

Understanding Brecht



WALTER BENJAMIN

Translated by Anna Bostock

Introduction by Stanley Mitchell



VERSO

London • New York

This edition published by Verso 1998
© Verso 1998
First published as *Versuche über Brecht* 1966
© Suhrkamp Verlag 1966

All rights reserved

The moral rights of the authors/editors/translators have been asserted

Verso

UK: 6 Meard Street, London W1V 3HR

USA: 180 Varick Street, New York NY 10014-4606

Verso is the imprint of New Left Books

ISBN 1-85984-814-1

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Biddles Ltd, Guildford and King's Lynn

Il s'agit de gagner les intellectuels à la classe ouvrière, en leur faisant prendre conscience de l'identité de leurs démarches spirituelles et de leurs conditions de producteur.

[RAMON FERNANDEZ]

THE AUTHOR AS PRODUCER*

You will remember how Plato, in his project for a Republic, deals with writers. In the interests of the community, he denies them the right to dwell therein. Plato had a high opinion of the power of literature. But he thought it harmful and superfluous – in a *perfect* community, be it understood. Since Plato, the question of the writer's right to exist has not often been raised with the same emphasis; today, however, it arises once more. Of course it only seldom arises in this *form*. But all of you are more or less conversant with it in a different form, that of the question of the writer's autonomy: his freedom to write just what he pleases. You are not inclined to grant him this autonomy. You believe that the present social situation forces him to decide in whose service he wishes to place his activity. The bourgeois author of entertainment literature does not acknowledge this choice. You prove to him that, without admitting it, he is working in the service of certain class interests. A progressive type of writer does acknowledge this choice. His decision is made upon the basis of the class struggle: he places himself on the side of the proletariat. And that's the end of his

* Address delivered at the Institute for the Study of Fascism, Paris, on 27 April 1934.

autonomy. He directs his activity towards what will be useful to the proletariat in the class struggle. This is usually called pursuing a tendency, or 'commitment'.

Here you have the key word around which a debate has been going on for a long time. You are familiar with it, and so you know how unfruitful this debate has been. For the fact is that this debate has never got beyond a boring 'on-the-one-hand', 'on-the-other-hand': *on the one hand* one must demand the right tendency (or commitment) from a writer's work, *on the other hand* one is entitled to expect his work to be of a high quality. This formula is, of course, unsatisfactory so long as we have not understood the precise nature of the relationship which exists between the two factors, commitment and quality. One can declare that a work which exhibits the right tendency need show no further quality. Or one can decree that a work which exhibits the right tendency must, of necessity, show every other quality as well.

This second formulation is not without interest; more, it is correct. I make it my own. But in doing so I refuse to decree it. This assertion must be *proved*. And it is for my attempt to prove it that I now ask for your attention. — You may object that this is a rather special, indeed a far-fetched subject. You may ask whether I hope to advance the study of fascism with such a demonstration. — That is indeed my intention. For I hope to be able to show you that the concept of commitment, in the perfunctory form in which it generally occurs in the debate I have just mentioned, is a totally inadequate instrument of political literary criticism. I should like to demonstrate to you that the tendency of a work of literature can be politically correct only if it is also correct in the literary sense. That means that the tendency which is politically correct includes a literary tendency. And let me add at once: this literary tendency, which is implicitly or explicitly included in every correct political tendency, this and nothing else makes up the quality of a work. It is because of this that the correct political tendency of a work extends also to its literary quality: because a political tendency which is correct comprises a literary tendency which is correct.

I hope to be able to promise you that this assertion will presently

become clearer. For the moment allow me to interject that I could have chosen a different point of departure for the considerations I wish to put before you. I began with the unfruitful debate concerning the relationship between the tendency and the quality of literary works. This argument is discredited, and rightly so. It is regarded as a textbook example of an attempt to deal with literary relationships undialectically, with stereotypes. But what if we treat the same problem dialectically?

For the dialectical treatment of this problem – and now I come to the heart of the matter – the rigid, isolated object (work, novel, book) is of no use whatsoever. It must be inserted into the context of living social relations. You rightly point out that this has been undertaken time and again in the circle of our friends. Certainly. But the discussion has often moved on directly to larger issues and therefore, of necessity, has often drifted into vagueness. Social relations, as we know, are determined by production relations. And when materialist criticism approached a work, it used to ask what was the position of that work *vis-à-vis* the social production relations of its time. That is an important question. But also a very difficult one. The answer to it is not always unequivocal. And I should now like to propose a more immediate question for your consideration. A question which is somewhat more modest, which goes less far, but which, it seems to me, stands a better chance of being answered. Instead of asking: what is the position of a work *vis-à-vis* the productive relations of its time, does it underwrite these relations, is it reactionary, or does it aspire to overthrow them, is it revolutionary? – instead of this question, or at any rate before this question, I should like to propose a different one. Before I ask: what is a work's position *vis-à-vis* the production relations of its time, I should like to ask: what is its position *within* them? This question concerns the function of a work within the literary production relations of its time. In other words, it is directly concerned with literary *technique*.

By mentioning technique I have named the concept which makes literary products accessible to immediate social, and therefore materialist, analysis. At the same time, the concept of technique

represents the dialectical starting-point from which the sterile dichotomy of form and content can be surmounted. And furthermore this concept of technique contains within itself an indication of the right way to determine the relationship between tendency and quality, which was the object of our original inquiry. If, then, we were entitled earlier on to say that the correct political tendency of a work includes its literary quality because it includes its literary tendency, we can now affirm more precisely that this literary tendency may consist in a progressive development of literary technique, or in a regressive one.

It will surely meet with your approval if, at this point, and with only apparent inconsequence, I turn to a set of entirely concrete literary relations: those of Russia. I should like to guide your attention to Sergey Tretyakov and to the type of 'operative' writer he defines and personifies. This operative writer offers the most palpable example of the functional dependency which always and in all circumstances exists between the correct political tendency and a progressive literary technique. Admittedly it is only one example; I reserve the right to quote others later on. Tretyakov distinguishes between the operative and the informative writer. The operative writer's mission is not to report but to fight; not to assume the spectator's role but to intervene actively. He defines this mission with the data he supplies about his own activity. When, in 1928, in the period of total collectivization of Russian agriculture, the slogan 'Writers to the Collective Farm!' was issued, Tretyakov went to the 'Communist Lighthouse' commune and, in the course of two prolonged visits, understood the following activities: calling mass meetings; collecting funds for down-payments on tractors; persuading private farmers to join the collective farm; inspecting reading-rooms; launching wall newspapers and directing the collective farm newspaper; reporting to Moscow newspapers; introducing radio, travelling film shows, etc. It is not surprising that the book *Feld-Herren* ('Field Commanders') which Tretyakov wrote following these visits is said to have exercised considerable influence on the subsequent organizing of collective farms.

You may admire Tretyakov and yet think that his example is not

particularly meaningful in this connection. The tasks he undertook, you may object, are those of a journalist or propagandist; all this has not much to do with literary creation. Yet I quoted Tretyakov's example deliberately in order to point out to you how wide the horizon has to be from which, in the light of the technical realities of our situation today, we must rethink the notions of literary forms or genres if we are to find forms appropriate to the literary energy of our time. Novels did not always exist in the past, nor must they necessarily always exist in the future; nor, always, tragedies; nor great epics; literary forms such as the commentary, the translation, yes, even the pastiche, have not always existed merely as minor exercises in the margin of literature, but have had a place, not only in the philosophical but also the literary traditions of Arabia or China. Rhetoric was not always a trifling form; on the contrary, it left an important mark on large areas of ancient literature. All this to familiarize you with the idea that we are in the midst of a vast process in which literary forms are being melted down, a process in which many of the contrasts in terms of which we have been accustomed to think may lose their relevance. Let me give an example of the unfruitfulness of such contrasts and of the process of their dialectical resolution. This will bring us once more to Tretyakov. For my example is the newspaper.

'In our literature,' writes an author of the Left,* 'contrasts which, in happier epochs, used to fertilize one another have become insoluble antinomies. Thus, science and *belles lettres*, criticism and original production, culture and politics now stand apart from one another without connection or order of any kind. The newspaper is the arena of this literary confusion. Its content eludes any form of organization other than that which is imposed upon it by the reader's impatience. And this impatience is not just the impatience of the politician waiting for information or that of the speculator waiting for a tip-off: behind it smoulders the impatience of the outsider, the excluded man who yet believes he has a right to speak out in his own interest. The editorial offices have long ago learned to exploit the fact that nothing binds the reader to his newspaper so much as this

* Benjamin himself: cf. *Schriften*, Frankfurt, 1955, vol. 1, p. 384.

impatience, which demands fresh nourishment every day; they exploit it by continually throwing open new columns for readers' questions, opinions and protests. Thus the unselective assimilation of facts goes hand in hand with an equally unselective assimilation of readers, who see themselves elevated instantaneously to the rank of correspondents. There is however a dialectical factor hidden in this situation: the decline of literature in the bourgeois press is proving to be the formula for its regeneration in the Soviet press. For as literature gains in breadth what it loses in depth, so the distinction between author and public, which the bourgeois press maintains by artificial means, is beginning to disappear in the Soviet press. The reader is always prepared to become a writer, in the sense of being one who describes or prescribes.* As an expert – not in any particular trade, perhaps, but anyway an expert on the subject of the job he happens to be in – he gains access to authorship. Work itself puts in a word. And writing about work makes up part of the skill necessary to perform it. Authority to write is no longer founded in a specialist training but in a polytechnical one, and so becomes common property. In a word, the literarization of living conditions becomes a way of surmounting otherwise insoluble antinomies, and the place where the words is most debased – that is to say, the newspaper – becomes the very place where a rescue operation can be mounted.'

I hope to have shown by the foregoing that the view of the author as producer must go all the way back to the press. Through the example of the press, at any rate the Soviet Russian press, we see that the vast melting-down process of which I spoke not only destroys the conventional separation between genres, between writer and poet, scholar and popularizer, but that it questions even the separation between author and reader. The press is the most decisive point of reference for this process, and that is why any consideration of the author as producer must extend to and include the press.

But it cannot stop there. For, as we know, the newspaper in

* Benjamin makes a play on words here with *Schreibender* (one who writes), *Beschreibender* (one who describes) and *Vorschreibender* (one who prescribes) (Translator's note).

Western Europe does not yet represent a valid instrument of production in the writer's hands. It still belongs to capital. Since, on the one hand, the newspaper is, technically speaking, the writer's most important strategic position, and since, on the other hand, this position is in the hands of the enemy, it should not surprise us if the writer's attempt to understand his socially conditioned nature, his technical means and his political task runs into the most tremendous difficulties. One of the decisive developments in Germany during the last ten years was that many of her productive minds, under the pressure of economic circumstances, underwent a revolutionary development in terms of their *mentality* – without at the same time being able to think through in a really revolutionary way the question of their own work, its relationship to the means of production and its technique. As you see, I am speaking of the so-called left intelligentsia and in so doing I propose to confine myself to the bourgeois left intelligentsia which, in Germany, has been at the centre of the important literary-political movements of the last decade. I wish to single out two of these movements, Activism and New Objectivity (*Neue Sachlichkeit*), in order to show by their example that political commitment, however revolutionary it may seem, functions in a counter-revolutionary way so long as the writer experiences his solidarity with the proletariat only *in the mind* and not as a producer.

The slogan which sums up the claims of the Activist group is 'logocracy', or, translated into the vernacular, the sovereignty of mind. This is apt to be understood as the rule of 'men of mind', or intellectuals; indeed, the notion of 'men of mind' has become accepted by the left-wing intelligentsia and dominates their political manifestos, from Heinrich Mann to Döblin. Quite obviously this notion was coined without any regard to the position of the intelligentsia in the production process. Hiller himself, the theoretician of Activism, does not want the notion of 'men of mind' to be understood to mean 'members of certain professions' but as 'representatives of a certain characterological type'. Naturally, this characterological type occupies, as such, a position between the classes. It includes any number of private persons without offering the smallest

basis for their organization into a collective. When Hiller formulates his rejection of the various Party leaders, he concedes that they may have many advantages over him; they may 'have more knowledge of important things . . . speak the language of the people better . . . fight more courageously' than he, but of one thing he is certain: 'their thinking is more faulty'. I daresay it is; but what is the use of that if the important thing in politics is not private thinking but, as Brecht once put it, the art of thinking inside other people's heads?*

Activism tried to replace materialist dialectics by the value, undefinable in class terms, of ordinary common sense. At best, its 'men of mind' represent a certain attitude. In other words: the principle upon which this collective is based is in itself a reactionary one; no wonder then that the effect of the collective was never revolutionary.

The pernicious principle behind such a method of forming a collective continues, however, to operate. We saw it at work when Döblin published his *Wissen und Verändern* ('To Know and to Change') three years ago. This text, as we all remember, took the form of a reply to a young man – Döblin calls him Herr Hocke – who had addressed himself to the famous author with the question: 'What is to be done?' Döblin invites Herr Hocke to espouse the cause of Socialism, but on certain questionable conditions. Socialism, according to Döblin, is 'freedom, spontaneous association of human beings, refusal of all constraint, revolt against injustice and constraint; it is humanity, tolerance and peaceful intentions'. Be that as it may, he takes this socialism as the starting-point for an all-out attack upon the theory and practice of the radical working-class movement. 'Nothing,' writes Döblin, 'can develop out of another thing unless it is already present in it: out of murderously exacerbated class struggle may come justice, but not socialism.' 'You, my dear sir,' – this is how Döblin formulates the advice which, for this and other reasons, he offers to Herr Hocke – 'cannot, by joining the

* The following passage, later deleted, originally appeared in the manuscript in place of the next sentence: 'Or, in Trotsky's words: "When enlightened pacifists undertake to abolish War by means of rationalist arguments, they are simply ridiculous. When the armed masses start to take up the arguments of Reason against War, however, this signifies the end of war."'

proletarian front, give practical effect to the affirmation with which you respond in principle to the struggle (of the proletariat). You must confine yourself to approving this struggle with emotion and with sorrow; for you must know that, if you do more, then a tremendously important position will fall vacant . . . the original communist position of individual human freedom, of spontaneous solidarity and unity among men. . . . This, my dear Sir, is the only position appropriate to you.' Here it becomes palpably clear where the concept of the 'man of mind' as a type defined according to his opinions, intentions or predispositions, but not according to his position within the production process, must lead. This man, says Döblin, should find his place *at the side* of the proletariat. But what sort of a place is that? The place of a well-wisher, an ideological patron. An impossible place. And so we come back to the thesis we proposed at the beginning: the place of the intellectual in the class struggle can only be determined, or better still chosen, on the basis of his position within the production process.

Brecht has coined the phrase 'functional transformation' (*Umfunktionierung*) to describe the transformation of forms and instruments of production by a progressive intelligentsia – an intelligentsia interested in liberating the means of production and hence active in the class struggle. He was the first to address to the intellectuals the far-reaching demand that they should not supply the production apparatus without, at the same time, within the limits of the possible, changing that apparatus in the direction of Socialism. 'The publication of the *Versuche*,' we read in the author's introduction to the series of texts published under that title, 'marks a point at which certain works are not so much intended to represent individual experiences (i.e. to have the character of finished works) as they are aimed at using (transforming) certain existing institutes and institutions.' It is not spiritual renewal, as the fascists proclaim it, that is desirable; what is proposed is technical innovation. I shall return to this subject later. Here I should like to confine myself to pointing out the decisive difference between merely supplying a production apparatus and changing it. I should like to preface my remarks on the New Objectivity with the proposition that to supply a production

apparatus without trying, within the limits of the possible, to change it, is a highly disputable activity even when the material supplied appears to be of a revolutionary nature. For we are confronted with the fact – of which there has been no shortage of proof in Germany over the last decade – that the bourgeois apparatus of production and publication is capable of assimilating, indeed of propagating, an astonishing amount of revolutionary themes without ever seriously putting into question its own continued existence or that of the class which owns it. In any case this remains true so long as it is supplied by hacks, albeit revolutionary hacks. And I define a hack as a man who refuses as a matter of principle to improve the production apparatus and so prise it away from the ruling class for the benefit of Socialism. I further maintain that an appreciable part of so-called left-wing literature had no other social function than that of continually extracting new effects or sensations from this situation for the public's entertainment. Which brings me to the New Objectivity. It launched the fashion for reportage. Let us ask ourselves whose interests were advanced by this technique.

For greater clarity let me concentrate on photographic reportage. Whatever applies to it is transferable to the literary form. Both owe their extraordinary development to publication techniques – radio and the illustrated press. Let us think back to Dadaism. The revolutionary strength of Dadaism lay in testing art for its authenticity. You made still-lives out of tickets, spools of cotton, cigarette stubs, and mixed them with pictorial elements. You put a frame round the whole thing. And in this way you said to the public: look, your picture frame destroys time; the smallest authentic fragment of everyday life says more than painting. Just as a murderer's bloody fingerprint on a page says more than the words printed on it. Much of this revolutionary attitude passed into photomontage. You need only think of the works of John Heartfield, whose technique made the book jacket into a political instrument. But now let us follow the subsequent development of photography. What do we see? It has become more and more subtle, more and more modern, and the result is that it is now incapable of photographing a tenement or a rubbish-heap without transfiguring it. Not to mention a river dam or an electric

cable factory: in front of these, photography can now only say, 'How beautiful.' *The World Is Beautiful*—that is the title of the well-known picture book by Renger-Patzsch in which we see New Objectivity photography at its peak. It has succeeded in turning abject poverty itself, by handling it in a modish, technically perfect way, into an object of enjoyment. For if it is an economic function of photography to supply the masses, by modish processing, with matter which previously eluded mass consumption — Spring, famous people, foreign countries — then one of its political functions is to renovate the world as it is from the inside, i.e. by modish techniques.

Here we have an extreme example of what it means to supply a production apparatus without changing it. Changing it would have meant bringing down one of the barriers, surmounting one of the contradictions which inhibit the productive capacity of the intelligentsia. What we must demand from the photographer is the ability to put such a caption beneath his picture as will rescue it from the ravages of modishness and confer upon it a revolutionary use value. And we shall lend greater emphasis to this demand if we, as writers, start taking photographs ourselves. Here again, therefore, technical progress is, for the author as producer, the basis of his political progress. In other words, intellectual production cannot become politically useful until the separate spheres of competence to which, according to the bourgeois view, the process of intellectual production owes its order, have been surmounted; more precisely, the barriers of competence must be broken down by each of the productive forces they were created to separate, acting in concert. By experiencing his solidarity with the proletariat, the author as producer experiences, directly and simultaneously, his solidarity with certain other producers who, until then, meant little to him.

I spoke of the photographer; let me now, very briefly, quote a remark of Hanns Eisler's about the musician: 'In the development of music, both in production and in reproduction, we must learn to recognize an ever-increasing process of rationalization. . . . The gramophone record, the sound film, the nickelodeon can . . . market the world's best musical productions in canned form. The consequence of this process of rationalization is that musical reproduction

is becoming limited to groups of specialists which are getting smaller, but also more highly qualified, all the time. The crisis of concert-hall music is the crisis of a form of production made obsolete and overtaken by new technical inventions.' In other words, the task consisted in the 'functional transformation' of the concert-hall form of music in a manner which had to meet two conditions: that of removing, first, the dichotomy of performer and audience and, secondly, that of technical method and content. On this point Eisler makes the following interesting observation: 'We should beware of overestimating orchestral music and thinking of it as the only high art-form. Music without words acquired its great importance and its full development only under capitalism.' This suggests that the task of transforming concert music requires help from the word. Only such help can, as Eisler puts it, transform a concert into a political meeting. The fact that such a transformation may really represent a peak achievement of both musical and literary technique – this Brecht and Eisler have proved with their didactic play *The Measures Taken*.

If, at this point, you look back at the melting-down of literary forms of which we spoke earlier, you will see how photography and music join the incandescent liquid mass from which the new forms will be cast; and you will ask yourselves what other elements may likewise enter into it. Only the literarization of all living conditions gives some idea of the scope of this melting-down process; and the temperature at which the melting-down takes place (perfectly or imperfectly) is determined by the state of the class struggle.

I have spoken of the way in which certain modish photographers proceed in order to make human misery an object of consumption. Turning to the New Objectivity as a literary movement, I must go a step further and say that it has turned *the struggle against misery* into an object of consumption. In many cases, indeed, its political significance has been limited to converting revolutionary reflexes, in so far as these occurred within the bourgeoisie, into themes of entertainment and amusement which can be fitted without much difficulty into the cabaret life of a large city. The characteristic feature of this literature is the way it transforms political struggle so that

it ceases to be a compelling motive for decision and becomes an object of comfortable contemplation; it ceases to be a means of production and becomes an article of consumption. A perceptive critic* has commented on this phenomenon, using Erich Kästner as an example, in the following terms: 'This left-radical intelligentsia has nothing to do with the working-class movement. It is a phenomenon of bourgeois decadence and as such the counterpart of that mimicry of feudalism which, in the Kaiser's time, was admired in a reserve lieutenant. Left-radical journalists of Kästner's, Tucholsky's or Mehring's type are a mimicry of the proletariat for decadent strata of the bourgeoisie. Their function, viewed politically, is to bring forth not parties but cliques; viewed from the literary angle, not schools but fashions; viewed economically, not producers but agents. Agents or hacks who make a great display of their poverty and turn the gaping void into a feast. One couldn't be more comfortable in an uncomfortable situation.'

This school, as I said, made a great display of its poverty. By so doing it evaded the most urgent task of the writer of today: that of recognizing how poor he is and how poor he must be in order to be able to begin again at the beginning. For that is the point at issue. True, the Soviet State does not, like Plato's Republic, propose to expel its writers, but it does – and this is why I mentioned Plato at the beginning – propose to assign to them tasks which will make it impossible for them to parade the richness of the creative personality, which has long been a myth and a fake, in new masterpieces. To expect a renovation – in the sense of more personalities and more works of this kind – is a privilege of fascism, which, in this context, produces such foolish formulations as the one with which Günther Gründel rounds off the literary section of *The Mission of the Young Generation*: 'We cannot close this . . . review of the present and outlook into the future . . . in a better way than by saying that the *Wilhelm Meister*, the *Grüne Heinrich* of our generation have not yet been written.' Nothing will be further from the mind of an author

* Cf. Walter Benjamin, 'Linke Melancholie' ('Left Melancholy'), on Erich Kästner's new book of poems, in *Die Gesellschaft*, 8 (1931), vol. I. pp. 182f. In quoting from himself, Benjamin has altered the original text.

who has carefully thought about the conditions of production today than to expect or even to want such works to be written. He will never be concerned with products alone, but always, at the same time, with the means of production. In other words, his products must possess an organizing function besides and before their character as finished works. And their organizational usefulness must on no account be confined to propagandistic use. Commitment alone will not do it. The excellent Lichtenberg said: 'It is not what a man is convinced of that matters, but what his convictions make of him.' Of course opinions matter quite a lot, but the best opinion is of no use if it does not make something useful of those who hold it. The best 'tendency' is wrong if it does not prescribe the attitude with which it ought to be pursued. And the writer can only prescribe such an attitude in the place where he is active, that is to say in his writing. Commitment is a necessary, but never a sufficient, condition for a writer's work acquiring an organizing function. For this to happen it is also necessary for the writer to have a teacher's attitude. And today this is more than ever an essential demand. *A writer who does not teach other writers teaches nobody.* The crucial point, therefore, is that a writer's production must have the character of a model: it must be able to instruct other writers in their production and, secondly, it must be able to place an improved apparatus at their disposal. This apparatus will be the better, the more consumers it brings in contact with the production process – in short, the more readers or spectators it turns into collaborators. We already possess a model of this kind, of which, however, I cannot speak here in any detail. It is Brecht's epic theatre.

Tragedies and operas are being written all the time, apparently with a trusty stage apparatus to hand, whereas in reality they do nothing but supply an apparatus which is obsolete. 'This confusion among musicians, writers and critics about their situation,' says Brecht, 'has enormous consequences, which receive far too little attention. Believing themselves to be in possession of an apparatus which in reality possesses them, they defend an apparatus over which they no longer have control, which is no longer, as they still believe, a means *for* the producers but has become a means to be used *against*

the producers.' This theatre of complex machineries, gigantic armies of stage extras and extra-refined stage effects has become a means to be used against the producers, not least by the fact that it is attempting to recruit them in the hopeless competitive struggle forced upon it by film and radio. This theatre – it matters little whether we think of the theatre of culture or that of entertainment, since both are complementary to one another – is the theatre of a saturated stratum for which anything that comes its way is a stimulant. Its position is a lost one. Not so the position of a theatre which, instead of competing against the newer means of communication, tries to apply them and to learn from them – in short, to enter into a dialogue with them. This dialogue the epic theatre has adopted as its cause. Matching the present development of film and radio, it is the theatre for our time.

In the interests of this dialogue Brecht went back to the most fundamental and original elements of theatre. He confined himself, as it were, to a podium, a platform. He renounced plots requiring a great deal of space. Thus he succeeded in altering the functional relationship between stage and audience, text and production, producer and actor. Epic theatre, he declared, must not develop actions but represent conditions. As we shall presently see, it obtains its 'conditions' by allowing the actions to be interrupted. Let me remind of you of the 'songs', whose principal function consists in interrupting the action. Here, then – that is to say, with the principle of interruption – the epic theatre adopts a technique which has become familiar to you in recent years through film and radio, photography and the press. I speak of the technique of montage, for montage interrupts the context into which it is inserted. Allow me, however, to explain very briefly why it is here that this technique enjoys special, and perhaps supreme, rights.

The interrupting of the action, the technique which entitles Brecht to describe his theatre as *epic*, always works against creating an illusion among the audience. Such illusion is of no use to a theatre which proposes to treat elements of reality as if they were elements of an experimental set-up. Yet the conditions stand at the end, not the beginning of the test. These conditions are, in one form or

another, the conditions of our life. Yet they are not brought close to the spectator; they are distanced from him. He recognizes them as real – not, as in the theatre of naturalism, with complacency, but with astonishment. Epic theatre does not reproduce conditions; rather, it discloses, it uncovers them. This uncovering of the conditions is effected by interrupting the dramatic processes; but such interruption does not act as a stimulant; it has an organizing function. It brings the action to a standstill in mid-course and thereby compels the spectator to take up a position towards the action, and the actor to take up a position towards his part. Let me give an example to show how Brecht, in his selection and treatment of gestures, simply uses the method of montage – which is so essential to radio and film – in such a way that it ceases to be a modish technique and becomes a human event. Picture to yourself a family row: the wife is just about to pick up a bronze statuette and hurl it at the daughter; the father is opening a window to call for help. At this moment a stranger enters. The process is interrupted; what becomes apparent in its place is the condition now exposed before the stranger's view: disturbed faces, open window, a devastated interior. There exists, however, a viewpoint from which even the more normal scenes of present-day life do not look so very different from this. That is the viewpoint of the epic dramatist.

He opposes the dramatic laboratory to the finished work of art. He goes back, in a new way, to the theatre's greatest and most ancient opportunity: the opportunity to expose the present. At the centre of his experiments stands man. The man of today; a reduced man, therefore, a man kept on ice in a cold world. But since he is the only one we've got, it is in our interest to know him. We subject him to tests and observations. The outcome is this: events are not changeable at their climax, not through virtue and resolve, but only in their strictly ordinary, habitual course, through reason and practice. The purpose of epic theatre is to construct out of the smallest elements of behaviour what Aristotelian drama calls 'action'. Its means, therefore, are more modest than those of traditional theatre; its aims likewise. It sets out, not so much to fill the audience with

feelings – albeit possibly feelings of revolt – as to alienate the audience in a lasting manner, through thought, from the conditions in which it lives. Let me remark, by the way, that there is no better starting point for thought than laughter; speaking more precisely, spasms of the diaphragm generally offer better chances for thought than spasms of the soul. Epic theatre is lavish only in the occasions it offers for laughter.

You may have noticed that the reflections whose conclusions we are now nearing make only one demand on the writer: the demand to *think*, to reflect upon his position in the production process. We can be sure that such thinking, *in the writers who matter* – that is to say the best technicians in their particular branches of the trade – will sooner or later lead them to confirm very soberly their solidarity with the proletariat. To conclude, I should like to quote a topical proof of this in the form of a short passage from the Paris periodical *Commune*. This periodical held an inquiry under the title: ‘For whom do you write?’ I shall quote from the reply by René Maublanc and then some relevant comments by Aragon. Maublanc says: ‘There is no doubt that I write almost exclusively for a bourgeois public. First, because I am obliged to [here he refers to his professional duties as a grammar-school teacher], and secondly because I am of bourgeois origin, had a bourgeois education, and come from a bourgeois environment and therefore am naturally inclined to address the class to which I belong, which I know best and can best understand. But that does not mean that I write to please that class or to uphold it. On the one hand, I am convinced that the proletarian revolution is necessary and desirable; on the other hand, I believe that the weaker the resistance of the bourgeoisie, the more rapid, the easier, the more successful and the less bloody this revolution will be. . . . The proletariat today needs allies in the bourgeois camp, just as in the eighteenth century the bourgeoisie needed allies in the feudal camp. I should like to be among those allies.’

Aragon’s comment on this is as follows: ‘Our comrade here touches upon a state of affairs which affects a very large number of present-day writers. Not all have the courage to look it straight in the eye. . . . Those who are as clear about their own position as René

Maublanc are rare. But it is precisely from these that we must demand still more. . . . It is not enough to weaken the bourgeoisie from within: it is necessary to fight it *together with* the proletariat. . . . René Maublanc and many of our friends among writers who are still hesitant have before them the example of Soviet Russian writers who came from the Russian bourgeoisie and yet became pioneers of Socialist construction.'

Thus far Aragon. But how did these writers become pioneers? Surely not without very bitter struggles and agonizing conflicts. The considerations I put before you are an attempt to draw a positive balance from these struggles. They are founded upon the concept to which the debate concerning the attitude of Russian intellectuals owes its solution: the concept of the expert. The solidarity of the expert with the proletariat – and therein lies the beginning of this solution – can never be other than mediated. The Activists and adherents of New Objectivity may strike whatever poses they like, they can do nothing about the fact that even the proletarianization of the intellectual hardly ever makes him a proletarian. Why? Because the bourgeois class has endowed him with a means of production – in the form of his education – which, on the grounds of educational privilege, creates a bond of solidarity which attaches him to his class, and still more attaches his class to him. Aragon was therefore perfectly right when, in another context, he said: 'The revolutionary intellectual appears first of all and above everything else as a traitor to his class of origin.' In a writer this betrayal consists in an attitude which transforms him, from a supplier of the production apparatus, into an engineer who sees his task in adapting that apparatus to the ends of the proletarian revolution. That is a mediating effectiveness, but it nevertheless frees the intellectual from the purely destructive task to which Maublanc, and many comrades with him, believe he has to be consigned. Will he succeed in furthering the unification of the means of intellectual production? Does he see ways of organizing the intellectual workers within their actual production process? Has he suggestions for changing the function of the novel, of drama, of poetry? The more completely he can address himself to these tasks, the more correct his thinking

will be and, necessarily, the higher will be the technical quality of his work. And conversely: the more precisely he thus understands his own position within the production process, the less it will occur to him to pass himself off as a 'man of mind'. The mind, the spirit that makes itself heard in the name of fascism, *must* disappear. The mind which believes only in its own magic strength *will* disappear. For the revolutionary struggle is not fought between capitalism and mind. It is fought between capitalism and the proletariat.