

Humanity and Nature, Warfare and Exploitation in Bertolt Brecht's Poetry

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Abstract. This article proposes a reading of the poetry of Bertolt Brecht as a powerful indictment of much of human activity in terms of its damaging effects both on the lives of many human beings themselves and the nature which they depend on in order to live. Long before awareness of the threats to the environment caused by indiscriminate exploitation of natural resources and uncontrolled production and consumption processes became widespread, Brecht pointed to many of the risks being run, to the inequalities that must be rebalanced and the injustices that must be righted, to how sustainable human trajectories can only be based on cooperation, autonomy and responsibility. Above all, Brecht showed how warfare and exploitation are not separate issues, but are rather inextricably linked as destructive human impulses.

Key words. Poetry, warfare, exploitation, humanity, environment

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In an age of increasing and accelerating globalization, human and all other lives, together with their environments, are undergoing change in multiple ways. Evidence from biology and geology confirms that the fine dividing line often traced between humankind and nature has become increasingly blurred. For example, no longer can we maintain the belief that there is a distinction between warfare as a means of resolving disputes and the destruction of nature as a form of exploiting resources for satisfying our needs. This perspective renders ever more urgent the search for new ways of acting to change our trajectories and tackle the perils of our time that threaten all forms of life and every aspect of the environments that host it.

A further danger stems from the homologation of cultures, systems of belief and languages. The decline in cultural and linguistic diversity exacts a heavy price as it chips away at the range of human possibility that constitutes the wealth of both beauty and hope with which civilizations build their development. This is a matter of great concern and all those who care about the condition of the earth, its living creatures and in particular that of humankind can bear witness to the fact that answers go beyond single visions or specific disciplinary perspectives. Our efforts not to exceed the limits of what the earth can support and remain in equilibrium are useless if we cannot build and maintain common discourses and communities of values.

Poetry – in a way which goes beyond that of any of the sciences – can act as a powerful medium for celebrating diversity. Poems, even – and perhaps especially – those conceived during such harrowing periods as wartime, can address the question of

fulfilment of our fundamental needs for sustenance and emotional support, promote awareness of the infinite complexities of our lives, and exhort us to value and practice the virtues of cooperation, autonomy, and responsibility¹. In just this way, the poems of Bertolt Brecht (1898 – 1956) proclaim a special message and a unique vision of the challenges of our times, able to encompass within the same perspective the perils faced both by humanity and nature. Although he was yet unaware of such threats as climate change, planetary tipping points, or holes in the stratospheric ozone, Brecht’s writings can be seen as sounding a timeless warning of the need to build awareness of the risks run by humanity both in terms of its destructive impulses and its inability to build reciprocal understanding through dialogue. His works are full of the contradictions posed by human trajectories and stand among the finest iconoclastic compositions of modern literature.

It has long been normal to describe war as a universal tragedy in the face of which human beings can no longer sing and poets have to hang their harps to the branches of willows, like the ancient prophets of the Jews deported to Babylon, as in Psalm 137 of the Bible:

*By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept
when we remembered Zion.*

*There on the poplars we hung our harps,
for there our captors asked us for songs,
our tormentors demanded songs of joy;
they said, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”*

¹ Arrobbio, O., Camino, E., Colucci–Gray, L., Dodman, M. and Ferrara, E. *Global Issues and Events. Relationships, Understanding and Actions at Individual and Community Levels*, Visions for Sustainability, 6, pp.3-5, 2016.

*How can we sing the songs of the Lord
while in a foreign land?*

The Italian poet Salvatore Quasimodo (1901–1968) – awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1959 "for his lyrical poetry, which with classical fire expresses the tragic experience of life in our own times", – claimed that war changes poets, "alters the moral life of a people and fosters a greater need for truth than is felt in normal times"². Quasimodo gave poetic form to this sentiment in the famous poem *On the branches of Willows (Alle fronde dei salici, 1947)*:

*And how could we sing
with a foreign foot on our hearts,
among the dead abandoned in the squares
on the grass hard for the ice, to the lament
like lambs of children, to the black scream of
a mother going to meet her son crucified on
a telegraph pole?
From the branches of willows, as a vow,
also our harps were hung,
they were swaying light to the sad wind.*

In certain moments in history, this kind of poetry could have appeared an invaluable testimony on the part of the survivor who leaves his town in flames with his father on his shoulders and his son by his side. In our present age, these lines have an almost unbearable ring, both emotionally and ethically. It is as if the poet had abdicated the exercise of his own will to retreat into self-exile, foregoing further efforts to struggle for his art and humankind's future. Brecht might well have seen his poem on the undecided, *The Waverer*, as a reply to such resignation. What is fundamental for Brecht's art is to defy fatalism, rebutting the idea that terrible times – which will forever threaten humanity, in one way or another –

² Rebay, L. *Introduction to Italian Poetry*, Dover, 1991.

must necessarily limit our focus to the problems besetting us, affirming the idea that joy expressed through artistic and poetic production must always be present to give value to life. While Simone Weil talked about the chance, even in the worst of times, to produce at the very least an inventory of the things oppressing us, in the *Svendborg Poems*, written in exile in Denmark in the 1930s, Brecht wrote³:

*In the dark times
Will there also be singing?
Yes, there will also be singing
About the dark times.*

For Brecht, it is more appropriate to imagine the poet as a man who no longer escapes. On the contrary, the poet stubbornly remains, constantly searching for something that has been able to survive the passage of destructive forces, and can therefore become the basis for reconstruction as an immediately available tool for those who – in a completely modified context – can appreciate its beauty and utility. Brecht was able to produce poetry even out of the very worst horrendous experience. One of his most striking books, *War Primer*, comprised a series of short sonnets set to images of World War II. In this unique text, Brecht offered a devastating visual and lyrical attack on war. He took photographs from newspapers and added short lapidary verses to each in an attempt to address the rotten truth of war by directly using – and ironically inverting – the tools of mass media and propaganda. Pictures of catastrophic bombings, portraits of leading Nazis, scenes of unbearable tragedy on the battlefield, all contribute to an anthology of horror, in which Brecht's words are razor-

³ Translations of Brecht's poems are by the authors

sharp, angry and direct, and produce an outstanding literary memorial to World War II.

Another of Brecht's poems, *The Cherry Thief* (in *Later Svendborg Poems and Satires*, 1936-1938), describes the nonchalant attitudes of a young man who steals cherries from the poet's tree. A utopian detachment from the grip of a controlling and possessing will is evoked, together with the idea that, perhaps, in the future the possessive pronouns "mine" and "yours" will no longer mean anything. Above all – we might add – "mine" and "yours" mean nothing when referred to natural fruits (or resources). It would clearly seem that they already had no meaning in the eyes of the migrant, radical politician, and writer who observes the scene:

*Early one morning, long before the cock
crowed
I was awakened by whistling and went to
the window,
In my cherry tree – a grey dawn filled the
garden –
Sat a young man with patched trousers
Merrily picking my cherries. As he saw me
He nodded, and with both hands
Gathered the cherries from the branches
into his pockets.
For quite a while as I lay once again in bed
I could hear him whistling his gay little song.*

Such a poetic experience has its roots in the perception of the urgent need to escape from a perspective centred on dominance, possession and exploitation, in order to build a vision founded on sharing and participation. The embedded message is that we have to search for a way to create unity even when afflicted by strife and conflict. Everything depends on our ability to establish connections between things, on which we must base our discussion and ensure that our way of talking is serious,

able to provoke heartbreak and let tears flow as the expression of our humanity.

Homeric poems had this same quality, conceived as rhapsodies alternating pain and suffering with joy and hope, witnessing a collective and shared memory. Their genesis required a profound sense of dwelling in a place that nurtures life and endurance in the face of all adversity, in order to let the connections between all things emerge and transform individual and separate verses into the elements of one unique work. This task would seem to be impossible for one person, even though we refer to one author.

Yet we may ask ourselves who or what is an author? The term "author" derives from the Latin "augere", meaning both "originate" or "promote" together with "augment", "enhance", "accomplish step by step". The language we can share with Brecht challenges all of us as authors. It does not matter if we are authors of a poem, a scientific theory, a song, a work of art, a new fruit or flower, or a political movement seeking freedom. What matters is gaining awareness through authoritative – and not authoritarian – modes of being, considering the consequences of our choices, maintaining a vision of nature and its multifaceted accomplishments which take place through changes and transformations that are continuous and sustainable both in the pace set by their rhythm and the resilience of their outcomes.

Brecht's life was always shaped by the terrible and catastrophic events of what he called "dark times" and his efforts to combat the causes and the perpetrators of that darkness. Born in Augsburg in 1898, he had a difficult childhood and untreated bacterial pharyngitis caused him to suffer from chronic fevers that developed into a

weakened heart condition and a rheumatic illness, thereby causing a facial grimace and uncontrolled movements. He grew up during the First World War and achieved success as a writer before Hitler's rise to power. He was then forced to spend 16 years in exile, returning to Berlin only to clash with the new East German regime as it came to power. In the following selection

An die Nachgeborenen

|

*Wirklich, ich lebe in finsternen Zeiten!
Das arglose Wort ist töricht. Eine glatte Stirn
Deutet auf Unempfindlichkeit hin. Der Lachende
Hat die furchtbare Nachricht
Nur noch nicht empfangen.*

*Was sind das für Zeiten, wo
Ein Gespräch über Bäume fast ein Verbrechen
ist
Weil es ein Schweigen über so viele Untaten
einschließt!
Der dort ruhig über die Straße geht
Ist wohl nicht mehr erreichbar für seine Freund
Die in Not sind?*

*Es ist wahr: Ich verdiene nur noch meinen
Unterhalt
Aber glaubt mir: das ist nur ein Zufall. Nichts
Von dem, was ich tue, berechtigt mich dazu,
mich sattzuessen.*

*Zufällig bin ich verschont. (Wenn mein Glück
aussetzt, bin ich verloren.
Man sagt mir: Iss und trink du! Sei froh, dass du
hast!
Aber wie kann ich essen und trinken, wenn
Ich dem Hungernden entreiße, was ich esse, und
Mein Glas Wasser einem Verdursteten fehlt?
Und doch esse und trinke ich.*

of poems each one focuses on different aspects of the human condition and our understanding of it, the ability or inability to take action and to assume responsibility, towards both present and future generations. In particular, *To the Future Generations* (1939) shows a marked awareness of being accountable for today's shortcomings.

To the Future Generations

|

*Truly, I live in dark times!
An ingenuous word is foolish. A smooth
forehead shows indifference. He who laughs
Has not yet heard
The terrible news.*

*What times are these, in which
A conversation about trees is almost a crime
Because in doing so we keep silent about so
much wrongdoing! And he who walks quietly
across the street. Does he not put himself out
the reach of his friends
Who are in danger?*

*It is true: I work for a living
But, believe me, that is a coincidence. Nothing
That I do gives me the right to eat until I am full.*

*By chance I have been spared. (If my luck runs
out, I am lost.)
They tell me: eat and drink. Be glad to be
among those that have!
But how can I eat and drink
When I take what I eat from the starving
And the thirsty do not have my glass of water?
And still I eat and drink.*

*Ich wäre gerne auch weise.
In den alten Büchern steht, was weise ist:
Sich aus dem Streit der Welt halten und die
kurze Zeit
Ohne Furcht verbringen
Auch ohne Gewalt auskommen
Böses mit Gutem vergelten
Seine Wünsche nicht erfüllen, sondern
vergessen
Gilt für weise.*

*Alles das kann ich nicht:
Wirklich, ich lebe in finsternen Zeiten!*

II

*In die Städte kam ich zur Zeit der Unordnung
Als da Hunger herrschte.
Unter die Menschen kam ich zu der Zeit des
Aufruhrs
Und ich empörte mich mit ihnen.
So verging meine Zeit
Die auf Erden mir gegeben war.*

*Mein Essen aß ich zwischen den Schlachten
Schlafen legte ich mich unter die Mörder
Der Liebe pflegte ich achtlos
Und die Natur sah ich ohne Geduld.
So verging meine Zeit
Die auf Erden mir gegeben war.*

*Die Straßen führten in den Sumpf zu meiner Zeit.
Die Sprache verriet mich dem Schlächter.
Ich vermochte nur wenig. Aber die
Herrschenden
Saßen ohne mich sicherer, das hoffte ich.
So verging meine Zeit
Die auf Erden mir gegeben war.*

*Die Kräfte waren gering. Das Ziel
Lag in großer Ferne
Es war deutlich sichtbar, wenn auch für mich
Kaum zu erreichen.
So verging meine Zeit
Die auf Erden mir gegeben war.*

*I would be glad to be wise.
The old books teach us what wisdom is:
To retreat from the strife of the world
To live out the brief time that is your lot
Without fear
To make your way without violence
To repay evil with good –
The wise do not seek to satisfy their desires
But to forget them.*

*But I cannot heed this:
Truly I live in dark times!*

II

*I came to the cities in a time of disorder
As hunger reigned.
I came among men in a time of turmoil
And I protested with them.
In this way I passed
The time given to me on earth.*

*I ate my food in the midst of slaughtering.
I lay down to sleep among murderers.
I was carefree with love.
And I looked upon nature with impatience.
In this way I passed
The time given to me on earth.*

*In my time streets led into a swamp.
My language betrayed me to the slaughterer.
There was little I could do. But without me
The rulers sat more securely, or so I hoped.
In this way I passed
The time given to me on earth.*

*The forces were limited. The goal
Lay far in the distance
It could clearly be seen even though
For me it was unreachable.
In this way I passed
The time given to me on earth.*

III

*Ihr, die ihr auftauchen werdet aus der Flut
In der wir untergegangen sind
Gedenkt
Wenn ihr von unseren Schwächen sprecht
Auch der finsternen Zeit
Der ihr entronnen seid.*

*Gingen wir doch, öfter als die Schuhe die Länder
wechselnd
Durch die Kriege der Klassen, verzweifelt
Wenn da nur Unrecht war und keine Empörung.*

*Dabei wissen wir doch:
Auch der Hass gegen die Niedrigkeit
Verzerrt die Züge.
Auch der Zorn über das Unrecht
Macht die Stimme heiser. Ach, wir
Die wir den Boden bereiten wollten für
Freundlichkeit
Konnten selber nicht freundlich sein.*

*Ihr aber, wenn es soweit sein wird
Dass der Mensch dem Menschen ein Helfer ist
Gedenkt unsrer
Mit Nachsicht.*

III

*You, when you resurface following the flood
In which we have perished, remember
When you speak of our weaknesses,
Also the dark time
That you have escaped.*

*For we went forth, changing country more often
than our shoes
Through the class warfare, desperate
At how there was only injustice and no outrage.*

*And yet we knew:
Even the hatred of sordidness
Distorts our course.
Even anger against injustice
Makes our voice hoarse. Alas, we
Who wished to lay the foundation for kindness
Could not ourselves be kind.*

*But you, when at last comes the time
In which man can help his fellow man,
Think of us
With clemency.*

Concerning Spring was written in 1928, when the idea of the Anthropocene and the question of environmental pollution were not yet issues of political concern. Yet this visionary text appears as an early warning, able to deal in poetry with issues about the

relationship between human trajectories and climate change, together with the dangerous lack of attention and concern about it, along with a spreading sense of unease concerning economic growth and an overwhelming fear of its consequences.

Über das Frühjahr

*Lange bevor
Wir uns stürzten auf Erdöl, Eisen und Ammoniak
Gab es in jedem Jahr
Die Zeit der unaufhaltsam und heftig grünenden
Bäume
Wir alle erinnern uns
Verlängerter Tage
Helleren Himmels
Änderungen der Luft
Des gewiß kommenden Frühjahrs.
Noch lesen wir in Büchern
Von dieser gefeierten Jahreszeit
Und noch sind schon lange
Nicht mehr gesichtet worden über unseren Städten
Die berühmten Schwärme der Vögel.
Am ehesten noch sitzend in Eisenbahnen
Fällt dem Volk das Frühjahr auf.
Die Ebenen zeigen es
In aller Deutlichkeit.
In großer Höhe freilich
Scheinen Stürme zu gehen:
Sie berühren nur mehr
Unsere Antennen.*

Concerning Spring

*Long before
We swooped upon oil, iron and ammonia
There was each year
A time of intense and irresistible leafing of trees.
We all recall
Lengthening days
Brighter skies
The changing air
The sure arrival of Spring.
We still read in books
About this celebrated time of year
Yet for a long time now
We have not seen above our cities
The renowned swarms of birds.
Most of the time people notice Spring
While sitting in railway station.
The plains show this
In its old clarity.
High above, it is true
Shining storms hover:
Yet by now they only touch
Our aerials.*

Morning Address to a Tree Named Green (Hauspostille 1927) expresses a sense of resilience and hope. Growing, surviving and maintaining dignity have never been easy, yet there is the chance for them to survive,

Morgendliche Rede an den Baum Griehn

*Griehn, ich muß Sie um Entschuldigung bitten.
Ich konnte heute nacht nicht einschlafen, weil der Sturm so laut war.
Als ich hinaus sah, bemerkte ich, daß Sie schwankten
Wie ein besoffener Affe. Ich äußerte das.*

*Heute glänzt die gelbe Sonne in Ihren nackten Ästen.
Sie schütteln immer noch einige Zähne ab, Griehn.
Aber Sie wissen jetzt, was Sie wert sind.
Sie haben den bittersten Kampf Ihres Lebens gekämpft.
Es interessieren sich die Geier für Sie.
Und ich weiß jetzt: einzig durch Ihre unerbittliche Nachgiebigkeit stehen Sie heute morgen noch gerade.*

*Angesichts Ihres Erfolges meine ich heute:
Es war wohl keine Kleinigkeit, so hoch heraufzukommen
Zwischen den Mietskasernen, so hoch herauf,
Griehn, daß
Der Sturm so zu Ihnen kann wie heute nacht.*

*even during the worst possible storm, both real and allegorical. Just as in the words of the Tao Te Ching: *Be bent, and you will remain straight.**

Morning Address to a Tree Named Green

*Green, I owe you an apology.
I could not sleep last night because of the din made by the storm,
When I looked out I noticed you swaying
Like a drunken monkey. That's how I put it.*

*Today the yellow sun is shining in your bare branches.
You are still shaking off a few tears, Green.
But now you know how much you are worth.
You have fought the most bitter fight of your life.
Vultures were taking an interest in you.
And now I know it's only by your unrelenting Pliability that you are still upright this morning.*

*In view of your achievements today I think
It was no mean feat to grow up so tall
In between the tenement houses, so tall,
Green, that
The storm can get at you as it did last night.*

On Unfruitfulness appeared in *Later Svendborg Poems and Satires* (1936-1938). It echoes the lines in the New Testament: "Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (Matthew 7:28).

Über die Unfruchtbarkeit

*Der Obstbaum, der kein Obst bringt,
wird unfruchtbar gescholten. Wer
untersucht den Bode?*

*Der Ast, der abbricht,
wird faul gescholten, aber
Hat nicht Schnee auf ihm gelegen?*

Yet, in the haste to exploit resources and consume products, what criteria are employed to assess events, who considers what are the underlying causes and who carries the principle responsibilities for what happens?

On Unfruitfulness

*The fruit tree that bears no fruit
Is accused of being barren. Who
Examines the soil?*

*The branch that breaks
Is called rotten, but
Wasn't there snow lying on it?*

The doubts expressed in *To a Waverer* (1935) are attributed to someone other than the speaker and interpreted as a polemic against those who were not resolute enough in their antifascist stance.

An den Schwankenden

*Du sagst:
Es steht schlecht um unsere Sache.
Die Finsternis nimmt zu. Die Kräfte nehmen ab.
Jetzt, nachdem wir so viele Jahre gearbeitet
haben
Sind wir in schwierigerer Lage als am Anfang.
Der Feind aber steht stärker da denn jemals.
Seine Kräfte scheinen gewachsen. Er hat ein
unbesiegliches Aussehen angenommen.
Wir aber haben Fehler gemacht, es ist nicht zu
leugnen.
Unsere Zahl schwindet hin.
Unsere Parolen sind in Unordnung. Einen Teil
unserer Wörter
Hat der Feind verdreht bis zur Unkenntlichkeit.
Was ist jetzt falsch von dem, was wir gesagt
haben
Einiges oder alles?
Auf wen rechnen wir noch? Sind wir
Übriggebliebene, herausgeschleudert
Aus dem lebendigen Fluß? Werden wir
zurückbleiben
Keinen mehr verstehend und von keinem
verstanden?
Müssen wir Glück haben?
So fragst du. Erwarte
Keine andere Antwort als die deine!*

Yet the speaker is unable to reply, since everyone must find their own answer, their own understanding, their own way of being, their own way of assessing what has been done and not done.

To a Waverer

*You say:
Things are looking bad for our cause.
The darkness is deepening. The forces are
declining.
Now, after working for so many years
We are in a more difficult position than at the
outset.
But the enemy stands there, stronger than ever.
His forces seem to have grown. He has assumed
an air of invincibility.
We however have made mistakes; there is no
denying it.
Our numbers are dwindling.
Our slogans are in disarray. The enemy has
twisted
A part of our words beyond recognition.
What is now false of what we have said:
Some or all?
Who can we still count on? Are we just leftovers,
cast out
Of the river of life? Shall we remain behind
Understanding no one and understood by none?
Must we get lucky?
This is what you ask. Expect
No other answer than your own.*