

Bertolt Brecht: The Poet Who Stepped out of the Black Forest and Into the Asphalt City

Friday 7 September 2018, by [BASU Anjan](#) (Date first published: 14 August 2018).

When Bertolt Brecht died 62 years ago on August 14, the world hardly knew it was witnessing the passing of one of 20th century's great poets.



Bertolt Brecht the playwright appears to have overshadowed his other artistic identities nearly completely, though, in truth, Brecht wore more creative hats than most other artists of his time. He was a theatre-producer, essayist, critic, novelist, short-story writer, drama theorist and film-script writer. And, above all, he was a poet. Indeed, Brecht was a poet first and everything else after that – though it is easy to forget this, not least because he himself actively downplayed his poetic output. Years before his first play, *Baal*, was staged, the 19-year-old Brecht was writing such haunting lines as these:

*Half-way along the road from night to morning
Naked and strewn in a rock-strewn glen
A chilly sky across it like an awning
You'll find the heaven for disenchanted men.*

*Ever silence where great rocks are lying
The glow remains although the light has gone
Sullen souls, fed up with their own crying
Sit dreamless, dumb and very much alone.*

And yet, though his poetic œuvre comprises nearly one thousand items, only about 170 had found a place in the three collections Brecht had made himself. He seldom let go of an opportunity of making light of the whole business of writing poetry. “(M)y poetry is laid so heavily to my account,” he somewhat dismissively said in response to a request in 1928 for a public reading of his poetry, “that for some time now the least rhyme has stuck in my craw”.

In fact, a large majority of Brecht's poems were not published before his death, prompting the editors of the 1976 Methuen collection of his poetry to remark that “more perhaps than any other major writer except Kafka, Brecht was content that the greater part of his achievement should remain unknown”.

But can the readers of his plays fail to see that Brecht's language was that of a poet? Think of *The Threepenny Opera*, among Brecht's most earthy – some may even say ribald – plays written, appropriately enough, in a rambunctious, racy idiom. The dainty Polly Peachum, daughter of Jonathan Jeremiah Peachum (who is very nearly the model of bourgeois respectability) stuns her parents by announcing her resolve to marry Mack the Knife, the London underworld's uncrowned king. Polly has had many suitors – all of them well-heeled as well as well-groomed – and yet, she always said no.

*But then one day, and that day was blue
Came someone who didn't ask at all
And he went and hung his hat on the nail in my little attic
And what happened then I can't quite recall.*

*And as he had got no money
And was not a nice chap
And his Sunday shirts, even, were not like snow
And as he had no idea of treating a girl with due respect
I could not tell him: No.*

*Oh, the moon was shining clear and bright
|Oh, the boat kept drifting downstream all that night
That was how it simply had to go.*

This is top-drawer lyric poetry and the fact that Brecht manages to pull this off in the middle of a boisterous farce, where the principal characters are all equally hard-nosed men/women of the world, establishes the supreme self-assurance of his technique.



Statue of Bertolt Brecht in Berlin. Credit: The Wire

Many of Brecht's early poems were composed as songs, at any rate as pieces to be read to the accompaniment of a musical instrument such as the guitar. Off and on he wrote what he called 'Psalms', evocative prose pieces that read like chants:

Evenings by the river in the dark heart of the bushes I see her face again sometimes, face of the woman I loved: my woman, who is dead now.

It was many years ago and at times I no longer know anything about her, once she was everything, but everything passes.

And she was in me like a little juniper on the Mongolian steppes, concave, with a pale yellow sky and great sadness.

The 22-year-old Brecht puts on paper his last memories of his mother in a tender little haiku-like poem that could well be a song:

*And when she was finished they laid her in earth
Flowers growing, butterflies juggling over her ...
She, so light, barely pressed the earth down
How much pain it took to make her as light as that!*

But he was equally capable of fashioning superbly lyrical poems which are not meant to be 'performed'. One late night in the spring of 1922, when travelling back home in Augsburg from Berlin by train, Brecht jotted down some lines that were later to be chiselled into the magnificent 'Of Poor B.B.', which begins thus:

*I, Bertolt Brecht, came out of the black forests.
My mother moved me into the cities
As I lay inside her. And the coldness of the forests
Will be inside me till my dying day.*

A speeding train on a dark night must have seemed to the 24-year-old Brecht the perfect symbol of Weimar Germany – tentative, transient, even unreal.

*In the grey light before morning, the pine trees piss
And their vermin, the birds, raise their twitter and cheep.
At that hour in the city I drain my glass, then throw
The cigar butt away and worriedly go to sleep.*

The coldness of the forest as much as the hardness of life in the 'asphalt city' has entered the soul of the Weimar generation, "...an easy generation (that lives) (i)n houses held to be indestructible". But the knowledge gnaws at its heart that

*Of those cities will remain what passes through them, the wind!
The house makes glad the eater: he clears it out.
We know that we're only tenants, provisional ones
And after us will come: nothing worth talking about.*

Memorably, this scepticism merges with the moral ambivalence of nowhere land:

*In the earthquakes to come, I very much hope
I shall keep my cigar alight, embittered or no.
I, Bertolt Brecht, carried off to the asphalt cities
From the black forests inside my mother long ago.*

Brecht was on the Nazis' hate list right from the mid-1920s and works like *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* quite infuriated Hitler's men. Right after Hitler's rise to power, therefore, Brecht went into exile, moving restlessly over western and northern Europe, living in Denmark, Sweden and Finland before moving to the US in 1941 where he lived through the war years. He eventually returned to what by then had become East Germany and settled down in Berlin. The long years in exile produced poems of several different kinds, including such quatrains as:

This, then, is all. It's not enough, I know.

*At least I'm still alive, as you may see.
I'm like the man who took a brick to show
How beautiful his house used once to be.*

Or

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

Or the tongue-in-cheek epigram written while in Los Angeles:

*Every day, to earn my daily bread
I go to the market where lies are bought
Hopefully
I take up my place among the sellers.*

In his poetry as much as in his plays, Brecht was in his element in irony, as witness this laconic account of a friendly *Encounter with the poet Auden*:

*Lunching me, a kindly act
In an alehouse, still intact
He sat looming like a cloud
Over the beer-sodden crowd.*

*And kept harping with persistence
On the bare fact of existence
I.e, a theory built around it
Recently in France propounded.*

Talking about irony and satire, though Brecht was an icon of the communist East German state and was awarded the Stalin Peace Prize in 1954 by the Soviet Union, he famously lampooned the authoritarian state in poems such as 'The Solution':

*After the uprising of the 17th June
The Secretary of the Writers' Union
Had leaflets distributed in the Stalinalle
Stating that the people
Had forfeited the confidence of the government
And could win it back only
By redoubled efforts. Would it not be easier
In that case for the government
To dissolve the people
And elect another?*

And yet, even in his last few years when his dramatic output had thinned considerably and he kept returning to poetry, the dominant themes were not built around cynicism or hopelessness. He again wrote lyrical poetry, evocative, often wistful:

*And I was old, and I was young at moments
Was old at daybreak, young when darkness came
And was a child recalling disappointments*

And an old man forgetting his own name.



The graves of Bertolt Brecht and his second wife and soul mate, Helene Weigel, at the Dorotheenstadt cemetery in Berlin. Credit: The Wire

“Well after his death in 1956”, the editors of the excellent Methuen collection note, “Brecht the poet remained like an unsuspected time-bomb ticking away beneath the engine-room of world literature”. It may well have been so, but it had not been possible even for Bertolt Brecht to hold back from the world’s view his most consummate achievement as poet, the incomparable ‘To Those Born Later’, written in exile in Denmark:

*Truly, I live in dark times!
The guileless word is folly. A smooth forehead
Suggests a hard heart. The man who laughs
Has simply not yet had
The terrible news.*

*What kind of times are these, when
To speak of trees is almost a crime
Because it implies silence about so many horrors?
That man there calmly crossing the street
Is already perhaps beyond the reach of his friends
Who are in need?*

*I came to the cities in a time of disorder
When hunger reigned there.
I came among men in a time of revolt
And I revolted with them
So passed my time
Which on earth was granted me.*

*You who will emerge from the flood
In which we have gone under
Remember*

*When you speak of our failings
The dark time too
Which you have escaped.*

*For we went, changing countries oftener than our shoes
Through the wars of the classes, despairing
When there was injustice only, and no resistance.*

*And yet we knew only too well
Even the hatred of meanness
Contorts our features.*

*Anger, even against injustice,
Makes our voice hoarse. Oh, we
Who wished to lay the foundation of kindness
Could not ourselves be kind.*

*But you, when at last it comes to pass
That man can help his fellow man,
Do not judge us
Too harshly.*

Anjan Basu

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