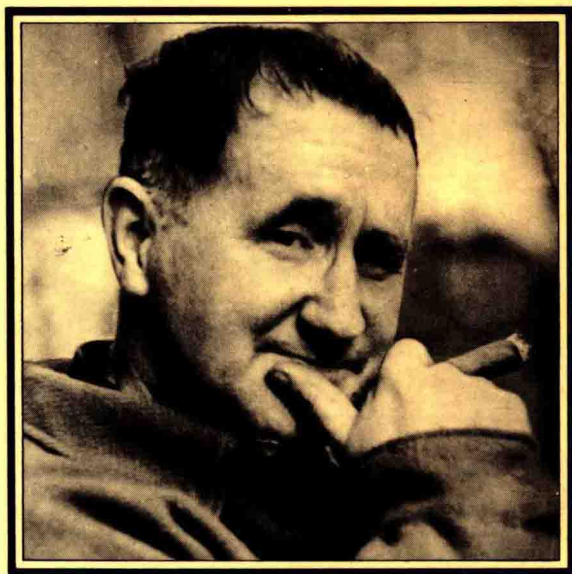


# Brecht

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## A CHOICE OF EVILS

FOURTH EDITION



MARTIN ESSLIN

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BRECHT  
A Choice of Evils

A CRITICAL STUDY OF  
THE MAN, HIS WORK  
AND HIS OPINIONS

*Fourth, revised edition*

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## FOREWORD TO THE THIRD EDITION

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This book first appeared in England in 1959, in the United States in 1960. At that time Brecht was still barely known in the English-speaking world. Today he has become a recognized classic, one of the great masters of twentieth-century literature. And there has been a steady stream of books and articles on the man and his work.

Moreover, in the quarter century since Brecht died many of his previously unpublished works have appeared, and a good deal of information about his life and circumstances, letters and diaries have become public. Clearly a book which had been one of the first to attempt only three years after he had died a survey of the man and the artist, the theoretician of drama and the political personality, and for which there seemed a steady continuing demand from students of Brecht and the general public, was in need of revision.

Yet, on rereading what I had written in 1957 and 1958, with an eye on what might have become out of date or been superseded by the new material, I was surprised to what extent the material I had then laboriously assembled has stood up to the test of time. The enormous mass of newly available biographical material and unpublished writings that have recently come to light have, indeed, filled out much that had been reported on the basis of personal reminiscences from friends – and enemies – of Brecht, or from hints contained in newspaper reports of the time. But the basic facts, the basic structure of Brecht's life and personality, the basic outline of his artistic and political profile remain unaffected.

Of course, there has been an immense amount of discussion and often bitter controversy about Brecht; and this book has often been in the centre of such disputes. But here too, in surveying what has been said for and against my point of view, I can merely repeat what I wrote in the foreword to the first paperback edition of the book, in 1960:

'That a study of a highly unorthodox Communist poet, which is appreciative of his genius but critical of his political convictions,

would find little understanding in orthodox Communist quarters was only to be expected. There is little point in arguing with criticism on the intellectual level of, say, the London *Daily Worker*. One might as well engage in a debate with a parrot. But there has been another, and outwardly more plausible, line of attack from similar, or at least closely related, quarters which certainly demands strong and categorical refutation.

'I have been accused of wanting to "denigrate" Brecht, the man, and of presenting a "repulsive" picture of a great, and defenceless, artist. That such a view is a grotesque misunderstanding, and misrepresentation, of this book should be apparent to any attentive reader. How could such a misconception arise? By applying to Brecht a system of ethics to which he himself never subscribed. It has, for example, been suggested that I have cast doubt on his honour by reporting that, after his exile in 1933, Brecht did not accept an invitation to work in the Soviet Union and even emigrated to America in 1941 by crossing its whole territory from Finland to Vladivostok. Did this not imply that he betrayed his faith for the sake of the fleshpots of Hollywood? I am accused of having presented Brecht as a coward and opportunist because I did nothing to explain away, or minimize, the otherwise undoubted and unquestionable facts that, before deciding to go back to East Germany, Brecht applied for an Austrian passport and secured a West German publisher and a Swiss bank account, and that in making this decision the prospect of at last obtaining control of a richly subsidized theatre was at least as important as his devotion to the interests of the party. Did this not ascribe the basest motives to a pure believer in the cause? I am attacked for trying to find an explanation for the paradox that Brecht *was* a Communist, but that much of his work was unacceptable to the party as Communist propaganda; for searching to establish the connection between Brecht's political convictions and the structure of his mind revealed in the imagery of his poetry. Is this not tantamount to questioning the purity of his motives?

'The fallacy of this approach lies in the naïveté of its underlying, but never openly acknowledged, assumptions. It presupposes that there could not possibly be a moral or ethical dilemma in being a Communist, even for a man of Brecht's deep sensitivity and penetrating intellect; that for a Communist all decisions would automatically flow from the basic equation that everything that is good for the party is

good for all its believers, and that thus, for example, a Communist could not possibly hesitate before deciding to settle in East Germany, or make some arrangements to safeguard his political independence; and that it is sacrilege to suggest that there may be a conflict between the poet's instinct for truth and the party's propaganda requirements. These, however, are the basic assumptions of the most puerile level of Communist hagiography which, admittedly, form the foundation of the terrifyingly simple-minded picture of Brecht as a latter-day Communist classic painted by the same East German propagandists who attacked him in his lifetime as a dangerous formalist and revisionist. To turn a complexly motivated human being into a cardboard poster seems to me a far more reprehensible and repulsive act of denigration than an honest and objective assessment of his personality. I admire Brecht for being a shrewd and realistic person who pursued a policy of enlightened self-interest, because he felt that he had something important to say and therefore ought to do his best to survive in his troubled times rather than indulge in empty heroic gestures. He never tires of praising the unheroic heroes like Schweik or Azdak who manage to achieve what they set out to do even at the cost of occasionally appearing less than brave, virtuous, or truthful. This was the system of ethics taught by Brecht's alter ego, the charming and wordily wise Mr Keuner:

"The bearer of knowledge must not get involved in fights; nor speak the truth; nor fail to eat; nor refuse honours; nor be recognizable. The bearer of truth has, of all virtues only one: that he carries the truth within him," said Mr Keuner.<sup>1</sup>

And Brecht certainly regarded himself as the bearer of an important truth. Is it really an insult to suggest that for its sake he sometimes did not refuse honours like the Stalin Prize, that sometimes he tried to make his real motives unrecognizable, that for its sake he refused to starve, that for its sake he sometimes retreated when challenged to a fight? Those who throw up their hands in horror when confronted with the image of Brecht as a complex, contradictory, modern, and therefore far from guiltless, human being, instead of their own oversimplified comic-strip conception of a superman hero, do in fact betray an amazing insensitivity toward the truly heroic, because tragically

<sup>1</sup> *'Von den Traegern des Wissens,' Versuche 1.*



ambivalent, aspect of their idol. It is, of course, fully understandable that the family and immediate circle of a great man would rather see some aspects of his character, his meanness in money matters perhaps, or the multiplicity of his love affairs, glossed over. But, in the long run, the "official, authorized" biographies of great men usually do more harm to their memories than the most irreverent. Even the failings of a great poet are valuable: they may reveal the sources of his poetry.

'There is only one other misunderstanding I should like to clear up. It concerns my method. In his brilliant, and deeply perceptive, essay,<sup>1</sup> Ernest Borneman criticizes me for – or compliments me on? – the fact that the way I build up my picture of Brecht from his biography and background toward a psychological and critical appreciation of the man and artist amounts to my using a Marxist, or crypto-Marxist, approach. This is a very penetrating observation, but it is valid only if the term "Marxist" is taken in its very widest sense, if, in fact, Marx could claim to be the only philosopher who insisted that all arguments should proceed from a foundation of solid fact. Marx may have been convinced that he had discovered the application of the scientific method to social (and perhaps also literary) analysis, but that does not mean that the scientific method was discovered by Marx. It is quite true that the argument of this book does proceed in a somewhat dialectical fashion. But this is inherent in the character of Brecht, who was a personality of contradictions and paradoxes, rather than in the method of the argument. In fact, Brecht's divided nature, in its alternation between anarchy and discipline, is the key to his deeply felt affinity to the Hegelian and Marxist dialectic. Moreover, as Borneman rightly points out, my book also relies on the use of modern psychological concepts and employs a system of philosophical and literary categories and values that would be anathema to Marx himself, let alone the scholastic dogmatists who claim to be the champions of Marxism today. Although I start from the facts of Brecht's life and background, my concern is to explain the relationship between Brecht's poetic genius and political convictions through an analysis of the psychological foundations of his personality revealed in the imagery of his poetry; a genuinely Marxist approach would be in the diametrically opposite direction: from his social and class background toward his psychology. Nor is my final conclusion, as Borneman

<sup>1</sup> Two Brechtians,' *The Kenyon Review*, Summer 1960.

## FOREWORD TO THE THIRD EDITION

would have it, that "the sole therapy for creative artists of Brecht's stamp . . . is to submit to Communist discipline," but, on the contrary, that conversion to Communism may often be the symptom of that profound psychological disturbance, the wound of the poet, for which his *creative genius* provides the therapy.'

So much for what I wrote in answer to criticism of this book in 1960. I stand by it today.

This new edition thus presents the same point of view as the first version of the book; but I have added a good deal of detail to my arguments from the material now available.

The *catalogue raisonné* of Brecht's writings as well as the bibliography of his collected works and their translations into English have been brought up to date; but the bibliography of books about Brecht has been restricted to the more important and significant biographical and critical material.

My thanks are due to the numerous friends who drew my attention to errors and omissions, and especially to Eric Bentley, whose vast knowledge of Brecht was always at my disposal and whose enthusiasm and generosity played a vital part in getting this book – and its present edition – published.

M.E.

*Winchelsea, Sussex, August 1979*

## FOREWORD TO THE FOURTH EDITION

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This book has now been in print for more than a quarter of a century. It is, I feel, a sign of its sound basic structure that it has been very easy indeed, over the years, to bring it up-to-date in its various new editions. In spite of the immense amount of additional material that has been appearing at intervals – hitherto unpublished poems and theoretical writings by Brecht, diaries and letters, as well as a flood of recollections by people who knew him – the basic facts, as they had been assembled by me shortly after Brecht died, remain unchanged.

This is not too surprising: at that time it was relatively easy to talk to people who had been in intimate touch with Brecht throughout his life; in many cases they talked more freely than they subsequently wrote about him. And the record of Brecht's public activity was still easily obtained from files of newspapers with reviews and interviews. So, again, this fourth, revised edition of the book contains little of essential importance that is basically new – except for some additions to the bibliography.

Where a great deal of additional material has now become public is in the area of Brecht's private life. At the time I first collected the material for this book it was fairly easy to hear about Brecht's sexual exploits; but his wife was still alive and so were many of the women involved, hence discretion seemed indicated. Today, with a number of very frank biographies available, and Brecht's letters and diaries revealing a great deal, it may be worth while just adding a few of these facts; they do contribute to the formation of a valid picture of Brecht's character.

Brecht was a polygamist. He professed to a belief in free love, but was, at the same time, extremely jealous and possessive. Even if he no longer wanted a woman, he could not bear her being with someone else. The recently published reminiscences of his first girl friend, Bie Banholzer, the mother of his illegitimate son, throw an amusing light on this. Bie was seduced by Brecht and became

pregnant. Her parents, highly respectable people, would not hear of her marrying Brecht (who had honourably offered to do the right thing); the little boy was sent to foster parents. After Brecht had achieved his first big successes in the early nineteen-twenties Bie's parents relented, now she – still in love with him – was free to marry him. But Brecht, by this time, was deeply involved with the singer Marianne Zoff, who was also pregnant by him. When Bie informed him that marriage was now possible, Brecht begged her to wait: his present girl being pregnant, her parents wanted him to marry *her*. Would she therefore not mind if he did marry Marianne, only to divorce her immediately after having made her an honest woman? Bie agreed to this bizarre plan. Years passed, no divorce. Finally Bie lost her patience. She issued an ultimatum to Brecht: 'Marry me now – or I marry the man who has been waiting for me so long.' Brecht could not bear losing her and soon afterwards an envoy from him arrived to plead with her to give him more time. Who was that envoy? None other than Helene Weigel, probably at that time herself already pregnant with Brecht's second son – or soon to be . . .

Stefan Brecht, Weigel's son was born in November 1924. Brecht married Weigel in April 1929. And by that time he was already deeply involved with Carola Neher, the star of the *Threepenny Opera* film, who perished in one of Stalin's Gulag camps during the war, in spite of Brecht's desperate attempts to save her.

In exile in Denmark Brecht lived with Weigel and his greatly beloved working-class secretary Margarete Steffin; he also struck up an affair, which blossomed into stormy love, with a Danish actress, Ruth Berlau, who left her husband, a prominent medical man, for him, and followed him into exile in America. On the journey from Finland to the United States, which took Brecht from Helsinki to Vladivostok to catch the last boat to California across the Pacific, Brecht was accompanied by Weigel, Berlau and Steffin, but Steffin, who was consumptive, became ill and the others had to leave her behind. She died in Moscow.

Berlau had come with Brecht on the understanding that in America he would leave Weigel and live with her. When this promise remained unfulfilled – for Brecht needed Weigel as a wonderful housekeeper and political and artistic adviser – Berlau (who had given birth to a child of Brecht's that died immediately after it was

born) became more and more upset and aggressive. She followed Brecht back to East Berlin. Her last years were beset by alcoholism and mental illness.

In East Germany Brecht developed a veritable harem among the actresses and female assistants in his theatre. There are stories about Weigel discreetly warning visiting directors against paying too much attention to one or the other of Brecht's mistresses as it might upset him.

At his funeral – so one of his closest friends in East Germany told me – there were five widows, all in black. Four were crying. One was laughing: Helene Weigel, the legitimate one who inherited the mantle of the great man's fame.

These facts would be merely amusing, if it were not for the constant attempts by the followers of the party line to try and turn Brecht into a saintly figure of the purest virtue. His attitude to women certainly was an important feature of his character – as well as of his artistic personality. It permeates his poetry and his work as a playwright. Brecht was undoubtedly an idealist in his Marxist commitment; but in his private actions he was a cynic of the first order. There *was* much of Baal in him, and of Azdak and Schweik.

Needless to say, all this adds to, rather than diminishes, Brecht's stature. It was the richness and contradictoriness of his character that made him into an ideal dramatist. And that was the initial point this book tried to make.

M.E.

*Stanford, California, 1983*

## INTRODUCTION

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There can be little doubt that Bertolt Brecht is one of the most significant writers of this century.

German literature, unlike that of France, Italy, pre-revolutionary Russia, or Scandinavia, is on the whole so remote from the taste and aesthetic conventions of the English-speaking world that its influence does not often make itself felt. Yet occasionally an author writing in German imposes himself and leaves a lasting impression: Kafka was one of these, Brecht is another. His influence on the theatre may well prove as powerful as that of Kafka on the novel.

It is an influence which has already left its mark; it did so long before Brecht's name itself was ever mentioned. Auden's and Isherwood's early plays, and a good many of the poems of their left-wing phase, clearly owe a debt to the early Brecht. In an entirely different sphere, that of the musical stage, the contemporary American musical with its blending of serious purpose in the book with popular tunes certainly derives to some extent from Brecht's experiments in *The Threepenny Opera*.

This first, anonymous and unacknowledged, impact of Brecht's ideas was followed, at an interval, by a second, more direct wave of his influence. This spread from Brecht's own theatre at East Berlin which gave him an opportunity to demonstrate the full range of his powers. His fame as a reformer of the stage was carried to Western Europe by visitors to Berlin and led to triumphant appearances of Brecht's Berliner Ensemble in Paris and London. Brecht's name became a household word, the daily coinage of dramatic critics. His theories were quoted in support of a multitude of contradictory causes. And his adherence to the East German Communist régime further confused the issue. Some argued that his greatness as a producer, backed by subsidies received from a Communist government, proved the cultural superiority of the Eastern camp, while others condemned him on the ground that he was a Communist propagandist and therefore could not be a great artist.

But Brecht's case defies such simplifications. It is far more complex and constitutes a curious paradox: Brecht was a Communist, he was

also a great poet. But while the West liked his poetry and distrusted his Communism, the Communists exploited his political convictions while they regarded his artistic aims and achievements with suspicion. To understand this paradox it is necessary to examine not only Brecht's professed opinions, his background and his works, but also to subject them to an objective, critical analysis.

This book attempts to put such a factual, yet critical, study of Brecht's artistic personality before an English-speaking public. It is not primarily a biography, although its critical assessment of Brecht and its discussion of the more general problem of the politically committed poet of genius, takes an account of Brecht's life as its starting point. There may be writers whose work can be discussed without reference to their life; it may even be possible to deal with Brecht's *œuvre* in this way, if, that is, one were merely concerned with its aesthetic qualities. But this is not the concern of this book: Brecht was not only a political poet, he also claimed that his writings were weapons in a political struggle, that they were based on a correct assessment of the world around him, of society. Moreover he himself and his works have become the centre of a political and ideological debate: was Brecht's aesthetic theory truly Marxist? Was his assessment of the social forces of his time as correct as he claimed? What was the social and psychological basis for his conversion to Marxism? All these and a host of other questions are relevant to a true assessment of Brecht's impact and importance; and they cannot be answered without reference to the salient facts of his biography. After Brecht's death his patrons elevated him into the position of a saint in the Byzantine pantheon of Communist hagiography – and in order to do so had to suppress or embellish some essential features of both his life and his work: it is they who have made it necessary to start out from a biographical basis in discussing him as an artist and a political figure.

Brecht's importance, moreover, transcends his significance as a dramatist, poet, or amusing personality. He is above all an epitome of his times: most of the cross-currents and contradictions, moral and political dilemmas, artistic and literary trends of our time are focused and exemplified in Brecht's life and its vicissitudes. Through his commitment to a political cause, through his participation in the struggles of pre-Hitler Germany, his experience as an exiled writer in Europe and America, his plunge back into the drab but fascinating

half-light of East Berlin, Brecht was more deeply involved in the conflicts of his age than most of his contemporaries. His experiences concentrate and distil its basic issues: the reaction of the generation of the First World War to the collapse of their entire civilization; the dilemmas facing a sensitive and passionate personality in an age of declining faith; the dangers that beset an artist whose indignation about the social evils of his society drives him into the arms of totalitarian forces; the theoretical and practical difficulties encountered by a writer of genius in a rigidly authoritarian society; the choice between lavishly subsidized but severely restricted working conditions in a Communist state on the one hand, and the limitations on the artist imposed upon him by a free, but commercial society. Brecht's experience exemplifies and sheds a light on all these problems.

The most intriguing question, however, posed – and largely answered – by Brecht's experience is: how far is it possible for a great writer to adhere to a creed so rigidly dogmatic, so far divorced from the reality of human experience as our latter-day brand of Communism without doing violence to his talent?

An analysis of Brecht's case will, I believe, put this problem into a new light by presenting the factual evidence of a concrete case of a committed major writer. It should help to explain the paradox why the most important Communist writer of his time was virtually banned within the Communist orbit, while, at the same time, being used to impress Western intellectuals with the achievements of Marxist culture.

And finally, although the main strength of Brecht's poetic power derives from his highly individual use of the German language, an attempt can be made at a critical survey of his work: his theory of the 'epic theatre' which he himself expounded in a most confusing manner and which has since then been further confounded by commentators hypnotized by the intriguing technical terms he invented, can be summarized in simple language and its real content and significance assessed. The real themes of his writing, which lie behind the surface of commitment and social purpose, can be laid bare and traced through the bewildering changes of style and tone of Brecht's Protean *œuvre*. This in turn will shed some further light on Brecht's personality and will help to explain the motives which made him an anarchist, nihilist, and cynic on the one hand, and a fervent believer in the collective virtues of discipline embodied in Marxist Communism on the other.



To avoid the need of wearying the reader with lengthy summaries of plays, novels, short stories, and poems which would interrupt the argument if they had to be inserted into the critical assessment of Brecht's work, a descriptive list of his writings is included in the reference section at the end of the book. This can be consulted as the need arises or studied separately at leisure. A short chronology of the main events of Brecht's career is also provided.

References to books and articles in periodicals and newspapers quoted are given in the footnotes, but in some cases titles have been abbreviated: e.g. Ernst Schumacher's massive study *Die dramatischen Versuche Bertolt Brechts 1918-1933* is referred to as 'Schumacher'. Full details of the more important sources used are given in the bibliography at the end of the book.

It is impossible to discuss a major writer without quoting from his works. To have given the quotations in the original German only would have been both pedantic and discourteous to the general reader. Brecht's poetry is peculiarly difficult to translate, but the quotations are nevertheless given in translated form. The translations are my own throughout the book (even in some cases of titles of works, where the existing form does not fully convey the intended meaning). They make no pretence at giving more than a suggestion of the meaning and the mood of the passages in question. Readers who know German are referred to the original; exact references to the passages concerned are provided.

As the book was designed to be a *critical* study of Brecht, and an objective account of his political convictions and the resulting tangled relations with the Communist party and authorities in Eastern Germany, it was impossible to approach his family and collaborators there without running the risk of later involving them in all kinds of embarrassments – and worse. Fortunately this was not necessary, as the whole story can be told by studying the ample material contained in newspapers and publications originating in East Germany and presenting the story in irreproachable 'official' form. Where personal accounts of events have been used, they were never accepted without rigorous cross-checking against the published facts and other independent sources.

For personal reminiscences of Brecht I am greatly indebted to Prof. Alfred Kantorowicz, Mr Ernest Borneman, Mr R. A. Harrison, Mr Melvin J. Lasky, Dr F. Wendhausen, and many others. I am