“Zwei Hände Erde”: Brecht on Mortality

Brecht’s works display a more widespread fascination with death than might be expected of a self-avowedly political writer. Indeed, Brecht himself seems to have consciously resisted that fascination from the moment when he became more consciously political, as may be seen from the prefatory note he wrote for the *Badener Lehrstück* when it was published in 1930. This article notes the dramatic function that the prospect of particular deaths has in Brecht’s plays from that time onwards, but since Brecht’s treatment of death would be altogether too large a topic for a short paper, it focuses more specifically on the theme of mortality in his poetry. It discusses the influence of his religious education and of baroque poetic models on his early poetry, and the disillusionment with religious tradition and the compensating emphasis on the finitude of human existence and the appeal of earthly pleasures that is manifest in his poems from 1916 onwards. By contrast, it also examines the emphasis that is to be found in much of his writing from 1933 onwards on the senses in which war threatens whole human cultures, as well as individual lives, with extinction. Finally it considers the poem “Verwisch die Spuren!” (1926), which has from time to time been submitted to reductive interpretations of both a political and a psychoanalytical nature, but in which the complexities and ambiguities of Brecht’s attitudes to mortality present themselves in a concentrated form.

The prefatory note that Brecht wrote for the *Badener Lehrstück vom Einverständnis* when it was first published in 1930 contains a striking reflection on the prominence given to the subject of dying in that text: “dem Sterben ist im Vergleich zu seinem doch wohl nur geringen Gebrauchswert zuviel Gewicht beigemessen” (BFA 3. P. 26). This statement, which is offered in justification of the view that the script is “unfinished” (“unfertig”), is striking for a number of reasons. In its immediate context it expresses an evaluation of the effectiveness of the text as a *Lehrstück*, which is to say as an exposition and examination of an ethical issue: to what extent and on what grounds are those who imperil their own lives in pursuit of personal distinction entitled to expect the sympathy and assistance of a human community whose interests are not served by their endeavours? The criterion of “Gebrauchswert” points beyond that immediate context, however, to the stern utilitarianism that Brecht had come to apply to social and cultural issues in the later 1920s, prominent examples of which are the presentation of human identity as definable by the uses to which it is put in *Mann ist Mann* (1926) and the position Brecht adopted when judging a poetry

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competition for the journal *Die literarische Welt* in 1927. The dominant sense of his comment on the *Badener Lehrstück* is that the subject of dying is of little use to a human community that is concerned with the issues of how to go on living and of how to establish appropriate precepts by which to live. Death, by implication, is merely the termination of life, and the experience of dying can have little direct bearing on the concerns of the living. For that reason, Brecht’s prefatory note argues, the attention given to the subject of dying in the *Badener Lehrstück* is disproportionate to the issues with which the text should primarily be concerned; or rather, Brecht’s statement uses the rhetoric of persuasion – “doch wohl nur” – to suggest that if the matter is considered with utilitarian criteria in mind, then the weight that has been given to the subject in the text itself is inappropriate.

In practice, the references to death in the *Badener Lehrstück* take a number of different forms. There is firstly the threat of death which prompts the call for help from the stranded pilot and his team of engineers (the “Monteure”). Secondly there are the images of death that are shown to the audience in illustration of the point that people are in general reluctant to help one another: more specifically, these images show “wie in unserer Zeit Menschen von Menschen abgeschlachtet werden” (BFA 3. P. 30). Thirdly there is the advice offered in the form of parabolic “Kommentartexte” on how to adjust to the necessity of death, and it is here that the question of how to prepare oneself for the prospect of physical death becomes difficult to disentangle from a metaphorical implication of the verb “sterben”. From this point in the text onwards, the professed inability of the stranded group to “die” becomes a metaphorical indicator of their resistance to radical change and the possibility of renewal; and when the chorus ultimately appeal to the “Monteure” with the words, “Richtet euch also sterben / Nicht nach dem Tod. / Sondern übernehmt von uns den Auftrag / Wieder aufzubauen unser Flugzeug” (BFA 3. P. 45), it is a form of moral rebirth that is implied. By comparison with the other *Lehrstücke* of the period 1929–1930, where the ethical question posed is sharply focused on the justification for sacrificing an individual human life for a communal cause, the *Badener Lehrstück* displays not only a more insistent, but also a more diffuse preoccupation with

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2 On the latter, see Midgley: *Writing Weimar* (n.1). Pp. 82–87.
3 It was for precisely this reason that Brecht had firmly rejected the extensive depiction of the death of the protagonist in Arnold Zweig’s novel *Der Streit um den Sergeanten Grischa* (1927); see Bertolt Brecht: “Der Streit um den Sergeanten Grischa” von Arnold Zweig. BFA 21. S. 249.
4 See for instance the text in the *Badener Lehrstück* on how the “thinker” overcame the storm (BFA 3. Pp. 37–38).