Uncomfortable, Unsettling, Alienating: Brecht’s Poetry of the Unexpected

What makes Brecht’s poetry distinctive is its consistent combination of disruptive techniques and its element of surprise. Although much attention has been given to the anti-traditional handling of rhythm and subject-matter, more needs to be devoted to the combination of these features with unorthodox use of rhyme, language, and context. Poems from all stages of his career – with the exception of the eulogies on aspects of socialism – reveal the aim of unsettling and engaging the reader in an intellectual exercise.

In much verse, what is suggested, or half-said, or obviously omitted, may be just as significant as what is actually stated. Indeed, the poet’s naming, or guiding, detracts from the reader’s intellectual pleasure of logical deduction, or of insight. Bertolt Brecht provides a prime example of the understating author, and, furthermore, in a predominantly intellectual mode. His verse regularly makes its impact through what might be termed “economy” – the poet’s omission of a full context, of clear stages in progression, or of an appropriate attitude towards his subject-matter. He consistently works in the conviction that the active reader wants to supply the ideas that the poet has “suppressed” – be they in individual words, lines, or even stanzas. His best-known poetic example of this is probably “Ulm 1592”,1 in which the reader’s awareness of historical progression demands that a “missing” final stanza be provided. Had Brecht himself included that stanza, he would have denied the reader’s participation in the process of reasoning, something which he consistently tries to promote. This poet does not want to tell, but to show. He does not want to conclude, but to enable his reader to do so. The very title “Ulm 1592” creates a context which the historically-minded reader will immediately question: what is the significance of the minor town of Ulm exactly one hundred years after the discovery of America? The point is made in a very different way in the poem on Empedocles’ shoe (BFA 12. Pp. 30–32): a clever teacher can create a complex learning opportunity even out of his own demise. Brecht’s focus on Empedocles’ decision to die without leaving any trace but his sandal is, as has been nicely suggested,

an instance of “creative misdirection” for the reader.\textsuperscript{2} False trails may actually be productive. And although by no means all of Brecht’s poems provide ambiguous directions of this kind, his best certainly do. They drive us onwards as we sift through – often mutually exclusive – possibilities. Indeed the minimalist style of the late poetry, which teases through its brevity, is a natural culmination of this art of the unstated, an art which ensures definitive interpretation remains impossible.\textsuperscript{3} In Brecht this is deliberate, because his aim is not a simple depiction of the world. As he emphasized in a response to a poem by Wordsworth, poetry involves far more than simple representation, and reading this genre is therefore a taxing exercise:

Lyrik ist niemals bloßer Ausdruck. Die lyrische Rezeption ist eine Operation so gut wie etwa das Sehen oder Hören, d.h. viel mehr aktiv. Das Dichten muß als menschliche Tätigkeit angesehen werden, als gesellschaftliche Praxis mit aller Widersprüchlichkeit, Veränderlichkeit, als geschichtsbedingt und geschichte-machend. Der Unterschied liegt zwischen “widerspiegeln” und “den Spiegel vorhalten”.\textsuperscript{4}

The claims may be slightly grandiose, but the final play on words is illuminating. “Holding up a mirror” for the reader is quite different from “mirroring”. The difference between the two is that the reader must complete the second stage of the process.

This business of engaging us to see the world differently and draw our own conclusions is, however, often made uncomfortable. Readers may be encouraged to predict a certain development and then find they are “wrong” – Brecht’s “logic” sometimes runs contrary to expectation. Further, it is not only the progression of ideas on which Brecht relies to disturb us and prompt a reaction: his choice of unexpected language and unsettling rhythms are another important plank for the creation of a reactive, mentally creative mood. At numerous points this language seems out of place, for it can be colloquial, or hard, or unpleasant, or even ridiculous – Brecht will go to the limits of banality, even beyond. The lines too, despite their syntactic simplicity and often laconic style, regularly contain some disruptive element. This may range from a rhythmic “irregularity” (suggesting casualness, uncertainty, insecurity, or apparent lack of direction), to prose seemingly forced into verse, or to potential verse forced out of an expected pattern into something akin to prose. Rhyme

\textsuperscript{3} For an example of how Brecht’s succinctness can continue to inspire fresh readings, even of his earlier works, see the lively analysis of “Vom armen B.B.” by Ronald Speirs: Of Poor B.B. – and Others. In: Kuhn and Leeder (eds.): Empedocles’ Shoe (n. 2). Pp. 37–52.
\textsuperscript{4} Bertolt Brecht: Journal 24.8.1940. BFA 26. Pp. 417–418. Here p. 418. Brecht is reacting to Wordsworth’s “She was a phantom of delight”.