

The Author as Producer

Il s'agit de gagner les intellectuels à la classe ouvrière, en leur faisant prendre conscience de l'identité de leurs démarches spirituelles et de leurs conditions de producteur.

Ramon Fernandez

You recall how Plato treats the poets in his projected State. In the interest of the community, he does not allow them to live there. He had a high idea of the power of poetry. But he considered it destructive, superfluous—in a perfect community, needless to say. Since then, the question of the poet's right to exist has not often been stated with the same insistence; but it is today. Certainly it has rarely been posed in this *form*. But you are all more or less familiar with it as the question of the poet's autonomy: his freedom to write whatever he may please. You are not inclined to accord him this autonomy. You believe that the current social situation forces the poet to choose whom his activity will serve. The bourgeois writer of popular stories does not acknowledge this alternative. So you show him that even without admitting it, he works in the interests of a particular class. An advanced type of writer acknowledges this alternative. His decision is determined on the basis of the class struggle when he places himself

on the side of the proletariat. But then his autonomy is done for. He directs his energies toward what is useful for the proletariat in the class struggle. We say that he espouses a *tendency*.¹

There you have the key word about which there has long been a debate, as you well know. It is well-known to you, so you also know how fruitless it has been. It has never broken away from the boring 'on the one hand—on the other hand': *on the one hand* we should demand that the poet's work conform to the correct political tendency, *on the other hand* we have the right to expect that his work be of high quality. Naturally this formula is unsatisfactory as long as we do not *understand* the connection which really exists between the two factors: tendency and quality. Of course we can simply decree what this relation is. We can say: a work which exhibits the correct political tendency need demonstrate no further qualities. We can also decree: a work which exhibits the correct tendency must necessarily exhibit all other qualities.

The second formulation is not uninteresting. What is more, it is correct. It is the one I adopt. But at the same time I refuse to decree it. This assertion must be *proven*. I ask your attention for an attempt at this proof. 'That is', you will perhaps object, 'a very peculiar, not to say far-fetched, subject. Yet you want to advance the study of fascism with such a proof?' That is indeed what I have in mind. For I hope to be able to show you that the concept of tendency, in the summary form that it usually occurs in the above-mentioned debate, is a completely inappropriate instrument of political literary criticism. I want to show you that the political tendency of a work can only be politically correct if it is also literarily correct. That means that the correct political tendency *includes* a literary tendency. For, just to clarify things right away, this literary tendency, which is implicitly or explicitly contained in every *correct* political tendency—that, and nothing else constitutes the quality of a work. The correct political tendency of a work includes its literary quality *because* it includes its literary *tendency*.

I hope I can promise you that this affirmation will shortly become clearer. For the moment I would point out that I could have chosen another starting point for my observations. I started from the fruitless debate over the relation between a work's political tendency and its quality. I could have started from an older but no less sterile debate: what is the relation between form and content, in political literature in particular? This way of formulating the question is decried: rightly so. It is considered an academic method of trying to fit literary relations undialectically into compartments. Very well. But what does the dialectical treatment of the same question look like?

The Concept of Technique

The dialectical consideration of this question, the one by which I come to the subject itself, can never lead anywhere by starting with isolated and lifeless objects: work, novel, book. It must be situated in the living

¹ Benjamin uses the word *Tendenz* throughout to mean the general direction a writer or his work takes, whether political or literary. It combines the notions of political line or group with literary school or movement.

social context. You reply, correctly, that this has been undertaken an innumerable number of times in our friends' circles. Certainly. But in so doing, they have often proceeded to generalities right away and thus necessarily became lost in vagaries. As we know, social relationships are determined by relationships of production. When it examined a work of art, materialist criticism was accustomed to ask how that work stood in relation to the social relationships of production of its time. That is an important question. But also a very difficult one. The answer to it is not always unambiguous. Thus I would now like to suggest a question which lies closer at hand. A question which is somewhat more modest, which is less encompassing, but which seems to me to have a better chance of being answered. Namely, instead of asking: what is the relationship of a work of art to the relationships of production of the time? Is it in accord with them, is it reactionary or does it strive to overthrow them, is it revolutionary?—in place of this question, or in any case before asking this question, I would like to propose another. Before I ask: how does a literary work stand in relation *to* the relationships of production of a period, I would like to ask: how does it stand *in* them? This question aims directly at the function that the work has within the literary relationships of production of a period. In other words, it aims directly at a work's literary *technique*.²

With the concept of technique, I have named the concept which gives access to a direct social analysis, and thus a materialist analysis of literary products. At the same time the concept of technique gives us the dialectical starting-point from which the sterile opposition between form and content can be overcome. The concept of technique also indicates the way to determine correctly the relationships between tendency and quality about which we asked at the beginning. So if we could make the above formulation, that the correct political tendency of a work includes its literary quality because it includes its literary tendency, now we can state more exactly that this literary tendency can be found in the progress or regression of literary technique.

It will certainly be in line with your thinking if I now, only apparently without transition, go on to quite concrete literary problems. Russian ones. I should like to call your attention to Sergei Tretyakov and to the model of the 'operative' writer which he has defined and embodied.³ This operative writer presents the clearest example of the functional relation which always exists, in any circumstances, between correct

² Benjamin uses the word *Technik* to denote the aesthetic technique of a work, but with considerable scientific and manufacturing connotations. Thus it is also close to 'technology'—the technical means by which a work is produced, its means of production.

³ Sergei Tretyakov (1892–1937?) was a famous Soviet playwright and futurist. He was a leading participant in the Moscow group which produced the journals *Lef* and *Novy Lef*. His most important plays, produced in collaboration with Meyerhold and Eisenstein, were *Gas Masks* (1924), *Listen Moscow* (1924) and *Roar China* (1930). His views on newspapers were published in a collective volume edited by Chuzak in 1929, entitled *The Literature of Fact*, which also included contributions by Brik and Shklovsky. Attacking those who demanded 'Red Tolstoys', he wrote: 'There is no need for us to wait for Tolstoys, because we have our own epics. Our epics are the newspapers.' Tretyakov was purged about 1937. The date of his death shortly thereafter is unknown.

political tendency and a progressive literary technique. Of course it is only one example: I am keeping others in reserve. Tretiakov distinguishes the operative writer from one who gives information. His mission is not to report, but to struggle; he does not play the role of spectator, but actively intervenes. He defines his task through the statements he makes about his activity. At the time of the total collectivization of agriculture, in 1928, when the slogan 'writers to the kolkhozy (collective farms)' was launched, Tretiakov left for the 'Communist Lighthouse' commune and during two lengthy stays there undertook the following tasks: calling mass meetings, collecting money to pay for tractors, persuading individual peasants who worked alone to enter the kolkhoz, inspecting reading rooms, creating wall-newspapers and editing the kolkhoz newspaper, being a reporter for Moscow papers, introducing radio and travelling movies. It is not surprising that the novel *Master of the fields* which Tretiakov wrote after his stay, had a substantial influence on the further formation of agricultural collectives.

You may appreciate Tretiakov and perhaps still think that his example does not mean very much in this situation. The duties he undertook, you may perhaps object, are all those of a journalist or a propagandist: all that doesn't have very much to do with literature. Yet I chose the example of Tretiakov intentionally, to indicate the breadth of the horizon from which we should rethink our notion of literary forms or genres in line with the given techniques of our current situation, so that we may arrive at the forms of expression to which literary energies should be applied today. There have not always been novels in the past, they do not always have to exist in the future; there have not always been tragedies, not always great epics. Commentaries, translations, even so-called forgeries have not always been *divertissements* on the borders of literature: they have had their place not only in philosophical literature, but in the poetic literatures of Arabia or China. Rhetoric has not always been an insignificant form. On the contrary, in Antiquity large areas of literature bore its stamp. All that should make you conscious of the fact that we stand in the midst of a powerful process of the transformation of literary forms, a process of transformation in which many of the oppositions with which we used to work could lose their power. Allow me to give you an example of the sterility of such oppositions and of the process by which they are dialectically overcome. That is where we again find Tretiakov. The example is, in fact, that of the newspaper.

The Advent of the Newspaper

'In our literature,' a leftist author writes, 'oppositions which mutually enriched each other in earlier, happier times, have become insoluble antinomies. Thus science and *belles lettres*, criticism and production, culture and politics have fallen away from each other, without maintaining any relationship or order. The showplace of this literary confusion is the newspaper. Its content is "material" which refuses any form of organization other than that imposed by the reader's impatience. This impatience is not only that of the politician who expects a piece of news, or of a speculator who awaits a tip: behind them hovers the impatience of whoever feels himself excluded, whoever thinks he has a

right to express his own interests himself. For a long time, the fact that nothing binds the reader to his paper as much as this avid impatience for fresh nourishment every day, has been used by editors, who are always starting new columns open to his questions, opinions, protestations. So the indiscriminate assimilation of facts goes hand in hand with the similar indiscriminate assimilation of readers, who see themselves instantly raised to the level of co-workers. But this phenomenon hides a dialectical moment: the fall of literature in the bourgeois press reveals the formula for its resuscitation in the Soviet Russian press, because the realm of literature gains in width what it loses in depth. In the Soviet press, the difference between author and public, maintained artificially by the bourgeois press, is beginning to disappear. The reader is indeed always ready to become a writer, that is to say, someone who describes or even who prescribes. As an expert—even if not a professional, but only a job-occupant—he gains entrance to authorship. Labour itself speaks out for writing it out in words constitutes part of the knowledge necessary to becoming an author. Literary competence is no longer based on specialized training in academic schools, but on technical and commercial training in trade schools and thus becomes common property. In a word, it is the literarization of the relationships of life which overcomes otherwise insoluble antinomies and it is the show-place of the unrestrained degradation of the word—that is, the newspaper—which prepares its salvation.⁴

Thus I hope I have shown that the portrayal of the author as a producer must be derived from the press. For the press, at least the Russian press, makes us acknowledge that the powerful process of transformation of which I spoke before goes beyond not only the conventional separations between genres, between writer and poet, between the scholar and the popularizer, but it also forces us to re-examine the separation between author and reader. The press is the most authoritative instance of this process and therefore any study of the author as a producer must deal with it.

But we cannot remain at that point. For as yet the newspapers of Western Europe are not a suitable instrument of production in the hands of the writer. They still belong to capital. On the one hand the newspaper, on the technical level, represents the most important literary position. But this position is on the other hand in the control of our opponents, so it should not be surprising that the writer's comprehension of his dependent social position, of his technical possibilities and of his political tasks must struggle against enormous difficulties. Among the most important developments in Germany in the last 10 years is the fact that many productive minds have gone through a revolutionary development parallel to and under the pressure of the economic situation, without however, having been able in a revolutionary way to think through their own work and its relationship to the means of production, its productive techniques, its technology. As you see, I am talking about the so-called left-wing intellectuals, and I will limit myself to left-wing bourgeois intellectuals. In Germany, the pace-setting politico-literary movements of the last decade have originated with these left

⁴ Benjamin himself. *Schriften* Volume 1, p. 384.

intellectuals. By the example of two of these movements, 'activism'⁵ and the 'new objectivity',⁶ I want to show that however revolutionary this political tendency may appear, it actually functions in a counter-revolutionary manner as long as the writer experiences his solidarity with the proletariat ideologically and not as a producer.

The Credo of Activism

The slogan which summarizes the demands of activism is 'logocracy', that is, the power of the intellect. Power to the intellect. The expression could well be translated as the power of the intellectuals. This conception of intellectuals has, in fact, become standard among left-wing intellectuals and it dominates their political manifestoes from Heinrich Mann to Döblin.⁷ It is not difficult to see that this conception completely ignores the position of intellectuals in the process of production. Hiller himself, the theoretician of activism, does not want to consider intellectuals as 'belonging to certain professions', but as 'representatives of a certain character type'.⁸ Naturally this character type as such occupies a position between classes. It includes a certain number of private existences, without offering the slightest opportunity of organizing them. When Hiller formulates his refusal (to join the Party—trs) for Party leaders, he at least concedes them something: they may 'be more knowledgeable about essential matters . . . speak the language of the people better . . . struggle more firmly' than he, but one thing is clear to him: that they 'have more intellectual deficiencies'. Very probably. But where does this get him, since in politics it is not individual thoughts, but, as Brecht once expressed it, the art of thinking what is in the heads of other people, that is decisive?⁹ Activism tried to replace materialist dialectics by a generality which is not definable in class terms: common sense. At best, its intellectuals represent a social stratum. In other words, in itself, the principle of this formation of a collective is a reactionary principle: no wonder the effect of such a collective can never be revolutionary.

⁵ Activism was a literary phenomenon, led by Hiller, which agitated for certain legal reforms in Germany.

⁶ The 'new objectivity'—*die Neue Sachlichkeit*—was a movement which began in the plastic arts and painting in reaction to the storm, stress and religious mysticism of later German expressionism. It replaced the distortions and exaggerations of the latter with a documentary, factual and unsentimental style. Brecht, after Expressionist beginnings, was a leading literary exponent of it for a while, as were the journalist Egon Erwin Kisch and the novelist Erich Maria Remarque.

⁷ Alfred Döblin (1878–1957) was the Expressionist author of *Berlin-Alexanderplatz* (1929), written under the influence of Joyce and Dos Passos. It was considered by many bourgeois critics of the time to be the classic literary portrayal of the German worker and his milieu. Döblin emigrated to France in 1933, and thence to the USA.

⁸ Kurt Hiller (born 1885) was a Berlin critic and essayist closely linked to Expressionism before and after the First World War. He was a contributor to *Die Weltbühne*, and in 1926 founded a group of 'Revolutionary Pacifists'. Arrested in 1933, he escaped to Prague, went to England in 1938 and returned to West Germany after the War.

⁹ (In place of the sentence which follows, the original manuscript contains this—later crossed out:) Or in Trotsky's words: 'When enlightened pacifists undertake to abolish war by means of rationalist arguments, they are simply ridiculous. When the armed masses start to take up the arguments of Reason against War, however, this signifies the end of War.' (*History of the Russian Revolution*, Vol 1, p 362)

The unhealthy principles of such a collective formation can still be felt. We could calculate them when Döblin's *Wissen und Verändern* ('Know and transform') was published three years ago. This tract was written as an answer to a young man—Döblin calls him Mr Hocke—who had come to the famous author with the question 'what is to be done?' Döblin invites him to attach himself to the cause of socialism, but with conditions that give one pause. Socialism, according to Döblin, is 'freedom, the spontaneous association of man, the refusal of any constraints, indignation against injustice and force, humanity, tolerance and peace'. Whatever the truth of that may be, in any case he starts from this socialism to make common cause against the theory and practice of the radical working-class movement. 'Nothing', Döblin claims, 'can grow out of something which cannot already be found in it—from a murderously aggravated class struggle can come justice, but not socialism.' 'You, my dear sir'—Döblin formulates the recommendations he gives Mr Hocke on this and other grounds—'cannot bring to fruition the principled "yes" you accord the struggle (of the proletariat) by integrating yourself into the proletarian forces. You must accord your disturbed and bitter agreement to this struggle, but you also know: if you do more, an enormously important position will no longer be occupied . . . that of original communistic individual freedom, spontaneous solidarity and the unity of man. It is this position which you must adopt as your own.' Here we can clearly see where the concept of the 'intellectual' as a type defined according to his opinions, ideas or dispositions, but not according to his position in the process of production leads. He should, as we read in Döblin, take up his position *next to* the proletariat. But what kind of a position is that? It is that of a benefactor. Of an ideological patron. An impossible position. And so we come back to the thesis we stated at the beginning: the place of the intellectual in the class struggle can only be determined, or better, chosen, on the basis of his position in the process of production.

Brecht elaborated the concept of 'functional transformation' (*Umfunktionierung*) for the transformation of the forms and instruments of production by a progressive intelligentsia—interested in the liberation of the means of production and thus useful in the class struggle. He was the first to formulate for intellectuals this far-reaching demand: do not simply transmit the apparatus of production without simultaneously changing it to the maximum extent possible in the direction of socialism. 'The publication of the *Versuche*', as the author of that series writes in the introduction, 'takes place at a point in time at which certain works should no longer so much relate individual experiences (have the character of a work), but rather should be aimed at the utilization (transformation) of certain institutes or institutions.'¹⁰ What is proposed is not a spiritual renewal such as the fascists proclaim, but technical innovations. I will return to these innovations. Here I will limit myself to indicating the decisive difference between merely transmitting the apparatus of production and transforming it. At the beginning of my comments on the 'new objectivity', I would like to set forth the notion that transmitting an apparatus of production without—as much as possible—transforming it, is a highly debatable procedure

¹⁰ The *Versuche* were the first attempt to publish a collected edition of Brecht. They started to appear in 1930, ceased in 1933, and were resumed by Brecht after the War.

even when the content of the apparatus which is transmitted seems to be revolutionary in nature. In point of fact we are faced with a situation—for which the last decade in Germany furnishes complete proof—in which the bourgeois apparatus of production and publication can assimilate an astonishing number of revolutionary themes, and can even propagate them without seriously placing its own existence or the existence of the class that possesses them into question. This is certainly true as long as the apparatus is transmitted by hacks, even if they are revolutionary hacks. I define a hack as a writer who fundamentally renounces the effort to alienate the apparatus of production from the ruling class in favour of socialism, by means of improving it. I further affirm that a substantial part of so-called left-wing writers have no other social function whatever, than eternally to draw new effects from the political situation in order to amuse the public. With that I come to the 'new objectivity'. It made documentaries fashionable. But we should ask: to whom is this technique useful?

The New Objectivity

For greater clarity, I will put photographic documentary in the foreground. What is valid for it can be extended to literature. Both owe their extraordinary growth to techniques of publication: to radio and the illustrated press. Let us think back to Dadaism. The revolutionary force of Dadaism lay in the fact that it put the authenticity of art to the test. The Dadaists made still-lives out of tickets, spools, cigarette butts that were integrated into painted elements. Then they showed it to the public: see, the picture-frame explodes time, the tiniest real fragment of everyday life says more than painting. Just as the bloody fingerprint of a murderer on the page of a book says more than the text. Many aspects of this revolutionary attitude have made their way into photo-montage. You only need to think of the work of John Heartfield, whose technique made book jackets into a political instrument. But now follow the path of photography further. What do you see? It becomes more and more subtle, more and more modern, and the result is that it can no longer photograph a run-down apartment house or a pile of manure without transfiguring it. Not to speak of the fact that it would be impossible to say anything about a dam or a cable factory except this: the world is beautiful. *The World is Beautiful*—that is the title of a famous book of photographs by Renger-Patsch, in which we see the photography of the 'new objectivity' at its height. It has even succeeded in making misery itself an object of pleasure, by treating it stylishly and with technical perfection. For the 'new objectivity', it is the economic function of photography to bring to the masses elements which they could not previously enjoy—spring, movie stars, foreign countries—by reworking them according to the current fashion; it is the political function of photography to renew the world as it actually is from within, in other words, according to the current fashion.

Here we have a drastic example of what it means to pass on an apparatus of production without transforming it. Changing it would have meant breaking down one of the barriers, overcoming one of the contradictions which fetters the production of intellectuals. In this case the barrier between writing and pictures. What we should demand from

photography is the capacity of giving a print a caption which would tear it away from fashionable clichés and give it a revolutionary use-value. But we will pose this demand with the greatest insistence if we—writers—take up photography. Here too technical progress is the basis of political progress for the author as producer. In other words: the only way to make this production politically useful is to master the competencies in the process of intellectual production which, according to the bourgeois notion, constitutes their hierarchy; and more exactly, the barriers which were erected to separate the skills of both productive forces must be simultaneously broken down. When he experiences his solidarity with the proletariat, the author as producer also experiences directly a solidarity with certain other producers in whom earlier he was not much interested. I spoke of photography. I want just briefly to quote a few of Eisler's comments about music: 'Even in the development of music, both in its production and in its reproduction, we must learn to recognize an increasingly strong process of rationalization . . . records, sound films, and gramophones can present exceptional musical performances in a canned form as a product. This process of rationalization has the result that the production of music will be limited to ever smaller, but also more highly qualified groups of specialists. This crisis of the concert business is the crisis of a form of production which has been made obsolete and anachronistic by new technical discoveries.' Our duty would thus be to transform the concert form in a way which must fulfil two conditions: it must supersede both the opposition between the musicians and the listeners, and that between technical performance and content. To this end, Eisler makes the following useful observation: 'We must be careful not to over-rate orchestral music and think of it as the only form of high art. Music without words took on its great importance and fullest development only with capitalism.' Which means: the duty of transforming the concert is not possible without the aid of words. Words alone can, in Eisler's formulation, bring about the transformation of the concert into a political meeting. That such a transformation does, in fact, present a high point of musical and literary technique, Brecht and Eisler have proven with their play *The Measures Taken*.¹¹

If you now look back at the process of recasting literary forms of which we were speaking, you can see how photography and music (and from these we can judge other forms) will enter a molten stream from which new forms will be cast. You see confirmed that only the literarization of all relationships of life can give a correct notion of the extent of this process of recasting, just as the state of the class struggle determines the temperature at which it occurs—in a more or less perfected form.

I spoke of the operation of a certain type of fashionable photography, which makes misery into a consumer good. When I turn to the 'new objectivity' as a literary movement, I must go a step further and say that it has made the *struggle against misery* into a consumer good. In fact, in many cases its political meaning has been exhausted with the transposition of revolutionary reflexes, in so far as they appeared in the

¹¹ Hans Eisler was a pupil of Schoenberg, who worked particularly closely with Brecht in the 'thirties and early 'forties. He emigrated to Hollywood via the USSR in 1933, going to East Germany after the War.

bourgeoisie, into objects of distraction and amusement which were integrated without difficulty into the cabaret business of the big cities. The metamorphosis of the political struggle from a drive to make a political commitment into an object of contemplative pleasure, from a means of production into an article of consumption, is characteristic of this literature. A perceptive critic¹² explained this in connection with the example of Erich Kästner thus: 'These extreme left-wing intellectuals have nothing to do with the worker's movement. Rather they exist as the mirror image of that fringe of bourgeois decadence which tried to assimilate itself to feudal strata and admired the Empire in the person of the reserve lieutenant. The extreme left journalists of the type Kästner.¹³ Mehring¹⁴ or Tucholsky¹⁵ are the decadent strata of the bourgeoisie who try to mimic the proletariat. Their function, seen from a political point of view, is to form not a Party, but a clique, seen from a literary point of view, not a school but a fad, from an economic point of view not to become producers but agents. Agents or hacks, who make a great show of their poverty and congratulate themselves on the yawning void. It would be impossible to carve a more comfortable position out of an uncomfortable situation.'

This school, as I said, makes a great show of its poverty. Thus it avoids the most pressing task of the contemporary writer: acknowledgment of how poor he is and how poor he must be to begin all over again. For that is the question. Of course, the Soviet State is not going to exclude the poet, as the Platonic State did—that is why I mentioned the Platonic State at the beginning—but it will assign him tasks which will not allow him to parade forth what have long been exposed as the false riches of the creative personality, in the form of new masterpieces. To wait for a renewal in the form of more famous authors is a privilege of fascism, which brings forth such crazy formulations as that with which Günther Gründel concludes his essay on literature in the *Mission of the Young Generation*: 'There is no better way to close this survey and perspective than with the comment that the *Wilhelm Meister* or the *Grüne Heinrich* of our generation has not yet been written.' To an author who has thought through the conditions of production today, nothing could be further from thought than to expect or even to want such works. His work would never merely be developing products, but always at the same time working with the means of production themselves. In other words, his productions must possess, in addition to and even before their characteristics as works, an organizing function. Yet their organisational value should not at all be limited to their use as propaganda. The political line alone cannot organize. The excellent

¹² Benjamin himself, in 'Left Melancholy. On Erich Kästner's New Book of Poetry', *Die Gesellschaft* 8 (1931), Vol. 1, p. 182.

¹³ Erich Kästner (born 1899), Walter Mehring and Kurt Tucholsky were satirists and writers of political songs, plays and essays. They were centred on the radical bourgeois and anti-militarist magazine, *Die Weltbühne*. Kästner was famous for his rhymes and children's books.

¹⁴ Walter Mehring (born 1896) was known mainly for his plays and political songs. He later emigrated to the USA.

¹⁵ Kurt Tucholsky (born 1890), was a prolific satirical essayist in the tradition of Heine. He collaborated in the production of *Deutschland, Deutschland über alles*—a polemical work uniting photo-montage and text. Tucholsky committed suicide when in exile in Sweden.

Lichtenberg¹⁶ has said: it doesn't matter what opinions someone has, but what kind of a man these opinions make of him. Now a great deal depends on one's opinions, but the best opinions won't help, if they don't make something useful out of the person who holds them. The best political tendency is false when it doesn't indicate the attitude with which one should approach it for the writer can only indicate this attitude when he makes something: namely something written. The tendency is the necessary but never sufficient condition of the organizational function of a work. The tendency also demands an exemplary, indicative performance from the writer. Today more than ever before that should be demanded. *An author who teaches a writer nothing, teaches nobody anything.* The determinant factor is the exemplary character of a production that enables it, first, to lead other producers to this production, and secondly to present them with an improved apparatus for their use. And this apparatus is better to the degree that it leads consumers to production, in short that it is capable of making co-workers out of readers or spectators. We already possess such a model, about which I can only speak briefly here. That is Brecht's epic theatre.

The Epic Theatre

People continue to write tragedies and operas which are apparently based on a stage apparatus proven by long experience, whereas in reality they do nothing but transmit an apparatus on the verge of collapse. 'The prevailing lack of clarity about their situation on the part of musicians, writers and critics,' Brecht says, 'has tremendous consequences, which are not sufficiently stressed. For since they think they possess an apparatus which in reality possesses them, they defend an apparatus over which they no longer have any control, which is no longer, as they believe, a means for the producer, but has become a means opposed to the producer.' The theatre's complicated machinery, enormous expenses for actors, subtle effects, have become a means of opposition to the producers, not least of all because this theatre seeks to recruit the producer for a competition in which film and radio have entangled it and which can lead nowhere. This theatre—whether one thinks of the 'high-brow' theatre or that of mere entertainment—belongs to a satiated social stratum which transforms everything it touches into amusement. Its position is hopeless. That is not true of a theatre which, instead of entering into competition with the newer instruments of publication and publicity, tries to use them and learn from them, in short, seeks to come to grips with them. Epic theatre has chosen to grapple with them. Seen from the current level of development of film and radio, it is the modern form of theatre.

In the interest of this grappling, Brecht went back to the original elements of the theatre. He more or less made do with a platform. He renounced too far-reaching plots. Thus he succeeded in transforming the functional relation between the stage and the public, text and production, director and actor. Epic theatre, he explained, should not so

¹⁶ Georg Lichtenberg (1742–99) was one of the great satirists of German literature. He was famous above all for his Aphorisms and his analyses of Hogarth's prints, which have recently been published in English.

much develop an action as present a situation. It attains that condition, as we shall soon see, by allowing the action to be broken up. Here I would remind you of the songs whose main function is to break the action. It is here—namely with the principle of breaking into the action—that the epic theatre takes up a process which, as you can clearly see, has become common in film and radio, press and photography, over the last few years. I am speaking of the process of montage: the element which is superimposed breaks into the situation on which it is imposed. Allow me to briefly emphasize that this process attains its appropriate, even perhaps its most fully justified form, with epic theatre.

The interruption of the action, which inspired Brecht to call his theatre 'epic', constantly goes against the public's theatrical illusion. Indeed, such illusion is useless for a theatre which is trying to treat elements of reality as a series of experiments. But the situations the epic theatre presents are to be found at the end, not at the beginning of these experiments. Situations which, in whatever form, are always ours. They are not brought closer to the spectator, but distanced from him. He perceives them as real situations, not, as with the naturalist theatre, with self-satisfaction, but with astonishment. Thus the epic theatre does not reproduce situations, rather it uncovers them. The discovery of situations is accomplished by means of the interruption of the action. Only here the interruption does not have the character of fear and pity, but has an organizing function. In the midst of the action, it brings it to a stop, and thus obliges the spectator to take a position toward the action, obliges the actor to adopt an attitude toward his role. From a single example I want to show you how Brecht's discovery and development of the notion of the 'gesture' signifies nothing other than a return to the decisive methods of montage in radio and film, but at the same time transforms montage from a process too often dictated by fashion into a human act. Imagine a family scene: the woman is just about to grab a bronze statue and throw it at her daughter; the father about to open the window and call for help. At this very moment a stranger enters. The action is interrupted; what comes to the foreground in its place is the situation which meets the glance of the stranger: contorted faces, open window, smashed furniture. But there is a point of view from which even more common scenes of contemporary existence don't look very different. That is the viewpoint of the epic dramatist.

To dramatic art as a whole he opposes the dramatic laboratory. He seizes in a new way the old and great opportunity of the theatre—calling into question all that exists. At the centre of such an experiment stands man. Contemporary man: thus a reduced, a limited man, a man thrown coldly into a cold world. But since this is the only man available to us, it is in our interest to know him. He undergoes trials, examinations. What results is this: the course of events cannot be changed at its peaks, not by heroic virtue and resolution, but only through strictly ordinary habitual actions, through reason and practice. To construct what in Aristotelian dramaturgy is called 'action' out of the smallest elements of behaviour, that is the meaning of the epic theatre. So its means are more modest than those of the traditional theatre; its purposes also. It aims less at filling the public with emotion,

even if it is that of revolt, than at making it consider thoughtfully, from a distance and over a period of time, the situations in which it lives. We can remark in passing that there is no better starting point for thought than laughter. In particular, thought usually has a better chance when one is shaken by laughter than when one's mind is shaken and upset. The only extravagance of the epic theatre is its amount of laughter.

A Mediated Solidarity

You may have noticed that the chain of thought whose conclusion we are approaching only presents the writer with a single demand, the demand of *reflecting*, of thinking about his position in the process of production. We can be sure of this: this reflection sooner or later leads the writers *who are essential*, that is, the best technicians of their trade, to conclusions and positions which are the basis of their trustworthy solidarity with the proletariat. Finally, I would like to mention a real proof in the form of a short passage from the current issue of *Commune*. *Commune* organized a questionnaire: 'For whom do you write?'. I quote from René Maublanc's answer, as well as from Aragon's additional comments.¹⁷ 'There can be no doubt', Maublanc writes, 'that I write almost exclusively for a bourgeois public. First because I am forced to'—here Maublanc indicates his duties as a teacher in a high school—'secondly because I am of bourgeois origin and of a bourgeois education and come from a bourgeois milieu, and therefore am naturally inclined to address myself to the class to which I belong, which I know best and can best understand. But that does not mean that I write to please it or to support it. On the one hand I am convinced that the proletarian revolution is necessary and desirable, on the other hand that the weaker the opposition of the bourgeoisie, the quicker, easier, more successful and less bloody the revolution will be. . . . Today the proletariat needs allies who come from the bourgeois camp, just as in the eighteenth century the bourgeoisie needed allies from the feudal camp. I want to be among these allies.'

To this Aragon comments: 'Here our comrade treats a question which concerns a very great number of today's writers. Not all of them have the courage to face up to it . . . Those who are as clear about their own position as René Maublanc are infrequent. But precisely from them we must ask more . . . It is not enough to weaken the bourgeoisie from the inside, one must fight *along with* the proletariat . . . For René Maublanc and many of our friends among writers who still hesitate, there exists the example of the Soviet Russian writers, who came out of the Russian bourgeoisie and still have become pioneers of socialist development.'

So far Aragon. But how did they become pioneers? Certainly not without bitter struggles, extremely difficult confrontations. The thoughts that I have presented to you attempt to draw some benefits from these struggles. They are based on the concept to which the debate over the attitude of the Russian intellectuals owes its decisive clarification: to the

¹⁷ René Maublanc was a French Communist philosopher, and author of *La Philosophie du Marxisme et l'Enseignement Officiel* (1935) and *Le Marxisme et la Liberté* (1946).

concept of the specialist. The solidarity of the specialist with the proletariat—which constituted the beginning of this clarification—can never be anything but a mediated one. The activists and the representatives of the new objectivity can wave their arms as much as they please: they cannot do away with the fact that even the proletarianization of an intellectual almost never makes a proletarian. Why? because, in the form of his culture, the bourgeois class gave him a means of production which, on the basis of the privilege of culture, makes him solidary with it, and even more so it with him. It is thus completely correct when Aragon, in another connection, declares: ‘The revolutionary intellectual appears, first and foremost, as a traitor to his class of origin.’ This betrayal consists, in the case of the writer, in behaviour which changes him from a reproducer of the apparatus of production into an engineer who sees his task as the effort of adapting that apparatus to the aims of the proletarian revolution. That is an indirect, mediated effectiveness, but it does free the intellectual from that merely destructive task to which Maublanc and many comrades believe they must limit themselves. Does he succeed in furthering the socialization of the intellectual means of production? Does he see a way for the intellectual worker to organize the process of production by himself? Does he have suggestions for transforming the function of the novel, the drama, poetry? The more he is able to orient his activity toward this task, the more correct the political tendency, and by necessity the higher the technical quality of his work will be. And in addition: the more exactly he knows his position in the process of production, the less he will be tempted by the idea of passing for an ‘intellectual’. The intellectual attitude which makes itself felt in the name of fascism *should* disappear. The intellectual who opposes fascism by trusting to his own miraculous power *will* disappear. For the revolutionary struggle does not take place between capitalism and the intellect, but between capitalism and the proletariat.

Translated by John Heckman

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