**The cherry thief: poems and nature in wartimes by Bertolt Brecht**

**Enzo Ferrara**

**Abstract**

*Poetry – better than any sciences – can act as a powerful means to celebrate diversity while speaking a universal tongue. Poems, even those conceived during as difficult times as in war, can address the fulfilment of our fundamental needs, and exhort us to valorize and aim at cooperation, autonomy, and responsibility. That is why the poems of Bertolt Brecht contain a unique vision on the challenges of our times, able to gather in the same perspective the perils of humanity and nature. Although unaware of the climate and environmental disorder of our times, yet Brecht’s writings share a universal message sounding as a timeless warning. His works, made up of contrary elements, stand as the greatest iconoclastic compositions of modern age and can still be used to gain awareness of our limits on the earth.*

**Introduction**

In the age of globalization, human lives are changing in multiple ways. Evidences from biology and geology confirm that the fine line between humankind and nature becomes increasingly blurred, urging the endeavour of new ways to tackle this perilous epoch. Another endangerment is the homologation of cultures, belief systems, and languages. Cultural and linguistic declines cost us seriously; they chip away at the diversity that constitutes the wealth of beauty and hope upon which civilizations develop. This is not a minor concern: all those who care about the condition of the earth and humankind can testimony that answers are but beyond single disciplines. Our efforts to protect earth boundaries are useless if we cannot maintain common discourses and communities of values.

Poetry – better than any sciences – can act as a powerful medium celebrating diversity while speaking a universal tongue. Poems, even those conceived during as difficult times as in war, can address the fulfilment of our fundamental needs of sustenance and affection, developing consciousness of life complexity, and exhort us to valorise and aim at cooperation, autonomy, and responsibility[[1]](#footnote-1).

That is why the poems of Bertolt Brecht (Eugen Berthold Friedrich Brecht, 1898 – 1956) contain a special message and a unique vision on the challenges of our times able to put in the same perspective the perils of humanity and nature. Although unaware of the possibility of climate change, planetary tipping points, or holes in the stratospheric ozone, yet Brecht’s writings share a universal message sounding as a timeless warning to gain awareness. His works, made up of contrary elements, stand as the greatest iconoclastic compositions of modern age.

To enjoy Brecht’s view of poetry, let us consider how it is normal to take war as a universal tragedy in front of which none can sing anymore and poets have to hang their harps to the branches of willows, like the ancient prophets of the Jews deported to Babylon, who are told 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!”*

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

The Italian poet Salvatore Quasimodo (1901–1968) – who won 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]](#footnote-2). Quasimodo gave poetic form to this sentiment in the celebrated poem *On the branches of Willows* (*Alle fronde dei salici*, 1947), which states:

*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 other times, this kind of poetry could have appeared valuable as the witness of the survivor, leaving his town in flame with his father on the shoulder and his son at hands. Actually, these verses sound hardly bearable, ethically too; it is like as the poet declines his will to auto-exile, refusing further possibilities to struggle for his art and humans’ future. Brecht would have probably dedicated him his poem on the undecided: *The Waverer*. What appear necessary to Brecht for art’s sake is to defy fatalism, rebutting the idea that bad times – which will ever threaten humanity, in one or another way – should necessarily constrain the need of reflections not only on the problems surrounding us, but also on joy, arts and poetry production that are all necessary elements for a valuable life. Simone Weil talked about the chance, even in the worst times, of producing at least the inventory of the things oppressing us. In the Svendborg Poems, written in exile in Denmark in the 1930s, Bertolt Brecht arrived to write:

*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 is no more escaping. On the contrary, he remains seeking for something that has been able to survive the passage of destructors, and can, therefore, be employed as the basis for reconstruction as an immediately helpful tool to those that – in a completely modified context – can appreciate its beauty and utility. Brecht was able to make poetry even on the worst horrible experience. One of his most striking book, *War Primer*, was made of 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 directly using – but with the opposite intent – mass media and propaganda. Pictures of catastrophic bombings, portraits of leading Nazis, scenes of unbearable tragedy on the battlefield, all contributes to an anthology of horror, from which Brecht’s words are razor-sharp, angry and direct. The result is an outstanding literary memorial to World War II.

Another Brecht’s poem, *The Cherry Thief* (in *Later Svendborg Poems and Satires*, 1936-1938), describes the lazy attitudes of a young man thieving cherries on the poet’s tree. An utopic detach from the will of control and possession is evoked together with the idea that, maybe, in the future the possessive pronouns “mine” and “yours” will no more mean anything. Above all – we add – “mine” and “yours” mean nothing when referred at natural fruits (or resources). Probably, they already had no meaning at the eyes of the emigrant, radical politician, and writer observing the scene:

*Early one morning, long before cockcrow*

*I was awakened by whistling and went to the window,*

*In my cherry tree – grey dawn filled the garden –*

*Sat a young man with patched up trousers*

*Cheerfully picking my cherries. Seeing me*

*He nodded, and with both hands*

*Pulled the cherries from the branches into his pockets.*

*For quite a while as I lay once more in bed*

*I hear him whistling his gay little song.*

Such a poetic experience puts its roots in the exigence of participation, which is still findable in schools and in so many sectors of social life. The inner message is that we have to search the way to unity even when afflicted by strain and in fights. Everything depends by the connections we are able to establish between things, upon which we have to discuss and the talk must be important, able to provoke heartbreaks and let tears drop.

Homeric poems were likewise, rhapsodies alternating pains and sufferance with joy and hopefulness, witnessing a collective and concord memory. Their genesis required tenancy and endurance to let the connections emerge, which transformed all those separated verses in elements of a unique work. This task is always impossible for a single, although we refer to one author. Yet, who is an author? The term “author” comes from the Latin “augere” and it means “augmenting”, “enhancing”, “getting accomplishment step by step”. The language we want to share with Brecht challenges now all of us as authors. It does not matter if we are authors of a poem, a scientific theory, a song, a masterpiece of art, a new fruit or flower, or a political improvement to freedom. What matters is to gain awareness through authoritative – and not authoritarian – moods of the consequences of our choices, with an eye at nature and its multifaceted accomplishments that naturally take place through changes and transformations, continuously but at a paced rhythm.

*Concerning Spring* was written in 1928, when Anthropocene and environmental pollution were not issues of political concern. Yet this visionary text appears as a timely one, able to express poetically the problems of climate and the dangerous lack of attention and concern on it, along with the spread sense of uneasiness over economic growth and the overwhelming fear of its consequences.

**Concerning spring (1928)**

*Long before*

*We swooped on oil, iron and ammonia*

*There was each year*

*A time of irresistible violent leafing of trees.*

*We all remember*

*Lengthened days*

*Brighter sky*

*Change of the air*

*The certainly arriving Spring.*

*We still read in books*

*About this celebrated season*

*Yet for a long time now*

*Nobody has seen above our cities*

*The famous flocks of birds.*

*Spring is noticed, if at all*

*By people sitting in railway rains,*

*The plains show it*

*In its old clarity.*

*High above, it is true*

*There seem to be storms:*

*All they touch now is*

*Our aerials.*

**Über das Frühjahr (1928)**

*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.*

*Morning Address to a Tree Named Green* was another early production of Bertolt Brecht (*Hauspostille* 1927). The poem opens to many figurative interpretations, but all of them have to cope with a sense of resistance and hope. Growing, surviving, maintaining dignity have never been easy, yet there is the possibility to come over even during the worst possible real or allegorical storm.

**Morning Address to a Tree Named Green (1927)**

*Green, I owe you an apology.*

*I could not sleep last night because of the noise of the storm,*

*When I looked out I noticed you swaying*

*Like a drunken ape. I remarked on it.*

*Today the yellow sun is shining in your bare branches.*

*You are shacking off a few tears still, Green.*

*But now you know your own worth.*

*You have fought the bitterest fight of your life.*

*Vultures were taking an interest in you.*

*And now I know it’s only by your inexorable*

*Flexibility that you are still upright this morning.*

*In view of our success its my opinion today.*

*It was no mean feat to grow up so tall*

*In between the tenements, so tall, Green, that*

*The storm can get at you as it did last night.*

**Morgendliche Rede an den Baum Griehn (1927)**

*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 Zähren 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.*

Brecht’s life was shaped by dark times. Born in Augsburg in 1898, he was a difficult child; untreated bacterial pharyngitis caused him fevers that chromicised into a weakened heart and a rheumatic illness causing facial grimace and uncontrolled movements. He came of age during the First World War and became a successful writer before Hitler’s rise to power. Then, he spent 16 years in exile, returning to Berlin just to clash with the rising East German regime.

**To Those Who Follow in Our Wake[[3]](#footnote-3) (1939)**

I

*Truly, I live in dark times!
An artless word is foolish. A smooth forehead
Points to insensitivity. He who laughs
Has not yet received
The terrible news.*

*What times are these, in which
A conversation about trees is almost a crime
For in doing so we maintain our silence about so much wrongdoing!
And he who walks quietly across the street,
Passes out of 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 my fill.
By chance I have been spared. (If my luck does not hold, I am lost.)*

*They tell me: eat and drink. Be glad to be among the haves!
But how can I eat and drink
When I take what I eat from the starving
And those who thirst do not have my glass of water?
And yet I eat and drink.*

*I would happily 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!*

**An die Nachgeborenen (1939)**

I

*Wirklich, ich lebe in finsteren 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 Freunde
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.

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 finsteren Zeiten!*

II

*I came into the cities in a time of disorder
As hunger reigned.
I came among men in a time of turmoil
And I rose up with them.
And so passed
The time given to me on earth.*

*I ate my food between slaughters.
I laid down to sleep among murderers.
I tended to love with abandon.
I looked upon nature with impatience.
And so 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.
And so passed
The time given to me on earth.*

*The powers were so limited. The goal
Lay far in the distance
It could clearly be seen although even I
Could hardly hope to reach it.
And so passed
The time given to me on earth.*

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*.

III

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

*For we went forth, changing our country more frequently than our shoes
Through the class warfare, despairing
That there was only injustice and no outrage.*

*And yet we knew:
Even the hatred of squalor
Distorts one’s features.
Even anger against injustice
Makes the voice grow hoarse. We
Who wished to lay the foundation for gentleness
Could not ourselves be gentle.*

*But you, when at last the time comes
That man can aid his fellow man,
Should think upon us
With leniency.*

III

*Ihr, die ihr auftauchen werdet aus der Flut
In der wir untergegangen sind
Gedenkt
Wenn ihr von unseren Schwächen sprecht
Auch der finsteren 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.*

*On unfruitfulness* appeared in *Later Svendborg Poems and Satires* 1936-1938. It echoes the New Testament: “Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Matthew 7:19)

**On unfruitfulness (1936-38)**

*The fruit tree that bears no fruit
Is called sterile. Who
Examines the soil?**The branch that breaks
Is called rotten, but
Wasn’t there snow on it?*

**Über die** **Unfruchtbarkeit (1936-38)**

*Der Obstbaum, der kein Obst bringt,*

*wird unfruchtbar gescholten. Wer
untersucht den Boden.*

 *Der Ast, der abbricht,*

*wird faul gescholten, aber
Hat nicht Schnee auf ihm gelegen*

---

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 enough resolute and pragmatic antifascist. Yet the speaker cannot give reply.

**To a Waverer (1935)**

You tell us
It looks bad for our cause.
The darkness gets deeper. The powers get less.
Now, after we worked for so many years
We are in a more difficult position than at the start.
But the enemy stands there, stronger than ever before.
His powers appear to have grown. He has taken on
an aspect 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
Part of our words beyond recognition.

What is now false of what we said:
Some or all?
Whom do we still count on? Are we just left over, thrown out
Of the living stream? Shall we remain behind
Understanding no one and understood by none?

Have we got to be lucky?

This you ask. Expect
No other answer than your own.

**An den Schwankenden (1935)**

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!

1. Osman Arrobbio, Elena Camino, Laura Colucci–Gray, Martin Dodman, and Enzo Ferrara, *Global Issues and Events. Relationships, Understanding and Actions at Individual and Community Levels*, Visions for Sustainability, 6, pp.3-5, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Luciano Rebay, *Introduction to Italian Poetry*, Dover, 1991. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See the original translation by Scott Horton appeared on Harper’s magazine (January 15, 2008) [https://harpers.org/blog/2008/01/brecht-to-those who-follow-in-our-wake/](https://harpers.org/blog/2008/01/brecht-to-those%20who-follow-in-our-wake/) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)