The Songs and Poems of Brecht’s *Furcht und Elend* Complex

This analysis focuses on four key “epic” features of Brecht’s most important anti-fascist play: the poems written in connection with certain scenes of *Furcht und Elend des Dritten Reiches*; the framing devices used in, or considered for, early productions; the replacement frame devised for *The Private Life of the Master Race*; and the song in the “Moorsoldaten” scene in *The Private Life of the Master Race*. Differences between preparatory poems and companion scenes are shown to involve changes in emphasis or Gestus of a genetic or potential rehearsal value. A comparison of “Die deutsche Heerschau” with the commenting devices used in *The Private Life of the Master Race* demonstrates that the former has advantages over the framing poetry used in the American adaptation. In conclusion, a consideration of the “Moorsoldaten” scene concentrates on the political significance of the embedded song “Die Moorsoldaten”, arguing that it makes a greater contribution to the play’s theme of resistance than has hitherto been recognized.

Songs and poems play a different role in Brecht’s *Furcht und Elend* complex from that of the songs in such canonical works as *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder*, *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan* and *Der kaukasische Kreidekreis*. Instead of establishing a fixed corpus of spoken and sung commenting devices relatively early on, Brecht experiments at almost every stage of the play’s evolution with a changing repertoire of sung prologue verses, epilogues and macroscopic framing devices. The main reason for this fluid repertoire of “episierende Elemente” is to be found in the chequered history of Brecht’s repeated attempts to have the play published and staged during his years of exile.

Work on *Furcht und Elend des Dritten Reiches* spans virtually the entire period of Brecht’s exile from Nazi Germany. Not long after his arrival in Denmark, he and Margarete Steffin set about assembling relevant material from press reports, eyewitness accounts and literary depictions of life under the Nazis in the work of fellow refugee writers. In July 1937 he began drafting individual scenes for an epic documentary play (working title: *Die Angst*) intended to present a picture of everyday life in Germany from 1933 to 1938, the year of the annexation of Austria. Some scenes from the work-in-progress were pre-published in France, Switzerland, Czechoslovakia and the USSR, thereby initially giving the false impression that Brecht was writing a series of disparate one-act plays. In fact, by June 1938 he had already completed a single work consisting of twenty-eight interrelated scenes, some eventually to be replaced by others written during the work’s prolonged period of gestation. The play’s premiere, using only eight scenes presented under the collective title *99%: Bilder aus dem Dritten Reich*, took place in Paris in May 1938. This landmark production brought to
its culmination the first phase of the work’s complex genesis. The second and most complicated phase covers the period of Brecht’s exile in the United States (1941–1947) and the third that of the work’s post-war publication and staging history. During the Second World War portions of the play were staged (1941) and filmed (1942) in the USSR and thirteen scenes from it were published in Moscow both in the original German and in English and Russian translations (1941). An adaptation comprising seventeen scenes was published in the USA in 1944 and staged the following year under the title *The Private Life of the Master Race: A Documentary Play*. The full German text was first published in New York in 1945 as *Furcht und Elend des III. Reiches: 24 Szenen*. After Brecht’s return to Europe the play went on to be printed in the Soviet Zone of Germany in 1948, the year of its successful staging at the Deutsches Theater in East Berlin, and from then on it was included in all major Brecht editions. Between 1957 and 1963 it formed part of the Berliner Ensemble’s repertoire and as a consequence played a role in the GDR’s belated cultural attempts to come to terms with Germany’s “unbewältigte Vergangenheit”.

The picture that emerges from this brief survey is of a work that existed, and was mediated, in a multiplicity of – invariably epic – forms, a feature that was in part the result of Brecht’s constant re-jigging and re-writing of the material to suit specific exile circumstances, his continued re-thinking of the possibilities of Epic Theatre in exile and the fact that *Furcht und Elend*’s full montage of scenes was too compendious to be staged – or sometimes even published – in its entirety.

The Preparatory Poems

One unique feature of the work’s genesis is the number of scenes (seven) for which a companion poem exists. No other play by Brecht ever stood in such a systematic relationship to a series of preliminary sketches in verse-form. These poems have received little attention and there has been no consensus about their function. Edgar Marsch assigns them to the category “vermutlich für *Furcht und Elend*”, not meaning that Brecht considered inserting them into the play (they would not have worked there), but instead suggesting a private exercise of essentially genetic value.¹ Notes to the relevant BFA poetry-volumes

¹ Edgar Marsch: *Brecht Kommentar zum lyrischen Werk*. München: Winkler 1974. P. 233. Some of the preparatory poems in the *Furcht und Elend* complex may even have been intended as “Übungsstücke für Schauspieler” by analogy with the exercises in *Der Messingkauf* (BFA 22. Pp. 830–839). The fact that “Das Kreidekreuz” was pre-published in *Die Sammlung* (August 1934). Pp. 641–642 and “Begräbnis des Hetzers im Zinksarg” was set to music by Hanns Eisler in 1937, certainly suggests that some of these poems could have been for more than private use.