Review

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Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht – The Story of a Friendship. By Erdmut Wizisla. Trans. Christine Shuttleworth. Yale University Press, 2009. 242 pp. $45.

Exhuming Brecht

The epilogue, as it were, of Erdmut Wizisla's *Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht – The Story of a Friendship* offers a close reading of Brecht's four poems commemorating his friend, who committed suicide in 1940. "The poems," Wizisla writes, "whose personal character as portraits is rare in Brecht's lyrical works, preserve for ever the name of the victim." Wizisla then concludes this final section and the book as a whole (appendices excepted) with a quotation from that very victim:

> The only historian capable of fanning the spark of hope in the past is the one who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious. And this enemy has never ceased to be victorious.

The familiar excerpt comes from the essay "On the Concept of History," Benjamin's late, caustic look at the deteriorating situation in Europe, which had been ensured by misplaced confidence on the German Left – from Social-Democratic to pro-Soviet – in the immanence of social transformation without the need for rupture. Brecht shared Benjamin's interventionist perspective. Both rigorous dialecticians, they came to reject teleological notions of progress and the advancement of European "civilization." As Brecht put it, at their unique historical juncture, "progress is the catastrophe," and the wide trust in European enlightenment (notwithstanding the far-flung and vicious empires) had ended up assisting the fascists.

While Benjamin's immediate reference in this passage from "Concept of History" might very well have been to the Nazis, his broader concern was with the two-stage form of political violence that fascism had inherited from its liberal-imperialist predecessors. This strategy involved physically destroying one's opponents and then obliterating the traces, thereby consolidating and homogenizing the victors' self-generated history as universal, uncontested, and beneficent. For Marx this was bourgeois history, and it tended to assume forms subtler than the Nazis' combination of *Blitzkrieg*, mass murder, and the fantasy Aryan lineages of an Alfred Rosenberg. Such bourgeois history suppresses what Marx referred to at the end of the first volume of *Capital* as "primitive accumulation," the brutal restructuring of society through a combination of legal manipulation, terrorization, displacement, expropriation, incarceration, and immiseration of whole populations. The result is the creation of a newly vulnerable and demoralized labor force on one side and the quick concentration of capital and resources at an enormous scale on the other. In addition and of necessity, the engineered crises on behalf of capital – whether in the form of sixteenth-century enclosure acts or structural readjustment programs in our own time – are elided, abstracted, and replaced with a tale of rationalization, liberation, and betterment.

For Benjamin, too, the victors falsify and legitimize their own narrative, offering a history without alternatives, residues, indeterminacies, unfulfilled potentialities, or meaningful resistance. (Nor, under these reactionary conditions, are there any real victims – who are in one way or another dehumanized or disappeared.) Liquidation in the realm of ideas and concepts re-affirms, even as it wipes from sight, physical liquidation, suggesting that political domination requires the right narrative as well as sufficient force. Political violence is revealed to involve not only the destruction of people but also the transformation or total erasure of traditions and practices, many of which could be crucial to imagining and waging revolutionary political struggle in the present. Better, therefore, for the bloodstained victor to bury history's losers in an unmarked ditch.

The immediate context for Wizisla's last-minute quotation of Benjamin is, fittingly, his exploration of Brecht's elegies. In one of them, "On the Suicide of the Refugee W. B.," Brecht observes how, as the global conflict intensifies,

> Empires collapse. Gang leaders
> Are strutting about like statesmen. The peoples
> Can no longer be seen under all those armaments.
> So the future lies in darkness and the forces of right
> Are weak. All this was plain to you
> When you destroyed a torturable body.

Benjamin's prognostication from "Concept of History" elucidates Brecht's poetic efforts to remember and thereby rescue something of his comrade Benjamin through literary immortalization. Yet despite the individual heroics – Benjamin's self-poisoning and Brecht's poetizing – the "darkness" seems all encompassing, while Wizisla's quotation of Benjamin at the end of the book seems directed to the present, the dead man's voice standing in for the author's as a ghostly warning and exhortation to all. Perhaps Wizisla, channeling Benjamin, is reminding us that the dead still remain vulnerable. And perhaps the author himself is seeking to excite "the spark of hope" into flame by rescuing the dead. But whom? And from whom? Who is the "enemy" here? And what is the nature of their "victory"?

Since Wizisla's purpose is the recovery and authoritative presentation of the friendship between Benjamin and Brecht based on the full array of surviving materials, it seems fair to say that the enemy could be any number of individuals involved in the erasure or distortion of their relationship, which was surprisingly intimate. Beyond their time in Berlin and Paris, Benjamin and Brecht summered together as exiles in a Danish coastal village called Skovbostrand, sometimes for months at a time. In 1934 and then in 1938 their "vacation" extended unbroken from June to October. In July of that last stay Benjamin described his peaceful existence to a friend:

> Brecht's house is next door; there are two children there whom I like; the radio; supper; the kindest hospitality, and, after a meal, one or two lengthy games of chess. The newspapers arrive so late that you have to pluck up your courage to look at them.

Photos of their regular chess-games included in the book provide a visual motif for Wizisla's story, which is above all one of intense intellectual engagement, with incessant move and countermove, action and reaction.

Consider, for example, some of their writings. Benjamin and Brecht first got acquainted in 1929, around the time of the premier of the *Dreigroschenoper*, one of many important works that would become an epicenter of Benjamin and Brecht's "reciprocal support in plans for publications and performances." Benjamin wrote an important review of a Paris production of *Dreigroschenoper* on Brecht's behalf in 1937, while the opera both enabled the development of Benjamin's aesthetics and, at the end, found a grim place in none other than "On the Concept of History." A copy of that essay – of which Brecht strongly approved – only got to the playwright in the USA after the author's death, but in a journal entry dated 9 August 1941 Brecht summarized key aspects of what he called "the little treatise":

> B. rejects the notion of history as a continuum, the notion of progress as a mighty enterprise undertaken by cool, clear heads, the notion of work as the source of morality, of the workforce as protégés of technology, etc. He makes fun of the common remark about its being astonishing that fascism "should still be possible in our century" (as if it were not the fruit of every century).

Finally, Brecht communicated with Hannah Arendt on the publications of Benjamin's work. The last of the eight texts that (in a 1946 letter to Brecht) she proposed for inclusion were: "7. The theses on the philosophy of history; 8. The conversations with Brecht."

Despite temporal and geographical gaps in their history, similarly significant points of connection and re-connection abound. It is therefore surprising that a book like this one took so long to appear. The dearth of scholarship is conspicuous. Lurking behind much of the commentary on Benjamin and Brecht is a Cold-War consternation about what it meant and means for Benjamin to have counted Brecht as a close friend and collaborator. To be specific, the affiliation with Brecht troubles anti-communists and "Western" Marxists. Needless to say, there have been many well-known associates of

both writers who either dismissed or actively suppressed the substance and meaning of their decade-long interaction. Whether from prejudice or protectiveness, Benjamin's "friends and acquaintances," Wizisla writes, "observed and commented on his relationship and developing collaboration with Brecht with suspicion and an unreasonable lack of understanding, and in some cases with malice." Notable among them were Adorno and his future wife Gretel Karplus, Ernst Bloch, and Gershom Scholem. All of them expressed a deep anxiety that Brecht's blunt political positions and *avant-garde* didacticism would be harmful to Benjamin, whether the latter was conceived as the cosmopolitan Jewish mystic or the erudite *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* contributor.

The effort to "save" Benjamin from Brecht began in his lifetime and extended beyond it. As Michael Sprinker has summarized in his important re-assessment of the Frankfurt School in a 1999 issue of *New Left Review*, "The Grand Hotel Abyss":

> Benjamin moved steadily further left from the mid-1920s, when he first seriously encountered Marxism in the form of Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*, to his death by suicide in 1940, on the eve of which he composed an ultra-left critique of SPD [Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands] theoretical orthodoxy, 'Über den Begriff der Geschichte'. It has long been held that Benjamin's soul was the battleground in a more than decade-long war of position fought between Bertolt Brecht and Gershom Scholem – a fable that the publication of a limited selection of Benjamin's letters edited by Scholem and Adorno does little to alter. . . . Scholem understood very well that Benjamin's Marxist *bona fides* could not simply be denied. As a result, he was compelled to construct, with Adorno's apparently willing collaboration, a plausible alternative picture, one that conceded the obvious presence of Marxist terms and concepts in Benjamin's writings of the 1930s, while denying that these signified any fundamental redirection in Benjamin's convictions or his method.

Scholem's efforts at reconstruction, with its stress on Benjamin's Judaic character and aspiration, are well known. As for Adorno, in a 1934 letter to Benjamin he expressed his worries "connected with the figure of Brecht and with the credence you are willing to

give him," as if Benjamin's attraction to Brecht were charismatic rather than intellectual. Minimizing or qualifying Benjamin's Marxism – which was attuned to the street and to the KPD (Kommunistische Partei Deutchlands) – was of a piece with the cautious, noncommittal leftism of Horkheimer's Institute, under which (writes Sprinker) "no political programme for [socialism's] realization was ever imagined." Bernd Witte, author of *Walter Benjamin: An Intellectual Biography* (1997), is explicit on this point, suggesting that, even with regard to Benjamin's manuscript submissions, "the New York censorship functioned remorselessly" and "deprived Benjamin's program for a politically functional aesthetic of its audience, hence of any immediate impact." From the UK and then from the States, Adorno wrote to Benjamin complaining persistently that much of Benjamin's work was insufficiently sophisticated in its use of dialectics (i.e., too materialist), and chose to hold Brecht responsible.

One of the ironies of Scholem and Adorno's efforts to ward away and, later, to obfuscate Brecht's role is the diminishment – perhaps even victimization – of Benjamin, his reduction to an impressionable, ethereal leftist critic. Scholem wrote that "Brecht, the tougher of the two, left a profound effect on the more sensitive nature of Benjamin." (In his *NLR* essay from 1973 Stanley Mitchell put it better: "With Benjamin it was the poet, Brecht, who was able to toughen the materialist sinews of the critic.") Even Hannah Arendt – who, according to Wizisla, assessed the Benjamin-Brecht relationship "positively, even euphorically" – represents Benjamin as a lonely, fragile figure. Adorno, meanwhile, seemed to consider Benjamin politically naïve, thrown off balance by hero-worship and unaware of the implications of his communist-Marxist identifications and leanings – for Adorno, a futile fantasy of "collective" identity with the masses. Presumably, he believed that the proletariat would stomp out Benjamin's sensitivities and antiquarian tastes more fully and irredeemably than Brecht had done.

Wizisla, however, sees Benjamin and Brecht as equals predisposed to engage one another both as antagonists and collaborators – as the big chessboard in the photographs symbolizes. To begin with, the literary critic was drawn to a man whose "whole field of activity . . . represented the strongest challenge Benjamin ever faced." Like Brecht himself, Benjamin sought out the vital and productive conjunction of ideas and methods in order to test "those he had previously adopted, and to sharpen his thinking." When

Gretel Karplus wrote to Benjamin in May 1934 warning him of Brecht's "dangerous" influence, Benjamin shared his hope that his friends would

> have confidence that the rewards of these connections, whose dangers are obvious, will become clear. You in particular must realize that my life, as well as my thought, is moving towards extreme positions. The distance that it asserts in this way, the freedom to juxtapose things and ideas that are considered irreconcilable, achieves its character only through danger.

Wizisla successfully represents for us Benjamin as a theoretical Marxist tactician and pugilist exercised by a dynamic and even-handed friendship with Brecht – in whom Benjamin recognized a crucial aspect of himself. Concomitantly, Brecht found in Benjamin – whom Brecht called "My sparring-partner, so learned," in another of those late poems, "Casualty List" – not only a sometime literary agent and editor but also his "first systematic critic with a claim to theory." They could not have sparred without occupying the same ring. Dialectics, "epic" theatre, the new media, crime fiction, and allegory regularly offered them common projects and problems. Consider, for instance, their shared commitment to "link high artistic standards indissolubly with politically advanced ones" in the never-realized journal *Krise & Kritik*, whose other participants included Bernard von Brentano, Herbert Ihering, Ernst Bloch, and Siegfried Kracauer.

As their involvement with the *Krise & Kritik* project – which envisioned articles on the publishing industry, the status of the novel, film censorship, Thomas Mann, etc. – demonstrates, both were intensely text-minded. Brecht insisted on "literarizing" his plays, sometimes in the direct way of adapting and rewriting known works (Marlowe's *Edward II*, Gay's *Beggar's Opera*) to emphasize the material-cultural provenance of literary production, or else by physically projecting titles and captions onto or above the staged action for ironic distance or critical commentary. For Brecht, the spectator must be activated, brought out from the shadows of the theatre seats into light; he must engage the performance, Frederic Ewen explains, not as an emotive and self-satisfied cultural consumer but "as if he were looking at footnotes or turning back the pages of a book" – for Brecht, ideally between draws on a cigarette.

Just as Brecht's plays provoke the absorbed spectator to become the active *reader* of dramatic representation, so Benjamin celebrated signification itself. With and in language, humanity detaches itself from "death-bound" nature, breaking apart what Witte calls "the illusion of organic continuities," just as, according to Benjamin, language split primal Adam from his fellow objects and creatures in Eden. For both, the Word can be a rock to smash the smooth pane of the "real" world's false transparency, exposing its contingencies and contradictions. For Brecht, that might be sought by bringing down the "fourth wall" under the proscenium arch, and for Benjamin by having the proletarian make text for himself, as he theorized in "The Writer as Producer" (written in 1934), in which he promotes the popular press and other forms of demotic writing that were prominent in the Soviet Union. To de-familiarize and take hold of language as a tool and as the condition for intellection is not merely to redefine core aesthetic categories but also, potentially, to reestablish the very sphere of the human. According to Benjamin and Brecht, with the right applications of language we can cut through the dominant bourgeois modes of objectivism, symbolism, romanticism, sentimentalism, and humanism, and thereby, Witte writes, achieve a revolutionary recognition of the "reification of the world under capitalism."

Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht – The Story of A Friendship provides a rich schematic exploration, clarification, and rehabilitation of an underappreciated conjuncture. Just as important, its very structure testifies to the author's own dialectic materialist method. Director of the Bertolt Brecht Archive, Wizisla has organized the book in lengthy, well-footnoted chapters that relate the intermittent but unified story of their friendship chronologically from different perspectives, with a kind of cross-index effect (e.g., the fourth chapter, "Benjamin on Brecht," is followed by "Brecht on Benjamin"). Wizisla's insistence on the growth, durability, and elasticity of the friendship gains force from his attention to "the reciprocal influences of their individual stances and respective approaches" as brought together and contrasted at any concrete moment in their documented history. Utilizing a miscellany of letters, essays, plays, memoranda, drafts, jottings, and minutes, Wizisla demonstrates his sensitivity to the two writers' complementary qualities and positions, which are better understood in the specificity and degree of their divergences and convergences.

Although they experienced their normal share of disagreements and miscommunications, Wizisla reveals them to have been politically uncompromised and well-theorized Marxists. For example, notwithstanding their various frustrations with party politics in Germany and in the Soviet Union before the war, Wizisla asserts, "Brecht's sympathies, like Benjamin's, were with the Communist Party, to the extent that it was the most radically anti-bourgeois and closest to the masses," even when both were insisting, during the planning for *Krise & Kritik*, on philosophical and aesthetic independence from the KPD. Here Wizisla's approach – oriented to detail, resistant to political cliché, and sensitive to the dynamics of persons and systems over time – provides an excellent model for renewed studies of Brecht, who necessarily survives the temporal bounds of his book, concerned as it is only with the life that the two figures shared.

The book effectively leaves us in late 1941, with Brecht awkwardly situated in Los Angeles. And what remains so important about Brecht is precisely his longevity beyond the war (whose aftermath Benjamin would not witness and evaluate), and his perseverance toward the building of socialism adumbrated by the actualities and the perceptions of the USSR. In a 1966 essay on the dead poet published in *The New Yorker*, Arendt bitterly denounced Brecht for having colluded with what she called "the Communist variety of total domination" and accused him of residing and working in the GDR in bad faith, with a Swiss bank account and an Austrian passport at hand, just in case. In the contemporaneous *Bertolt Brecht: His Life, His Art, and His Times* (published in 1967 and reissued in 1992), Frederick Ewen presents things differently: Brecht's perspective on his situation in the GDR, where he commanded a robust theatre with his wife, actor Helene Weigel, was that (contra the Frankfurter *philosophes*) bureaucratization and unsavory political expediency (like the earlier intransigencies of KPD orthodoxy) were serious problems to be tackled, not inevitabilities or essences of communism.

According to Ewen, Brecht often rebuked East German officialdom in matters pertinent to his theatre, the Berliner Ensemble, and "openly called for the removal of bureaucratic government functionaries from the domain of art." But, Ewen adds as a corrective, "Brecht's animadversions and activities were all undertaken within the

framework of the Socialist state in which he was participating, and for which he was working" – and which successfully brought real art, from J. S. Bach to film, to the masses. Perhaps years-long flight from the Nazis (followed by FBI surveillance and a HUAC interrogation while in the USA) had inured Brecht to taking for granted the life-and-death questions that underlay the Cold War and the grand, humble project of socialism, even as it preconditioned him for another emigration. Continuously directing, Brecht found a meaningful existence in Berlin among actors, designers, and manuscripts, assisted by relatively good health, some local travel, and creature comforts.

At the start of the third millennium – with its barefaced imperialist occupations, an endgame of speculative finance, and the hastening erosion of middleclassism – the value of such a life unexpectedly reasserts itself.[1]

[1] My thanks to Joe Ramsey for his substantive editorial input.