

made one think, they did not like at all ('You get nothing out of it'). If one needed an aesthetic, one could find it here. I shall never forget how a worker looked at me when I replied to his suggestion that I should add something to a chorus about the Soviet Union ('It has to go in - otherwise what's the point?'), that it would destroy the artistic form. He put his head on one side and smiled. A whole area of aesthetics collapsed because of this polite smile. The workers were not afraid to teach us and they were themselves not afraid to learn.

I am speaking from experience when I say that one need not be afraid to produce daring, unusual things for the proletariat so long as they deal with its real situation. There will always be people of culture, connoisseurs of art, who will intercept: 'Ordinary people do not understand that.' But the people will push these persons impatiently aside and come to a direct understanding with artists. There is high-flown stuff, made for cliques, and intended to create new cliques - the two-thousandth re-blocking of an old felt hat, the spicing of old, rotting meat: this the proletariat rejects ('What a state they must be in!') with an incredulous, yet tolerant shake of the head. It was not the pepper that was rejected, but the decaying meat: not the two-thousandth blocking, but the old felt. When they themselves wrote and produced for the stage they were wonderfully original. So-called agitprop art, at which people, not always the best people, turned up their noses, was a mine of new artistic methods and modes of expression. From it there emerged magnificent, long-forgotten elements from ages of genuine popular art, boldly modified for new social aims: breathtaking contractions and compressions, beautiful simplifications, in which there was often an astonishing elegance and power and a fearless eye for the complex. Much of it might be primitive, but not in that sense in which the spiritual landscapes of bourgeois art, apparently so subtle, are primitive. It is a mistake to reject a style of representation because of a few unsuccessful compositions - a style which strives, frequently with success, to dig down to the essentials and to make abstraction possible. The sharp eyes of the workers penetrated the surface of naturalistic representations of reality. When the workers in *Dravet Henkel* said of spiritual analyses, 'We don't want to know all that,' they were expressing a desire to receive a more accurate image of the real social forces at work under an immediately visible surface. To cite my own experience, they did not object to the fantastic costumes and the apparently unreal milieu of the *Threepeny Opera*. They were not narrow - they hated narrowness (their homes were narrow and cramped). They did things on a grand scale; the entrepreneurs were

mean. They found some things superfluous which the artists declared to be necessary; but then they were generous and not against excess; on the contrary they were against those who were superfluous. They did not put on a muzzle on a willing horse but they saw that it pulled its weight. They did not believe in such things as 'the' method. They knew that many methods were necessary to attain their goal.

The criteria for popular art and realism must therefore be chosen both generously and carefully, and not drawn merely from existing realistic works and existing popular works, as often happens; by so doing, one would arrive at formalistic criteria, and at popular art and realism in form only.

Whether a work is realistic or not cannot be determined merely by checking whether or not it is like existing works which are said to be realistic, or were realistic in their time. In each case, one must compare the depiction of life in a work of art with the life itself that is being depicted, instead of comparing it with another depiction. Where popularity is concerned, there is one extremely formalistic procedure of which one must beware. The intelligibility of a literary work is not guaranteed merely if it is written exactly like other works which were understood in their time. These other works which were understood in their time were also not always written like the works before them. Steps had been taken to make them intelligible. In the same way, we must do something for the intelligibility of new works today. There is not only such a thing as *being popular*; there is also the process of *becoming popular*.

If we wish to have a living and combative literature, which is fully engaged with reality and fully grasps reality, a truly popular literature, we must keep step with the rapid development of reality. The great working masses are already on the move. The industry and brutality of their enemies is proof of it.

Translated by Stuart Hood

Walter Benjamin

Conversations with Brecht

1934

4 July, Yesterday, a long conversation in Brecht's sickroom about my essay 'The Author as Producer'. Brecht thought the theory I develop in the essay – that the attainment of technical progress in literature eventually changes the function of art forms (hence also of the intellectual means of production) and is therefore a criterion for judging the revolutionary function of literary works – applies to artists of only one type, the writers of the upper bourgeoisie, among whom he counts himself. 'For such a writer,' he said, 'there really exists a point of solidarity with the interests of the proletariat: it is the point at which he can develop his own means of production. Because he identifies with the proletariat at this point, he is proletarianized – completely so – at this same point, i.e. as a producer. And his complete proletarianization at this one point establishes his solidarity with the proletariat all along the line.' He thought my critique of proletarian writers of Becher's type too abstract, and tried to improve upon it by analysing a poem of Becher's which appeared in a recent issue of one of the proletarian literary reviews under the title '*Ich sage ganz offen*' ('I say quite openly'). Brecht compared this poem, first, with his own didactic poem about Carola Neher, the actress and secondly with Rimbaud's *Barzaan fever*. 'I taught Carola Neher all kinds of things, you know,' he said, 'not just acting – for example, she learned from me how to wash herself. Before that she used to wash just so as not to be dirty. But that was no way to do things. So I taught her how to wash her face. She became so perfect at it that I wanted to film her doing it, but it never came to that because I didn't feel like doing any filming just then and she didn't feel like doing it in front of anybody else. That didactic poem was a model. Anyone who learned from it was supposed to put himself in place of the "I" of the poem. When Becher says "I", he considers himself as producer of

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the Union of German Proletarian-Revolutionary Writers – to be exemplary. The only trouble is that nobody feels like following his example. He gets nothing across except that he is rather pleased with himself.' In this connection Brecht said he had been meaning for a long time to write a series of such model poems for different trades – the engineer, the writer. Then he compared Becher's poem with Rimbaud's. He thinks that Marx and Engels themselves, had they read *Le Barzaan fever*, would have sensed in it the great historical movement of which it is the expression. They would have clearly recognized that what it describes is not an eccentric poet going for a walk but the flight, the escape of a man who cannot bear to live any longer inside the barriers of a class which – with the Crimean War, with the Mexican adventure – was then beginning to open up even the more exotic continents to its mercantile interests. Brecht thinks it is impossible to turn Rimbaud's attitude – the attitude of the foodloose vagabond who puts himself at the mercy of chance and turns his back upon society – into a model representation of a proletarian fighter.

6 July, Brecht, in the course of yesterday's conversations: 'I often imagine being interrogated by a tribunal. "Now tell us, Mr Brecht, are you really in earnest?" I would have to admit that no, I'm not completely in earnest. I think too much about artistic problems, you know, about what is good for the theatre, to be completely in earnest. But having said "no" to that important question, I would add something still more important: namely, that my attitude is *permissible*.' I must admit he said this after the conversation had been going on for some little time. He had started by expressing doubt, not as to whether his attitude was permissible, but whether it was effective. His first remark was in answer to something I had said about Gerhart Hauptmann. 'I sometimes ask myself,' he said, 'whether writers like Hauptmann aren't, after all, the only ones who really get anywhere: I mean the *substantive writers* [Substantiv-Dichter]. By this he means those writers who really are completely in earnest. To explain this thought he proceeds from the hypothesis that Confucius might once have written a tragedy, or Lenin a novel. That, he thinks, would be felt as improper, unworthy behaviour. 'Suppose you read a very good historical novel and later you discover that it is by Lenin. You would change your opinion of both, to the detriment of both. Likewise, it would be wrong for Confucius to have written a tragedy, say one of Euripides's tragedies; it would be felt as unworthy. For the parallels are not. All this lends, in short, to a differentiation