He took what he believed was useful from them and discarded the rest. This does not negate the influence that the Bible had on him, however. After all, as a young man Brecht also loved reading Friedrich Nietzsche, a philosopher who was equally influenced by his Protestant upbringing and the language of the Luther Bible. Nietzsche’s *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, as Brecht knew, is essentially an attempt to refashion the language of the Bible for his own philosophy and for the modern day. Brecht used the language of the Bible for similar reasons, and with similar effect, but without the pomposity and nineteenth-century heroism that characterized so much of Nietzsche’s work. Whereas Nietzsche worshipped the idea of a heroic superman, Brecht reveled in the ordinary language of the people and had no use for heroes.

Another aspect of Brecht’s writing that Bob Dylan astutely picks up on, therefore, is its lack of heroism – or downright misanthropy. As Dylan asserts, “there was no love for people in” Brecht’s “Pirate Jenny.” After all, the song comes to its conclusion with its protagonist, a poor kitchen maid overlooked and disrespected by her customers, deciding to have all of them killed. *Saint Joan of the Stockyards*, Brecht’s Depression-era take on the canonized French heroine, on the classical German playwright Friedrich Schiller’s heroic play *Maid of Orleans*, and on George Bernard Shaw’s plays *Saint Joan* and *Major Barbara*, ends neither with heroism nor with reconciliation but rather with the once saintly protagonist insisting on the necessity for physical violence: “The truth is that / Where force rules only force can help.”¹⁹ In *Mother Courage and Her Children* the protagonist, Anna Fierling, learns nothing fundamental about war over the course of the play’s diegesis, in spite of the fact that she loses all of her children to the Thirty Years War. Brecht’s early play *Baal* features an unlikeable protagonist who behaves despicably to everyone around him, especially his admirers. *The Threepenny Opera* gives its audiences the murderer and thief Mack the Knife (and a famous ditty later sung by Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, Sting, and countless others) and not a single positive character; and the action of *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* takes place in a den of iniquity akin to the biblical “cities of the plain” Sodom

¹⁸ Ronald Speirs, *Brecht’s Early Plays* (London: Macmillan, 1982), 162.

¹⁹ Bertolt Brecht, *Saint Joan of the Stockyards*, trans. Ralph Manheim, in CP 3, 201–311 (308).

and Gomorrah, which God chooses to destroy by “sulfur and fire.” Brecht’s protagonists, however, can do without God’s punishment because they are perfectly capable of destroying their city themselves: “We need no raging hurricane / We need no bolt from the blue: / There’s no havoc which they might have done / That we cannot better do.”²⁰ And Brecht’s protagonists also cannot be sent to Hell as punishment for their sins because they have always lived in Hell anyway: “We will never / Let you drag us off to Hell forever / For we *are* in Hell and always have been.”²¹

Brecht’s plays, in short, do not generally feature heroic or even particularly likeable protagonists, and they mostly do not have happy endings. His literary figures are, for the most part, not models of good behavior, and anyway, in most of his works, good behavior is not rewarded, while bad behavior frequently leads to rich rewards. Brecht’s libretto for the ballet *The Seven Deadly Sins* succinctly demonstrates that much of what is considered to be virtuous in traditional morality (love, sympathy, generosity, kindness) leads directly to personal ruin; the later play *The Good Person of Szechwan* features a protagonist, Shen-Te, who manages to destroy her own life and that of others by being too nice. As Shen-Te remarks to the helpless gods at the end of the play, “Something is wrong with this world of yours. Why / Is wickedness so rewarded, and why is so much suffering / Reserved for the good?”²²

The answer is that the world of Brecht’s plays is not good, and that the people in the plays are not good, either. How could they be good in the midst of a world that is so horrible? His play *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich*, one of the most important contributions to anti-Nazi culture in the years of the Hitler dictatorship, contains thirty scenes of life in Nazi Germany, and most of them feature characters who are opportunistic, cowardly, greedy, stupid, or downright cruel. Only two scenes feature a genuine, unambiguous hero of the anti-Nazi resistance; he, not coincidentally, is already dead – precisely because he was a hero – and he therefore does not make a physical appearance in the play. Another famous contribution by Brecht to the analysis of Nazi culture is *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*; in that play, too, almost everyone behaves badly, and anyone who is actually good is living very dangerously. In his world few good deeds go unpunished. In this sense the Brechtian universe is not so different from that of the biblical Book of Job, in which a good man is visited with

²⁰ Bertolt Brecht, *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, trans. W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman, in CP 2, 171–235 (197).

²¹ Brecht, *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, 232.

²² Bertolt Brecht, *The Good Person of Szechwan*, trans. John Willett, in CP 6, 1–111 (198).

unspeakable horrors and the only answer given by God “out of the whirlwind” to the heartfelt question “Why?” is yet another question: “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?” Brecht leaves God out of the equation, though, because for him, as one of his characters puts it, “The fate of man is man.”²³

This is a very uncertain “fate,” however. No other twentieth-century playwright thematized the mutability, changeability, and unreliability of human beings more insistently than Brecht. One of his early poems openly proclaims: “In me you have someone you cannot count on.”²⁴ Certainly, he was deeply influenced by the main trends in nineteenth and early twentieth-century drama, especially the naturalism of Gerhart Hauptmann, the expressionism of Ernst Toller and Georg Kaiser, and the bourgeois realism of Henrik Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw, among others. And yet Brecht was emphatically not interested in writing psychologically realistic plays about bourgeois families and their problems. While his life coincided with that of the father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, as a playwright and author he was not particularly interested in psychology. He read Aristotle and Lessing (and also Freud), but he was not primarily interested in writing plays that would, via the purging of the emotions of fear and pity, generate some sort of cathartic release. Rather Brecht, as Bob Dylan later recognized, was interested in ratcheting up tension and not letting his audiences go. He did not want his audiences to get too familiar or comfortable with particular characters and their quirks.

This makes Brecht a tough nut to crack, since, to this day, much analysis of drama (and of novels and stories as well) relies on the concepts of character and character development. That is what plays are supposed to be about. Brecht, by contrast, is not particularly interested in characters and what they are in and of themselves. Rather, he is interested in how characters interact with one another and thereby produce what one might call particular character effects. The central statement of this approach is Brecht’s revolutionary early play *Man Equals Man* (1926), in which the protagonist, Galy Gay, can become more or less anything depending on the interactions he experiences. As one figure in the play puts it, “man is nothing. Modern science has proved that everything is relative.”²⁵ Another proclaims: “People are taken much too seriously. One equals no one. Anything less than two

²³ *Bertolt Brecht’s Me-Ti: Book of Interventions in the Flow of Things*, ed. and trans. Antony Tatlow (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2016), 47.

²⁴ Bertolt Brecht, “Poor B.B.,” CPBB 251.

²⁵ Bertolt Brecht, *Man Equals Man*, trans. Gerhard Nellhaus, in Brecht, CP 2, 1–76 (42).

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hundred at a time is not worth mentioning.”²⁶ We can think of figures in Brecht’s plays as social variables akin to the unknown quantities to be searched for in algebraic equations or calculus. They behave differently in different circumstances, and they do not have a permanent or fixed identity. They are always a reflection of the forces around them.

This puts Brecht at odds with much of the European dramatic tradition as it has developed over the last few centuries, and it may help explain why he was attracted to non-European traditions in which “human nature” seemed, at least to him, to be less fixed and preordained than in nineteenth-century European realism. Nevertheless, Brecht’s insights into the variability of human nature, although they may contravene much of Western dramatic literature and what counts as common sense, are contemporary and relevant, since notions of a fixed human identity are harder to come by in our own world than they were in the nineteenth century when Ibsen was writing his plays. And his skepticism about human nature corresponds better to a period of radical revolutionary change than the dogmas of bourgeois individualism. Nor do his insights into human variability and impermanence contravene the entire Western tradition, since the Scottish philosopher David Hume, 150 years before Brecht’s birth, had already recognized the slipperiness of what we call individual identity. Robert Musil, the great Austrian novelist who lived at the same time as Brecht, also explored the mutability of human nature in works such as *The Man Without Qualities* (1930–1943). Brecht operationalizes such insights for the modern stage, using theater as an experimental form in order to test various identity constructs and character effects. What is particularly important in such operations is not the “content” or “message,” whatever that may be deemed to be, but rather the method itself. For Brecht, theater – as the most social of all the literary arts, in both its production and reception – is the ideal form for experimenting with notions of human and group identity and social structure.

Precisely because he wanted to make his audiences uncomfortable, Brecht continues to have many opponents and not just admirers. Particularly in the English-speaking world, where notions of artistic excellence are often conflated with the expectation of moral probity, he is sometimes condemned as a Marxist who chose to spend the last years of his life in the socialist dictatorship of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Moreover, because Brecht tended to work with many collaborators on his plays, he has been accused of offending conventional notions

²⁶ Brecht, *Man Equals Man*, 31

of individual authorship and originality. Such criticisms are overly simplistic, because they paint a complex world in black-and-white terms and do not take specific historical situations or personal constellations into consideration. Moreover, and paradoxically, they take an author who rejected ordinary notions of individual character and identity and make him into the antagonist of his own personal morality play. Brecht freely admitted to being a Marxist and did not believe that it was possible to understand the modern world and its radical changes without reference to Marx's material dialectics. He certainly did settle in the GDR and spent the last eight years of his life there, building up the celebrated Berliner Ensemble and spreading his approach to theater throughout Europe and ultimately the rest of the world.

Brecht was a German writer living in the era of Hitler and Stalin, and as a convinced Marxist he was a dedicated anti-fascist. He never chose to become a member of the Communist Party because he did not want to submit himself to Party discipline and valued his own artistic freedom above obedience to the Party and its leaders. In the difficult situation of the Hitler dictatorship and World War II, Brecht ultimately chose to seek refuge in the United States rather than the Soviet Union – unlike many German writers who were members of the Communist Party. His choice for the United States does not necessarily make him morally better or worse than the writers who instead went to the USSR, nor does it make him an American patriot. It was simply a choice he made to protect himself, his family, and his work at a moment of great peril. Brecht would surely rather have stayed in a non-Nazi Germany, but that choice was not open to him after January 1933, when Hitler came to power, or after May 1933, when the Nazis started burning his books. Certainly, by choosing not to settle in the Soviet Union, he avoided the dismal fate – murder, persecution, and terror – that awaited many other German writers who made a different choice. A post-facto critic has the option to congratulate Brecht or condemn him. Alternatively, however, and more fruitfully, a critic can try to understand his work and the complex, difficult choices he made. As Brecht wrote in one of his most famous poems, a plea “To Those Born After”: “You who will emerge again from the flood / In which we have gone under / Think / When you speak of our faults / Of the dark times / Which you have escaped.”²⁷ We would do well to heed him.

Brecht never expected to live a long life. From an early age he was worried about the strength and durability of his heart. At the end of World

²⁷ Bertolt Brecht, “To Those Born After,” CPBB 734–736 (736).