

Introduction: Radicalism, Traditionalism, Eristics

'Not even the trace of a Greek column.'

'Auch nicht die Spur einer griechischen Säule.'

In a sense, the above observation by Hans Curjel, the artistic director of the *Stadttheater* in Chur (Switzerland), on Brecht's production of *The Antigone of Sophocles* at his theatre in early 1948 is correct.¹ By contrast with classicizing stage practices, common to the present day, the *mise-en-scène* by Brecht and his stage designer Caspar Neher (shown, for instance, on the cover image of this book) conspicuously lacked Greek columns, or indeed any Hellenizing architectural element, prop or costume that would function as a visual hint towards Greco-Roman antiquity. But how could Curjel overlook those four poles? Arranged in a semi-circle and adorned with horse skulls (real ones – the heads of the horses had to be boiled down after being delivered to the theatre!),² they are columns in their own right: re-placing, literally, any conventionally aestheticizing Neo-Classicism with primitive rawness, the four poles rising from the ground and supporting horse skulls at the top invoke and at the same time transform, in the true manner of *Verfremdung*, the classical column. They leave the spectators with a sense of the weirdly familiar, a sense which is to arouse their interest and curiosity. This *orchestra* (the term for the central acting area of the Classical Greek theatre) has been turned into the display of a slaughterhouse: refined elegance has morphed into gruesome rawness and visual refinement – note that animal skulls (so-called *boukrania*) are popular ornaments in Graeco-Roman art – has been turned into barbaric exposure.

Curjel's oversight, I submit, is indicative of a widespread misreading of Brecht. So much is Brecht seen as a cutting-edge figure among the boldly innovative historical avant-garde of theatre in the twentieth century – a perception which he himself did everything to create, endorse and sustain – that it is easy to overlook (sometimes quite literally) the traditionalism of his art, its rootedness in and indebtedness to a wide range of

¹ In Hecht 1988: 187–93 (quote from p. 189).

² As Ruth Berlau (in Hecht 1988: 186) recalls with horror.

established artistic forms and practices. The contrast with Brecht's contemporary Artaud, who Brecht never engaged with in his extensive theoretical writings (and *vice versa*), is strong and telling. It becomes especially obvious when comparing Brecht's historically aware, carefully conceived and poetically crafted scripts with Artaud's radical rejection of the classics (*No More Masterpieces!*) and his fundamental distrust in language as a meaningful vehicle of expression which leads him to resort to a 'primitive' rawness of body, space and sound instead. Yet, there is some convergence between those two in the end-result. It is, for instance, no accident that in 1967 *The Living Theatre* did create an *Antigone* which combined Brecht and Artaud, a match-up which was also at the centre of Frank Castorf's 2019 production of the *Galileo* at the *Berliner Ensemble*.³ In a similar vein, the stage of Brecht's *The Antigone of Sophocles* in Chur is as much as anything an instance of 'cruel theatre', and throughout his artistic life Brecht was very much indeed concerned with (systemic) violence, in particular the oppression of human beings by fellow human beings, and what he saw as the inability of humankind to break out of self-generated patterns of exploitation and inhumanity. Last but not least, the goal of productively unsettling their audiences is surely another common ground shared by these two theatre practitioners and theorists (even if they differ when it comes to the precise nature of this unsettling, its means and its desired effects).

Brecht the Radico-Traditionalist

My point here, to be clear, is not to deprive Brecht of his status as a 'radical' artist, that is, an avant-garde creator and a principal innovator of twentieth-century theatre. Quite the contrary. The point is to explore and bring home the crucial insight that Brecht's radicalism cannot be properly understood without his traditionalism. In the same way as Curjel at the micro-level failed to see the Greek column 'behind' the barbaric poles as the anti-thesis which Brecht (and Neher) quoted and indeed needed to create this remarkable staging, so we will fail, at the macro-level, to understand Brecht's radicalism, and his art more generally, if we fail to see and proactively look for the traditional foundations and building blocks which Brecht utilized when pursuing his project of 'Great Building' ('Das große Bauen', an architectural metaphor which Brecht was especially fond

³ On the *Living Theatre* production see Foley 2012: 132–8.

of using in the post-World War II years). Only such an approach can do justice to the artist himself and the art he created. This is because it would be hard to think of an avant-garde artist who was more aware than Brecht of his historical situation and of his own historicity. Ever the cultural materialist, Brecht constantly, consciously and creatively engaged with a broad range of traditions: Confucius, Aristotle, Schiller, Naturalism, Japanese *Noh* theatre, Bacon, Shakespeare, Brueghel, to name but some of the most obvious ones. Some of Brecht's contemporaries, especially those who knew him and had been observing him closely, were keenly aware of Brecht's traditionalism as a pre-requisite of his radicalism. Thus in 1961 Hans Mayer wrote an essay entitled 'Brecht und die Tradition', while in his funeral speech for Brecht in August 1956 Georg Lukács called him the legitimate successor to Aristotle and Lessing.⁴

If spotting Brecht's traditionalism and utilizing the insights derived from this to arrive at an improved understanding of his radicalism are at the core of this book, tragedy, and Greek tragedy in particular, has been chosen as an ideal vehicle for such an exploration.⁵ It was at the centre of Brecht's practical and theoretical interests during a crucial liminal phase in his life, the year 1948 when Brecht, turning fifty in February of that year, resided in Switzerland putting together his ground-breaking production of *The Antigone of Sophocles* (a hybrid of translation/adaptation/new play which he had just completed) while using this experience for his first model book (the *Antigonemodell* 1948, published in 1949). On top of all this, in this remarkably productive year (even by Brecht's high standards) he, finally, managed to bundle his theoretical reflections into the *Kleines Organon für das Theater* which was to remain his only complete major theoretical treatise and which, since its publication in 1949, has served as one of the seminal texts for Brecht's theory of the theatre, fundamentally shaping the understanding of theatre scholars, students and practitioners. In this rich

⁴ Mayer 1961: 1996 and, for the Lukács episode, Mayer 1971: 1996 p. 242.

⁵ The interfaces between Brecht and tragedy, despite their importance for both Brecht and the history of tragedy, have rarely been examined, and then only rudimentarily: note in particular the final chapter of Williams 1966, Dickson 1978: 192–207, Carney 2005: 152–84, Lehmann 2013: 554–62, Oesmann 2014, Cole 2020: 4f. The larger issue of Brecht and 'the tradition', with some reference to the tragic tradition, has been tackled by Spalter 1967 and two eminent German Brechtians, Hans Mayer ('Brecht und die Tradition', first published in 1961) and Werner Mittenzwei (in his 'Brechts Verhältnis zur Tradition' from 1973 which deals mainly with Goethe and Schiller, and throughout his momentous 1986 biography of Brecht). On 'tragedy' more generally, see the extensive treatment in Lehmann 2013 (esp. 60–132) and, on a more modest scale, Poole 2005. Other discussions are Steiner 1961 (and cf. Steiner 1996), Williams 1967, Most 2000, Eagleton 2003, Felski 2008, Billings 2014, Leonard 2015, Billings/Leonard 2015 and Critchley 2019.

and complex ‘*Antigone* project’, as I will call it regularly, Brecht chose a play which had been crucial for re-calibrating the thinking on ‘the tragic’ within the German idealistic tradition (dethroning Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King* as the standard reference point) and used it for his own re-calibration as a playwright, director and theorist.

Greek Tragedy, Tragedy and the Western Tragic Tradition

Greek tragedy, then, has a central place in this book, both materially and conceptually. But it is important to bear in mind that this focus extends to encompass subsequent instantiations of tragedy in the Western tragic tradition. There are two main reasons, closely inter-connected, for the wider field of vision which underlies this entire book. First and foremost, Brecht himself does not systematically distinguish between Greek tragedy, tragedy and the Western tragic tradition but usually lumps them together. The important section 33 of the *Small Organon* is a model example for this kind of conflation.⁶ Here Greek tragedy (Oedipus, in this case), Shakespeare and, by implication, the entire Western tragic canon are conflated into ‘tragedy of fate’ or ‘Schicksalstragödie’, which is Brecht’s go-to conception of tragedy – and branded, with Brecht-typical panache and polemics, as ‘barbarian theatre’ because it accepts, legitimizes and endorses human inaction and the uncritical, lethargical acceptance of ‘the world-as-is’. The glue, so to speak, which in Brecht’s view holds together the various instantiations of tragedy and the tragic is a shared worldview where the human sphere is seen as ultimately entirely governed by a supra-human entity, be it referred to as ‘the gods’ or ‘fate’ or something else. At this point, then, the notion of tragedy as an artform is fused with that of tragedy as a determinist worldview. A similar conflation of ‘Greek’ with ‘the Western classical tradition’ can be observed in Brecht’s engagement with the most eminent theorist of (Greek) tragedy, Aristotle. In Brecht-speak, ‘Aristotelian’ can both refer to the Greek philosopher as a historically distinct figure and as a label or shorthand for the entire pre-Brechtian Western tradition, including Naturalism, against which Brecht’s ‘non-Aristotelian’ theatre is being positioned.

The second main reason for the broader approach is in some sense the corollary of the previous one. Since Brecht saw himself in conversation with the entire tragic tradition, we ought to approach the issue with

⁶ BFA 23: 78, English translation in Silberman/Giles/Kuhn 2015: 239.

a similar mindset. The topic, in other words, invites and enables a broad comparatist vista. As a result, this book is different from the standard account of classical receptions in that it goes beyond obvious genealogical links – Brecht and Sophocles’ *Antigone*, for example – and explores analogues where the quest for the precise ‘sources’, ‘links’ and ‘connections’ gives way to a comparatist modality where ‘family resemblances’, so to speak, generate templates which are ‘good to think with’: heroism, chorality, chronotopes, gender, maternity, class, justice, closure, historicization, to name some of the most important ones for the present study.

All of this said, Greek tragedy does have a prominent and exceptional place in Brecht’s engagement with tragedy and the tragic tradition. This is well illustrated by a brief but important fragment from the *Messingkauf*, Brecht’s unfinished main theoretical work:

PHILOSOPH: Die Alten haben das Ziel der Tragödie darin erblickt, dass Furcht und Mitleid erweckt werde. Auch jetzt wäre das ein gutes Ziel, wenn bloß unter Furcht Furcht vor den Menschen und unter Mitleid Mitleid mit Menschen verstanden würde und wenn also das ernste Theater mithilfe, jene Zustände unter den Menschen zu beseitigen, wo sie voreinander Furcht und miteinander Mitleid haben müssen. Denn das Schicksal des Menschen ist der Mensch geworden.

PHILOSOPHER: The ancients considered it to be the purpose of tragedy to arouse fear and pity. Today too this would be a good objective, if only fear meant fear of human beings and pity meant pity with human beings, and if therefore serious theatre were to help doing away with those conditions among human beings in which they have to fear each other and pity each other. For humanity has become the fate of humanity. (Brecht *Messingkauf* B12, BFA 22: 710, cf. Kuhn/Giles/Silberman 2015: 35)

Reading this fragment backwards (a good strategy in general for approaching Brecht’s often aphoristic style), the argument that Brecht puts in the mouth of the Philosopher (one of the dialogue partners in the *Messingkauf*) is that *Schicksalstragödie* is no longer a matter of distant divine entities but entirely situated within the human realm, hence changeable. Modern, in other words Brechtian, tragedy is to be precisely this kind of art. It is implied that this used to be different: that is, previous forms of serious theatre conceptualized ‘tragedy of fate’ as something entirely outside of the human sphere, hence unalterable. But of those previous forms of theatre the one used by Brecht to develop his argument here is clearly Greek tragedy, unmistakably conceptualized within the well-known

Aristotelian terms of fear (*phobos*) and pity (*eleos*) from the definition of tragedy in chapter 6 of the *Poetics* (1449b24–8). This is done despite the very significant fact that ‘tragedy of fate’ is not an element of Aristotle’s theorizing of tragedy at all! In fact, there is no place for ‘tragedy of fate’ in the Aristotelian *Poetics*, a text which is remarkably uninterested in the eschatological and theological dimension of tragedy in general. Brecht does not, in fact cannot, get the crucial notion of *Schicksalstragödie* from Aristotle but, ultimately, from German Idealism via his school training, his extensive exposure to Schiller and Jessner’s *Oedipus* production from 1929 (see the section on Jessner below). Greek tragedy and Aristotle are therefore invoked to make a larger point about pre-Brechtian tragedy and the Western tragic tradition which they, upon closer and more critical inspection, do not really endorse. For Brecht, Greek tragedy – and not Schiller or Shakespeare – is the key reference point for reflecting on tragedy and the tragic. It offers cultural visibility and a powerful recognition factor, and in the person of Aristotle has a theoretician associated with it whom Brecht felt extraordinarily good to think with and think against.

The Eristics of Reception

If radicalism and traditionalism are common concepts, the more idiosyncratic term ‘eristics’ in the title of this book calls for explanation. It has been chosen instead of the more common one ‘dialectics’, entirely appropriate as it would be in its own right. This is because it alone seemed to convey some crucial peculiarities of Brecht’s reception modalities. First, it operates as a pun on the ‘erotics’ of classical reception, a.k.a. ‘philhellenism’. Using the Greek noun *eris* (‘strife’) to replace *erôs* (‘desire’) is a pointer to the polemical nature of Brecht’s interaction with Greek tragedy, both in its theatrical practice and in the form of its main surviving theorist Aristotle. This highly unusual attitude towards the Greeks was one aspect which drew me to this project in the first place: it is not often that Classicists (or others, for that matter) come across someone who argues that Sophocles and all the other cultural icons of the Greek stage produced ‘barbaric theatre’, and if such provocations perhaps do not arouse curiosity and interest in everyone, this one certainly did in me. Upon closer inspection it quickly turned out that underlying Brecht’s *eris* there is, in fact, a lot of *erôs* as well, very much in its full sense of ‘desire for something that is lacking’.

Secondly, the term ‘eristics’ implies a certain degree of competitiveness, a need to excel when benchmarking oneself against peers. Brecht sensed his poetic exceptionalism early on, and throughout his life very much felt that he was one of the all-time greats. A picture taken around 1920 shows the young Brecht posing for the camera as ‘the new Schiller’ in the space vacated by the Schiller statue at the Augsburg *Stadttheater* (Figure 7.1).⁷ When in 1978 Heinrich Breloer, as part of a documentary on the young Brecht and Paula Banholzer (Brecht’s early love and the mother of his first child), interviewed the person who took this now somewhat iconic picture, Brecht’s Augsburg friend Otto Bezold, he was told what Brecht said in those moments. As Breloer puts it in his 2019 Brecht ‘novel’:

(Bezold) ‘Ich bin der nächste. Ich werde da eines Tages stehen!’ Und Bezold drückt auf den Auslöser. Ich frage den alten Herrn: ‘Haben Sie ihm das geglaubt?’ – Otto Bezold: ‘Ja, absolut! Er hat immer gesagt: Ich bin der letzte Dichter der deutschen Sprache. Das letzte deutsche Genie!’ Das alles war für die Freunde nicht nur so hing gesprochen. Sie glaubten es, weil Brecht für sie glaubhaft war.

(Bezold) ‘I’ll be the next one. One day I’ll stand there!’ And Bezold takes the picture. I ask the old man: ‘Did you believe him?’ – Otto Bezold: ‘Yes, absolutely! He would always say: I am the last poet of the German language. The last German genius!’ All of this was, in his friends’ view, not simply him just saying it. They believed it, because Brecht was credible for them.’ (Breloer 2019: 18)

Brecht’s statue, to be sure, is still not standing in that niche of the Augsburg *Stadttheater*, nor is it likely to pop up in that spot ever: the city of Augsburg has only fairly recently discovered its official pride in its famous lost son, as controversial and downright annoying as he often was, partly in an attempt to capitalize on his *post mortem* marketing value. The most proactive way of embracing his cultural and theatrical ‘heritage’ has taken on the form of the annual *Brechtfestival* which, since 2010, has taken place in Brecht’s hometown around the time of his birthday in February. And perhaps the Brecht pictures adorning the Augsburg *Stadttheater* during those festival days are indeed proof that Brecht, for better or worse, has become a classic after all, even if the niche created for him is, unlike Schiller’s, not carved out of stone but lighter and more colourful: more transient, to be sure, but also more playful and more changeable (the last two being qualities much appreciated by Brecht himself).

⁷ Mittenzwei 1986: I 46, Parker 2014: 95, Breloer 2019: 17f. (the episode also features early in the 2019 movie by Breloer on Brecht).

Brecht was certainly always ‘eristic’ in the sense of being an aspiring classic, and his early sense of purpose and being on an artistic mission remained very strong throughout his entire life. Years after the Schiller picture at the Augsburg theatre, in his poem ‘Besuch bei den verbannten Dichtern’ (‘Visiting the exiled Poets’), part of the collection *Svendborger Gedichte* from 1939 (BFA 12: 35), Brecht envisages himself in conversation with Ovid, Po Chü-i, Tu-fu, Villon, Dante, Voltaire, Heine, Shakespeare and Euripides. Also note that his quite aggressive stance against Thomas Mann was surely in part personal and motivated by sheer envy of Mann’s literary achievements and concomitant public accolades. An anecdotal sense of Brecht’s self-perception as a classic can be gained from the literary critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki. He recalls an encounter with Brecht in 1952 where his tongue-in-cheek comparisons of Brecht with Goethe and Schiller are received by Brecht with complete and absolute seriousness. Reich-Ranicki subsequently shares another anecdote which suggests that Brecht considered himself on par with Shakespeare.⁸

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly for this project, the term ‘eristics’ is linked to notions of productivity. The ancient Greek poet Hesiod, in his *Works and Days* (11–26), distinguished between two types of *eris*, a bad one and a good one. The former creates conflict and war, while the latter makes people productive by motivating farmers, potters, builders and poets (!) to excel in farming, pottery, building and performing poetry. Brecht’s relationship with things Greek, and with the cultural tradition of tragedy, is very much informed by this good and productive *eris*, and the mandate to engage critically with the past came by default with the obligation to produce himself – and to produce something better.

The Structure and Goals of This Book: Point of Contact – Positionings – Comparatist Explorations

The attempt to do justice to these complex dimensions of Brecht’s engagement with tragedy and the tragic underlies the tri-partite macro-structure of this book. My starting point (Part I: Point of Contact 1948) is an obvious and straightforward one, namely Brecht’s genealogical link with Greek tragedy, which manifested itself in various forms: his adaptation of Sophocles’ *Antigone* (a hybrid of translation, adaptation and new play), the stage production of this work at the local theatre in Chur (Switzerland)

⁸ Reich-Ranicki 1999: 347 (= Reich-Ranicki 2001: 95).

in early 1948, the model book based on this production (*Antigonemodell 1948*) and the *Small Organon for the Theatre* (*Kleines Organon für das Theater*), the only major theoretical treatise which Brecht completed (written in 1948 and published in 1949). The fact that all of this work was created in the year 1948 is significant. This is an important liminal year in Brecht's biography when, after more than fifteen years of exile in various European countries and in the USA, he was in limbo, trying to sort out his options for the return to Berlin and the German stage. This 'Greek phase' of re-orientation and experimentation underlines just how foundational Brecht's engagement with Greek tragedy in fact is, and how he was able to utilize this tragic tradition in particular to develop his new and radical visions in theory and test them in theatrical practice.

Part II ('Positionings') situates Brecht's relationship with the Greeks and their tragedy within his artistic topography by widening the scope considerably and exploring his relationships with other 'classical' traditions of theatre: the Asian theatre traditions, Shakespeare, Schiller and Naturalism. In addition, the role of comedy and the comic in Brecht is scrutinized to create a better sense of how the comic interacts with Brecht's notion of the tragic. This broadly comparatist angle is pursued further in Part III ('Comparatist Explorations') which returns to Brecht's oeuvre. It seeks to make visible and analyse the tragic tradition 'behind' some key dramatic works. At this point, the realm of genealogical connections – that is, overt, acknowledged and quite straightforward links between an older work of art to which a newer one responds – is left behind for good in favour of using analogues as a hermeneutic tool for a comparatist analysis: do features and techniques deployed in Greek tragedy and subsequently in the tragic tradition re-surface in Brecht? If so, how can they be utilized as handles and gateways for a deeper understanding of Brecht's art? Questions to do with heroism, gender, parody, closural techniques, chronotopes, linguistic register and chorality are as much part of this analysis as are the themes of motherhood, sacrifice, ritual, kinship relations, divinity and justice.

The book's Conclusion is written in such a way that it can be consulted as a 'stand-alone' piece. It pulls threads together, summarizes but also suggests further paths of inquiry. In general, this monograph is designed to allow for multiple ways of reading: sequential of course, but also selective (chapter by chapter or part by part), or even somewhat piecemeal. If this book (or parts of it) is able to convey to readers a sense of Brecht's enormous creative energy and inspires them to (re-)engage with Brecht, Greek tragedy and/or the tragic tradition afresh, productively and on their own terms, it will have served one of its main purposes.

The comparatist aspect of this study needs further elaboration. There are certainly strong material grounds for comparison between Brecht and tragedy.⁹ Brecht himself became increasingly aware that he constantly engaged with tragedy and the tragic tradition as he continued to explore the interconnections between content and form. In 1919, Brecht observes that the protagonist of his first full-length play *Baal* ‘is neither particularly comic nor particularly tragic in nature’.¹⁰ Some two years later the experience of watching an expressionist play in Augsburg prompts him to make a fascinating, even if somewhat tongue-in-cheek journal entry: ‘I observe that I start to become a classic. . . . People criticize the subservience to form of the classics and overlook that it is form which provides services there.’¹¹ By the late 1920s, the question of how dramatic form needs to be re-formed so that it can adequately deal with the major concerns of modern life in the age of capitalism becomes central to Brecht. This is the time when Brecht, living in an ever-more-polarized Germany under growing economic duress, becomes increasingly politicized and adopts Marxist positions on those major concerns of modern life. Confronting the ‘big issues’ as an artist necessitated experimenting with dramatic form. The plays *Fatzer* and *The Bread Store* (neither of which Brecht was able to complete) show him grappling intensely with this issue, as do the finished works of this period like *The Threepenny Opera*, the libretto for the Weill-opera *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, the play *St. Joan of the Stockyards* and *The Measure* (one of Brecht’s most idiosyncratic creations). Of great importance in this context is a brief review/newspaper article by Brecht from early 1929, occasioned by Leopold Jessner’s *Oedipus* production (on which see below) and

⁹ On grounds for comparison, and their relationship to the problematic notion of equivalences, see the excellent book *All the Difference in the World: Postcoloniality and the Ends of Comparison* by Natalie Melas (= Melas 2007). In part this monograph is so important for methodological and theoretical reasons: its extensive Introduction (‘Grounds for Comparison’, pp. 1–43) continues to be the best discussion known to me of the process and the attendant problems of literary comparative analysis in practice and the conceptual tools underlying it. Of her subsequent four detailed case studies, I find the chapter on Derek Walcott’s *Omeros* particularly rewarding.

¹⁰ In the dedicatory note to the first version of *Baal* from 1919 (BFA: 18). Brecht goes on to say that the protagonist Baal has ‘the seriousness of all animals’. The attractive suggestion to look at *Baal* as a satyr play (made by Parker 2018 on the basis of Brecht comparing Baal with Socrates) deserves further examination. Key features of the genre (on which see especially Griffith 2015) like the liminal status of the satyrs as well as the role of ‘raw’ nature and the civilized/non-civilized binary in Greek satyr play seem to be promising points of departure here.

¹¹ Journal 17 June 1921 (BFA 26: 230): ‘Ich beobachte, dass ich anfangs, ein Klassiker zu werden. . . . Man rügt den Formendienst der Klassik und übersieht, dass es die Form ist, die dort Dienste leistet.’