

WALTER BENJAMIN  
UNDERSTANDING BRECHT

Introduced by Stanley Mitchell

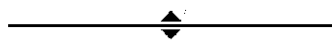
Translated by Anna Barbrook





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# Understanding Brecht



WALTER BENJAMIN

*Translated by Anna Bostock*

*Introduction by Stanley Mitchell*



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Unless otherwise indicated all footnotes are taken from the German edition.



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Benjamin had what Lukács so enormously lacked, a unique eye precisely for significant detail, for the marginal . . . for the impinging and unaccustomed, unschematic particularity which does not 'fit in' and therefore deserves a quite special and incisive attention.  
[ERNST BLOCH]

## INTRODUCTION

Like Mayakovsky and the Russian Formalists, Brecht and Benjamin form one of the classic literary partnerships of the revolutionary Socialist movement. Their relationship, however, is only now coming to light, for it was not until 1966 that the majority of Benjamin's essays on Brecht were published.

Walter Benjamin was an eccentric 'man of letters', born of a well-to-do German Jewish family in 1892. In the course of his lifetime, he underwent a complex change, transposing the structures and habits of his earlier mystical thought to enrich the categories of Marxism.

Benjamin's idiosyncratic and difficult cast of mind blocked his way to an academic career. Scholastic authorities rejected his doctoral thesis (on the origins of German tragedy) for incomprehensibility. But not only that: Benjamin, with characteristic lack of diplomacy, had taken issue with Johannes Volkelt, one of the official aestheticians of German academia. Barred from secure employment, he became an itinerant man of letters, experiencing the intellectual proletarianization he describes in 'The Author as Producer'. Had he



gained a university post it is difficult to say how his thought might have developed. With hindsight, many of his Marxist ideas are traceable in different forms to the days before his professional fate was decided. However, what is certain is that his precarious economic position sharpened his attraction to Marxism. At one point he contemplated joining the Communist Party.

The period was the late twenties and early thirties. Asya Lacis, a Communist theatrical producer, whom Benjamin had met in Capri in 1924, introduced him to Brecht whom he visited frequently during the thirties, staying with him for long periods during the latter's Danish exile. Throughout the decade, 1930 to 1939, responding to the rise and triumph of fascism, Benjamin wrote the present sketches and studies. Less fortunate than Brecht (luck was not one of his stars), Benjamin took his life in flight from the Gestapo, while attempting to cross the Franco-Spanish border in 1940.

Benjamin's writing is essayistic, aphoristic, fragmentary. Even his doctoral thesis is more a philosophical meditation than a systematic exposition and demonstration. At first it might seem odd that Brecht came together with Benjamin and not with someone more politically committed, Georg Lukács, for instance. But Brecht and Lukács never saw eye to eye. Whereas Lukács was hostile to the experimental art of the twentieth century because it lacked a sense of totality and perspective, Brecht shared with Benjamin a scavenging, magpie temperament, receptive to the often fragmented nature of modern art and literature. Benjamin was an extravagant collector and antiquarian, a passionate roamer and observer of cities, who could extract cultural histories from wayside odds and ends.

The diary extract, 'Conversations with Brecht', which concludes this volume, seems to show Brecht as the giver, Benjamin the taker; which was no doubt true psychologically. Benjamin's old Zionist friend, Gershom Scholem, wrote: 'Brecht was the harder nature and made a deep impact upon the more sensitive Benjamin who entirely lacked athletic qualities.' Intellectually, the relationship is certainly more complex and two-sided. There are, for instance, strong indications that the ideas and implications of 'epic theatre' were common to them both before they met.

This diary extract (never intended for publication) is so valuable because it gives the immediate atmosphere of the two men's conversations, their cast of mind, manner of speech, fondness for image, parable, allegory, aphorism, all of which we find separately in their writings. Whereas Benjamin was the more metaphorical thinker, from Brecht he learnt – what his former associates, from Gershom Scholem to T. W. Adorno, always deplored, considered disastrous – 'crude thinking' (*plumpes Denken*), that need for thought to simplify itself, crystallize out into essentials before it could be made practice.

Benjamin belonged to a generation of thinkers who, in the years just preceding the First World War, rebelled against the linguistic barrenness of German academic discourse. In different ways these thinkers sought to validate and discover meaning by revitalizing the semantic and metaphorical attributes of language itself. Marxism benefited from this generation in the writings of Benjamin, Bloch, and Adorno. At the same time, little will be gained from these Marxists, if they are approached with a 'commonsense', materialistic gauge. Here, as for poetry, one must follow Goethe's dictum:

*Wer den Dichter will verstehen  
Muss in Dichters Lande gehen.  
[If the poet you'd understand,  
You must go into the poet's land.]*

With Benjamin it was the poet, Brecht, who was able to toughen the materialist sinews of the critic.

### *The Modern Sage*

Two things, essentially, linked Brecht and Benjamin: a similar historical imagination and a similar humanism. Like Gramsci they were distinguished from the official Communist movement of the thirties by a deep historical pessimism into which, according to Romain Rolland's formula, 'Pessimism of the Intellect, Optimism of the Will', they planted seedlings of hope, and upon which they grounded a dialectical understanding of past and future. As with

Gramsci their pessimism was shaped by the victories of fascism. Germany seemed bent on its thousand-year empire. In addition, the degeneration of Socialism in the USSR quenched a hopeful attitude to the present.

The pessimism was strategic, designed to engender hope, not for foreseeable victories or reversals of fortune, but for the survival of the species as such. This was not yet the nuclear age, but Brecht spoke prophetically: 'They're planning for thirty thousand years ahead. . . . They're out to destroy everything. Every living cell contracts under their blows. . . . They cripple the baby in the mother's womb.' In his friend, Benjamin discovered 'a power that sprang from the depths of history no less deep than the power of the fascists'.

Brecht and Benjamin thought in millennia, geologically, of new dark and ice ages. They discovered optimism in men's most ancient teachers. 'The hard thing gives way' is the maxim which Brecht's customs official elicits from the Chinese sage in the poem 'Legend of the Origin of the Book Tao Te Ching on Lao Tzu's Way into Exile'. And Benjamin comments: 'The poem comes to us at a time when such words ring in the ears of men like a promise which has nothing to concede to the promises of a Messiah. For the contemporary reader, however, they contain not only a promise but a lesson:

". . . That yielding water in motion  
Gets the better in the end of granite and porphyry."'

To align oneself with all those things which, like water, are 'inconspicuous and sober and inexhaustible' would remind one, Benjamin argued, of the cause of the losers and the oppressed. In his 'Sixth Thesis on the Philosophy of History' (in *Illuminations*), he wrote: 'Only the historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.' History was for him an ever-present arena, never (as with Lukács) merely the 'preconditions of the present'. The battles of the past had to be fought and refought; if not they might be lost again.

Benjamin puts this thesis into practice in his analysis of Brecht's Lao Tzu poem. Here the 'spark of hope in the past' is that momentary 'friendship' between sage and customs official which elicits Lao Tzu's wisdom. Such friendliness forms Brecht's and Benjamin's 'minimum programme of humanity'; and Benjamin concludes his commentary with the sage-like injunction: 'Whoever wants to make the hard thing give way should miss no opportunity for friendliness.'

At the end of the 'Conversations', Benjamin quotes a Brechtian maxim: 'Don't start from the good old things but the bad new ones.' The same phrase occurs in a Brecht essay on Lukács, whom he criticizes for a lingering attachment to the old masters and the 'good old days' of bourgeois culture. Lukács opposes the patrician Thomas Mann to Kafka, insecure visionary of despair. In the 'Conversations' Benjamin and Brecht tussle over Kafka. Brecht accuses Benjamin of prolonging Kafka's own self-mystifications. Yet elsewhere Brecht was to include Kafka among those 'documents of despair' from which Socialist writers may learn because of their innovating literary techniques.

What is 'bad' about Kafka is the despair; what is 'new' is not merely the technique, but the kinds of perception and understanding that inform it. Brecht describes Kafka's outlook as that of 'a man caught under the wheels', of the petty bourgeois who is 'bound to get it in the neck'. But this is not the petty bourgeois who turns to fascism, to a leader. Even from under the wheels he continues to ask questions; 'he is wise'. It is, as Benjamin says of Brecht's Galy Gay in *A Man's a Man*, the wisdom of a man 'who lets the contradictions of existence enter into the only place where they can, in the last analysis, be resolved: the life of a man'. Kafka's heroes are crushed under the wheels. Nevertheless, they number, along with Schweyk and Leopold Bloom, among the potential 'wise men' of the 'bad new' days. It is with them, victims and flotsam of mass society, that Brecht begins. Where Lukács had berated twentieth-century literature for not producing 'rounded characters', Brecht rejoined that dehumanization would not be lifted by leaving the mass, but by becoming part of it. In his hands, the Kafkaesque victim, the anonymous K., the petty bourgeois under the wheels, becomes the Brechtian K., the

canny Herr Keuner. Similarly, Benjamin remarks of Galy Gay: 'A man's a man: this is not fidelity to any single essence of one's own, but a continual readiness to admit a new essence.' The 'bad new' days destroy personality, create anonymity. Brecht and Benjamin start with the anonymous man and encourage his resilience, so that the 'hard thing' may give way. But because of their fear of a new dark age, they think in a perspective which goes beyond the immediate class struggle to encompass all the social struggles of humanity, where qualities like cunning and endurance are more important than heroism. Brecht's drama and poetry form a humanist *vademecum* for dark ages. His 'heroes' are resourceful, humorous nobodies.

### *Epic Theatre*

Epic theatre is the product of a *historical* imagination. Brecht's 'plagiarism', his rewriting of Shakespeare and Marlowe, are experiments in whether a historical event and its literary treatment might be made to turn out differently or at least be viewed differently, if the processes of history are revalued. Brecht's drama is a deliberate unseating of the supremacy of tragedy and tragic inevitability. His 'historical pessimism' cuts the ground from under the truly pessimistic 'optimism' of all those who place their faith in historical inevitability. Echoing his own 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', Benjamin comments: "'It can happen this way, but it can also happen quite a different way' – that is the fundamental attitude of one who writes for epic theatre.' The possibility that history might have been different will inspire a *tua res agitur* in the minds of present-day spectators: history may now be different; it is in your hands, even though the means at your disposal are slight and the qualities required of you are perhaps undramatic, unromantic. Hence, in recovering the past, the epic dramatist will 'tend to emphasize not the great decisions which lie along the main line of history but the incommensurable and the singular'.

Benjamin's encounter with Brecht leads him, in 'What is Epic Theatre?' (of which the two existing versions are given here), to sketch out a new theory of the history of drama which is already

suggested in his earlier, pre-Marxist *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*. Benjamin saw affinity between the allegoric imagination of the German baroque dramatists and the artistic needs of the twentieth century; first in the melancholy spirit of the former, with its emblematic but inscrutable insignia, which he rediscovered in Kafka; then in the cognate principle of montage which he found in the work of Eisenstein and Brecht. Montage became for him the modern, constructive, active, unmelancholy form of allegory, namely the ability to connect dissimilars in such a way as to 'shock' people into new recognitions and understandings. A great deal of Benjamin's critical writing concerns itself with 'shock' as the primary experience of dislocation in modern urban, mass, industrial life. He considered Baudelaire and Proust, for example, sensitive reactors to the new 'shocks' of modern life, who at the same time used their art as a means of self-protection. Such self-protection, he argued, is no longer needed by the revolutionary artist who welcomes 'shock' with critical distance, with 'heightened presence of mind'. Thus Benjamin came to regard montage, i.e. the ability to capture the infinite, sudden or subterranean connections of dissimilars, as the major constitutive principle of the artistic imagination in the age of technology.

For fruitful antecedents, he looks back beyond German baroque to those forms of drama where the montage principle first made its appearance. He finds it wherever a critical intelligence intervenes to comment upon the representation, in other words where the representation is never complete in itself, but is openly and continually compared with the life represented; where the actors can at any moment stand outside themselves and show themselves to be actors.

Once more Chinese culture plays its part in the thinking of the two men. Benjamin points to the custom of Chinese theatre to 'make what is shown on the stage unsensational' and underlines Brecht's debt to this technique. Then, very originally, he sketches out a byway of European theatre which, he suggests, had always sought to escape from the 'closed' drama of Greek tragedy, had always sought for an untragic drama. The untragic drama and the montage principle were closely connected in Benjamin's mind. That byway led

via the medieval mystery play, German baroque drama, certain scenes of Shakespeare, Part II of Goethe's *Faust*, to Strindberg and finally Brecht and 'epic theatre': 'If, that is, one can speak of a path at all, rather than an overgrown stalking-track along which the legacy of medieval and baroque drama has crept down to us over the sublime but barren massif of classicism.'

Benjamin quotes from the early Lukács to found a theory which takes an entirely opposed direction to Lukács's own subsequent dramaturgy. The later Lukács, concerned with the 'main line of history', treated 'stalking-tracks' as either non-existent or unworthy of mention. Basing himself on Hegel's concept of tragedy, he categorized the dramatic hero as an exponent of will, the protagonist of a conflict between two mutually exclusive ethical demands. To carry through his will against all obstacles was the hero's sole aim, his glory and his defeat. Benjamin, however, noted: 'Plato, Lukács wrote twenty years ago, already recognized the undramatic nature of the highest form of man, the sage. And yet in his dialogues he brought him to the threshold of the stage.' That is, with Plato begins Benjamin's alternative history of European drama, where the wise and dispassionate man is hero. Indeed, Socrates applauded the new 'rationalist' drama of Euripides, which concluded the great period of Greek tragedy. And Benjamin considered Brecht a 'Socratic' dramatist: 'One may regard epic theatre as more dramatic than the dialogue (it is not always): but epic theatre need not, for that reason, be any the less philosophical.'

In Brecht's transformation, the sage, from Galy Gay in *A Man's a Man* to Azdak in the *Caucasian Chalk Circle* and Matti in *Herr Puntila*, is the man who has suffered and travelled much, who changes his role to suit his circumstances. He is, in Benjamin's words, 'an empty stage on which the contradictions of our society are acted out'. It is through this 'empty', 'consenting', pliant, adaptable 'hero' that some of the principles of montage – *Verfremdung* (alienation), exchanging roles and identities – may best be enacted. Such a device is used by Eliot in *The Waste Land*, in the figure of the hermaphrodite blind seer, Tiresias, who has seen everything before, who witnesses and suffers everything again. But he is a figure of nostalgia,

a traditional stoic sage who speaks the language of snobbish irony and can bequeath nothing to posterity but the primal syllables of the Indo-European tongue. Brecht's sages or 'thinking men' are by contrast men of sense and vitality. Galy Gay learns his lesson, masters his situation, and for all his adaptability, indeed because of it, proves the only humane person in the play; able to show 'friendliness' to the man whose identity he allowed himself to rob. Azdak, the rogue, can make justice reign for a brief talismanic hour. Galileo, though not a man of the people, but who belongs with the 'adaptable' heroes, can, in the second version of the play, which Benjamin did not live to read, make a self-critique of the scientist that encompasses the history of professional men from the Renaissance to the present.

In his metaphysically probing thought, Benjamin sees Brecht's epic theatre as a form not merely of 'Socratic', but of truly Platonic drama. The aim of the address, 'The Author as Producer', is to find a political answer, a political role for the artist that would placate Plato's strictures in the *Republic*. Benjamin's historical imagination uncovers a path that leads from the dialogues to epic theatre. In his disquisitions on Brecht, Benjamin seeks to rescue the artist in Plato, whom Plato himself feared.

### *Art and Politics*

In one respect, by eliding the politicization of art with the use of artistic 'means of production' or apparatus, Benjamin and Brecht at times constricted the relationship between politics and art. Brecht, in his later theory and practice, was able to clarify this confusion. Benjamin died before he could completely think through a new materialist aesthetics.

Brecht's earlier attitudes were shaped by Piscator and the Russian ex-Futurists, like Tretyakov, for whom the destruction of a theatre of illusion meant a frontal attack on the bourgeoisie itself. Stanislavskian reproduction was considered bourgeois as such. To be anti-bourgeois or proletarian was to show how things worked, while they were being shown; to 'lay bare the device' (in the words of the



Russian Formalists). Art should be considered a form of production, not a mystery; the stage should appear like a factory with the machinery fully exposed.

Certainly the Doric or Corinthian pillars which fronted the bourgeois bank served a reactionary purpose. But the modern glass-plated banks show nothing more of the workings of capitalism. As an analogy with Brechtian theory, this would be crude and unfair, for, as we have seen, it was precisely the use of montage which constructed the political connections that were not immediately visible. Nevertheless, throughout the left-wing avant-garde art of the twenties and thirties, the belief predominated that to attack and repudiate 'illusionism' or 'reproduction' itself constituted a progressive political act, constituted *the* way in which politics could enter directly into art. This belief continues to affect all radical and left thinking on aesthetics today.

Benjamin's development up to this point had been singular. He began, very typically for the time, as an aesthetic philosopher who lamented the passing of old traditions, as modern technology and mass society took their place. He was anything but a revolutionary avant-garde thinker. He was always avant-garde, but in the spirit of an Eliot (with whom indeed he shared a great deal: Eliot's recovery of the metaphysical poets stems from the same roots as Benjamin's interest in German baroque drama), and as a critic he matched the associative, allegorical powers of Eliot's poetry.

Benjamin's attitude to the newspaper illustrates his further evolution. In 'The Storyteller', his essay on Leskov in *Illuminations*, Benjamin contrasts the self-preserving, self-containing powers of the story, that most ancient bearer of wisdom, with the mere giving-out of information that is *par excellence* the role of the newspaper.

In 'The Author as Producer' (paradoxically, probably composed earlier than 'The Storyteller') a change of enormous scale is evident in his thinking. The newspaper, or at least the contemporary Soviet newspaper, Benjamin here describes as a 'vast melting-down process' which 'not only destroys the conventional separation between genres, between writer and poet, scholar and popularizer' but 'questions even the separation between author and reader'. The 'place

where the word is most debased – that is to say, the newspaper – becomes the very place where a rescue operation can be mounted’.

The Chinese wall newspaper of the Cultural Revolution, the posters, inscriptions and roneoed sheets of the Parisian (and other) students in 1968, all bear Benjamin out and make this once melancholy, metaphysical *littérateur* into the foremost revolutionary and radical critic of the nineteen-sixties and seventies. The spread of street-theatre, agitprop, ‘interaction’ likewise vindicate Benjamin’s and Brecht’s views of the theatre. At the same time their enthusiasm and radicalism conceal a potentially harmful one-sidedness. Thus the very democratization of art by means of the media of reproduction is used to oust and reject all traditional forms of art associated with a division of performer and audience, owner and onlooker. Benjamin simply identifies ‘aura’, the aesthetic nimbus surrounding a work of art, with property, and mechanical reproduction with proletarianization. Of course, mechanical reproduction can be and is abused and absorbed by capitalism, and Benjamin was an early, perceptive diagnostician of this danger. As a preventive (or, if necessary, a cure) he argued for the social control of the media. In this there was nothing new. What was challenging was the suggestion that such social control would create new forms of art; more, that the politicization of the media was the same as the politicization of art. In other words, media and art were identified. The old distinction between form and content was abolished; form itself became political.

By thus collapsing content into form, the range of forms may be restricted. Because Benjamin was the child of the first phase of a new technological era, when techniques like photo-montage had a direct political effect, he sometimes tended to isolate technique as politically effective in itself and to ignore that the politicization of technology involves the relations, as well as the means, of production.

At the same time as he championed the ‘bad new things’, Benjamin’s philosophy of history, as we have seen, required a constant battle on behalf of the past, on behalf of its victims. He sought to solve this contradiction with the concept of *Jetztzeit*, (‘the presence

of the now'), a *nunc stans*, in which time stands still, where past and future converge not harmoniously, but explosively, in the present instant.

This concept of *Jetztzeit*, together with that of *Ermattungstaktik* ('tactics of attrition'), were the two ideas or predispositions that dominated Benjamin's thinking during his last years. *Jetztzeit* entailed the ability to intervene in events, whether as politician or intellectual, to 'blast open the continuum of history' (Sixteenth Thesis on the Philosophy of History). The idea is important in view of the progressivist, evolutionist, determinist traditions of Social Democracy on the one hand, which Benjamin explicitly attacked in his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History'; and the 'Utopian' positivism and pragmatism of the Soviet Union under Stalin on the other. In linking the idea of *Jetztzeit* with the Socialist revolutionary movement Benjamin joins ranks with Gramsci and the Lukács of *History and Class Consciousness* (one of the Marxist texts which most influenced him).

The other idea or attitude, *Ermattungstaktik*, Brecht described in a poem full of pessimism written after Benjamin's death.

*Ermattungstaktik war's, was dir behagte  
Am Schachttisch sitzend in des Birnbaums Schatten.  
Der Feind, der dich von deinen Büchern jagte  
Lässt sich von unsereinem nicht ermatten.*

[Tactics of attrition are what you enjoyed  
Sitting at the chess table in the pear tree's shade.  
The enemy who drove you from your books  
Will not be worn down by the likes of us.]

The philosophy of *Ermattung* dominates Benjamin's writings on Brecht, the belief that in the end 'the hard thing gives way'. The dialectical essence of Benjamin's thought lies in the polarity of *Jetztzeit* and *Ermattung*; the 'Messianic' intervention in, and control over, history (however small the proportions and shortlived the duration), the expectation, expressed in the last 'Thesis on the Philosophy of History', that 'every second of time was the straight gate through which the Messiah might come', and the sober, sage-like, patient

wearing down of hardness. It was this sense of expectation that Benjamin's friend and contemporary Ernst Bloch translated into the category of 'concrete Utopia' or the ontological principle of hope.

Bloch wrote of Benjamin's suicide that it was 'a kind of parting with life not so uncharacteristic of him, if one thinks of a phrase of his which I recall: "Least of all has one power over a dead man"'. In a similar vein Brecht wrote in a second poem on his friend's death:

*Zuletzt an eine unüberschreitbare Grenze getrieben  
Hast du, heisst es, eine überschreitbare überschritten  
[In the end driven to an impassable frontier  
You, we hear, passed over a passable one.]*

Benjamin committed suicide at Port Bou on the Franco-Spanish frontier, in September 1940, on hearing that he was likely to be handed over to the Gestapo the following day. Brecht remarked, when he received the news of his death, that this was the first real loss that Hitler had caused to German literature.

STANLEY MITCHELL  
*London, 1972*



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A STUDY ON BRECHT

# WHAT IS EPIC THEATRE?\*

[FIRST VERSION]

The point at issue in the theatre today can be more accurately defined in relation to the stage than to the play. It concerns the filling-in of the orchestra pit. The abyss which separates the actors from the audience like the dead from the living, the abyss whose silence heightens the sublime in drama, whose resonance heightens the intoxication of opera, this abyss which, of all the elements of the stage, most indelibly bears the traces of its sacral origins, has lost its function. The stage is still elevated, but it no longer rises from an immeasurable depth; it has become a public platform. Upon this platform the theatre now has to install itself. That is the situation. But, as happens in many situations, here too the business of disguising it has prevailed over its proper realization. Tragedies and operas go on and on being written, apparently with a trusty stage apparatus to hand, whereas in reality they do nothing but supply material for an apparatus which is obsolete. 'This confusion among musicians, writers and critics about their situation has enormous consequences which receive far too little attention. Believing themselves to be in possession of an apparatus which in

\* Bibliographical details of where these essays were first published are given on page 123.

reality possesses them, they defend an apparatus over which they no longer have control, which is no longer, as they still believe, a means *for* the producers but has become a means to be used against the producers.' With these words Brecht dispels the illusion that theatre today is based on literature. That is true neither for the commercial theatre nor for his own. In both, the text is the servant: in the former it serves to keep the business going, in the latter to change it. How is such change possible? Is there such a thing as drama for the public platform – for that is what the stage has become – or, as Brecht says, for 'public propaganda institutes'? And if so, what is its nature? The only possibility of doing justice to the public platform appeared to have been found by the 'theatre of current events', the *Zeittheater*, in the form of political plays. But however this political theatre functioned, socially it promoted the occupation by the proletarian masses of the very positions which the apparatus of the theatre had created for the bourgeois masses. The functional relationship between stage and public, text and performance, producer and actors, remained almost unchanged. Epic theatre takes as its starting point the attempt to introduce fundamental change into these relationships. For its public, the stage is no longer 'the planks which signify the world' (in other words, a magic circle), but a convenient public exhibition area. For its stage, the public is no longer a collection of hypnotized test subjects, but an assembly of interested persons whose demands it must satisfy. For its text, the performance is no longer a virtuoso interpretation, but its rigorous control. For its performance, the text is no longer a basis of that performance, but a grid on which, in the form of new formulations, the gains of that performance are marked. For its actor, the producer no longer gives him instructions about effects, but theses for comment. For its producer, the actor is no longer a mime who must embody a role, but a functionary who has to make an inventory of it.

Clearly, functions thus changed must be founded on changed elements. A recent (1931) Berlin performance of Brecht's parable *A Man's a Man* offered the best opportunity to test this. Thanks to the courageous and intelligent assiduity of Legal, the theatre direc-

tor, this was not only one of the most precisely studied productions seen in Berlin for years; it was also a model of epic theatre, the only one so far. What prevented the professional critics from recognizing this fact will be seen in due course. The public found Brecht's comedy perfectly accessible – once the sultry atmosphere of the first night had cleared – without help from any professional criticism. For the difficulties encountered by epic theatre in achieving recognition are, after all, nothing other than an expression of its closeness to real life, while theory languishes in the Babylonian exile of a praxis which has nothing to do with the way we live. Thus, the values of an operetta by Kolla lend themselves more readily to definition in the approved language of aesthetics than those of a play by Brecht, especially since such a play, in order totally to dedicate itself to the construction of the new theatre, allows itself a free hand with literature.

Epic theatre is gestural. The extent to which it can also be literary in the traditional sense is a separate issue. The gesture is its raw material and its task is the rational utilization of this material. The gesture has two advantages over the highly deceptive statements and assertions normally made by people and their many-layered and opaque actions. First, the gesture is falsifiable only up to a point; in fact, the more inconspicuous and habitual it is, the more difficult it is to falsify. Second, unlike people's actions and endeavours, it has a definable beginning and a definable end. Indeed, this strict, frame-like, enclosed nature of each moment of an attitude which, after all, is as a whole in a state of living flux, is one of the basic dialectical characteristics of the gesture. This leads to an important conclusion: the more frequently we interrupt someone engaged in an action, the more gestures we obtain. Hence, the interrupting of action is one of the principal concerns of epic theatre. Therein lies the formal achievement of Brecht's songs with their crude, heart-rending refrains. Without anticipating the difficult study, yet to be made, of the function of the text in epic theatre, we can at least say that often its main function is not to illustrate or advance the action but, on the contrary, to interrupt it: not only the action of others,



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