

Art of Olive Green

Towards Art, an Ethics & a Laugh

Archives

All posts for the month January, 2012

“The Late Lamented Fame of the Giant City of New York” — Brecht

Posted by *getraer* on *January 13, 2012*

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I've been too quiet, so I thought to share something I've long meant to: Bertolt Brecht's poetry. Concern with copyright infringement—and the chore of scanning and cleanup—has stayed my keyboard, but if I receive a takedown request from vested parties I shall remove. (Though all English editions of his poetry could well be out of print (http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb_sb_noss_1/188-5752402-3519909?url=search-alias%3Daps&field-keywords=bertolt+brecht+poems&x=0&y=0), particularly the pellucid translations of Willet and Manheim from which I will excerpt exclusively.)

I know him mostly for his poetry and lyrics, particularly as sung by Dagmar Krause and Robyn Archer, which has given me a skewed picture of his oeuvre. Yet these are probably the best way to know him, without inviting obscurantists to prate about originality, political courage, personal conduct and worst of all his theory of theatre, the interpretation of which has led to a generation of audience abuse.

From what I know of Brecht, he would like his poems and songs to be shared, especially “in these dark times.” He has been called the greatest 20th century German poet bar Rilke, so it's a tragedy that he's not better known for these plainspoken works. I'll start with a rather epic one, but given that consumption always already starts in the lungs of the “West,” why not go for that windbaggiest of respiratory tracts? My home, New York, New York.

LATE LAMENTED FAME OF THE GIANT CITY OF NEW YORK

1

Who is there still remembers
The fame of the giant city of New York
In the decade after the Great War?

2

What a melting pot was America in those days – celebrated by poets!
God's own country!
Invoked just by the initials of its names:
U.S.A.
Like an unmistakable childhood friend whom everyone knows.

3

This inexhaustible melting pot, so it was said
Received everything that fell into it and converted it
Within twice two weeks into something identifiable.
All races which landed on this zestful continent

Eagerly abandoned themselves and forgot their profoundest characteristics
 Like bad habits
 In order to become
 As quickly as possible like those who were so much at home there.
 And they received them with careless generosity as if they were utterly different
 (Differing only through the difference of their miserable existences).
 Like a good leaven they feared no
 Mass of dough, however enormous : they knew
 They would penetrate everything.
 What fame! What a century!

4
 Ah, those voices of their women coming from the sound-boxes!
 Thus they sang (take good care of those records!) in the golden age.
 Harmony of the evening waters at Miami!
 Uncontainable gaiety of the generations driving fast over unending roads!
 Mighty lamentations of women singing, faithfully mourning Broad-chested men, but ever surrounded by
 Broad-chested men!

5
 They collected whole parks of rare human specimens
 Fed them scientifically, bathed them and weighed them
 So that their incomparable gestures might be perpetuated in photographs
 For all who came after.

6
 They raised up their gigantic buildings with incomparable waste
 Of the best human material. Quite openly, before the whole world
 They squeezed from their workers all that was in them
 Fired rifles into the coal mines and threw their used-up bones and
 Exhausted muscles on the streets with
 Good-natured laughter.
 But in sporting acknowledgement they reported
 The same rough obstinacy in workers on strike
 With homeric exaggeration.

7
 Poverty was considered despicable there.
 In the films of this blessed nation
 Men down on their luck, on seeing the homes of the poor
 (which included pianos and leather couches)
 Killed themselves out of hand.

8
 What fame! What a century!
 Oh we too demanded such broad-gauge overcoats of rough material
 With the padded shoulders which make men so broad
 That three of them fill the entire sidewalk.
 We too sought to brake our gestures
 Thrust our hands slowly into our pockets and work ourselves slowly
 Out of the armchairs in which we had reclined (as for all eternity)
 Like a whole State turning over
 And we too stuffed our mouths full of chewing gum (Beech-nut)
 Which was supposed eventually to push forward the jawbone
 And sat with jaws ruminating as in endless greed.
 To our faces too we wished to lend that feared impenetrability
 Of the poker-faced man who propounded himself to his fellow citizens
 As an insoluble riddle.
 We too perpetually smiled, as if before or after a good piece of business
 Which is the proof of a well-ordered digestion.
 We too liked to slap our companions (all of them future customers)
 On arm and thigh and between the shoulder-blades
 Testing how to get such fellows into our hands
 By the same caressing or grabbing motions as for dogs.

So we imitated this renowned race of men who seemed destined
To rule the world by helping it to progress.

9

What confidence! What an inspiration!
Those machine rooms: the biggest in the world!
The car factories campaigned for an increase in the birthrate:
they had started making cars (on hire purchase)
For the unborn. Whoever threw away
Practically unused clothing (but so
That it rotted at once, preferably in quicklime)
Was paid a bonus. Those bridges
Which linked flourishing land with flourishing land ! Endless ! The longest in the world!
The men who piled their stones so high
That they towered over all, anxiously watched from their summits the new buildings
Springing up from the ground, soon to overtower
Their own mammoth size.
(Some were beginning to fear that the growth of such cities
Could no longer be stopped, that they would have to finish their days
With twenty storeys of other cities above them
And would be stacked in coffins which would be buried
One on top of the other.)

10

But apart from that: what confidence! Even the dead
Were made up and given a cosy smile
(These are characteristics I am setting down from memory; others
I have forgotten) for not even those who had got away
Were allowed to be without hope.

11

What people they were! Their boxers the strongest!
Their inventors the most practical! Their trains the fastest!
And also the most crowded!
And it all looked like lasting a thousand years
For the people of the city of New York put it about themselves:
That their city was built on the rock and hence
Indestructible.

12

Truly their whole system of communal life was beyond compare.
What fame! What a century!

13

Admittedly that century lasted
A bare eight years.

14

For one day there ran through the world the rumour of strange collapses
On a famous continent, and its banknotes hoarded only yesterday
Were rejected in disgust like rotten stinking fish.

15

Today when the word has gone round
That these people are bankrupt
We on the other continents (which are indeed bankrupt as well)
See many things differently and, so we think, more clearly.

16

What of the skyscrapers?
We observe them more coolly.
What contemptible hovels skyscrapers are when they no longer yield rents!
Rising so high, full of poverty? Touching the clouds, full of debt?
What of the railroad trains?

In the railroad trains, which resemble hotels on wheels, they say
Often nobody lives.
He travels nowhere
With incomparable rapidity.
What of the bridges? The longest in the world, they now link
Scrapheap with scrapheap.
And what of the people?

17

They still make up, we hear, but now
It's to grab a job. Twenty-two year old girls
Sniff cocaine now before setting out
To capture a place at a typewriter.
Desperate parents inject poison into their daughters' thighs
To make them look red hot.

18

Gramophone records are still sold, not many of course
But what do they tell us, these cows who have not learned
To sing? What
Is the sense of these songs? What have they really
Been singing to us all these years long?
Why do we now dislike these once celebrated voices?
Why do these photos of cities no longer make the slightest impression on us?
Because word has gone round
That these people are bankrupt.

19

For their machines, it is said, lie in huge heaps (the biggest in the world)
And rust
Like the machines of the Old World (in smaller heaps).

20

World championships are still contested before a few spectators
who have absent-mindedly stayed in their places:
Each time the strongest competitor
Stands no chance against the mysterious law
That drives people away from shops stocked to bursting.

21

Clutching their smile (but nothing else now) the retired world champions
Stand in the way of the last few streetcars left running.
Three of these broad-gauge fellows fill the sidewalk, but
What will fill *them* before nightfall?
The padding warms only the shoulders of those who in interminable columns
Hurry day and night through the empty canyons of lifeless stonepiles.
Their gestures are slow, like those of hungry and enfeebled beasts.
Like a whole State turning over
They work themselves slowly out of the gutters in which they
seem to be lying as for all eternity.
Their confidence, it is said
Is still there; it is based on the hope that
Tomorrow the rain will fall upwards.

22

But some, we hear, can still find jobs: in those places
Where whole wagon-loads of wheat are being shovelled into the ocean
Called Pacific.
And those who spend their nights on benches are, we hear, apt to
Think quite impermissible thoughts as they see
Those empty skyscrapers before dropping off to sleep.

23

What a bankruptcy! How

Great a fame has departed! What a discovery:
That their system of communal life displays
The same miserable flaw as that of
More modest people.

—*Bertolt Brecht*