

INTRODUCTION

Bertolt Brecht's First Play

The fame of Brecht's later plays has been bad for the reputation of his earlier ones, and in combating this phenomenon one is combating some powerful preconceptions. It is assumed, for example, that a major writer steadily improves. Early works are automatically placed in such categories as juvenilia and apprenticeship. Also, the earlier work is judged by criteria suggested by the later. Brecht himself judged his early work by criteria suggested by the later, which compounded the problem and created the cliché. The cliché reads as follows: "The later Brecht was a great man who had found himself in finding a great philosophy. The early Brecht was a confused and misguided young fellow who would never have come to any good—had he not found the great philosophy and, through it, his greater self. In other words, the early work represents the sin from which Marxism redeemed him. The early Brecht is the unregenerate Saul; the late Brecht, the sainted Paul." Now this cliché is the more important because it is taken over—with a little rewording—by many non-Marxists. It can be taken over without misgivings by anyone who is prepared to assume that to go from despair and pessimism to some sort of "positive" philosophy is to become a finer artist.

To protest at this cliché should not be to reverse it. An artist is not confronted with the alternative: progress or regress. Merely development—with ups and downs—is more normal. And that in my view is what the career of Brecht has to show. This, however, must be said on behalf of his early work: that had he died immediately after

writing it, he would in time have been classed with other such youths of amazing poetic genius as Büchner and Rimbaud.

In time. His work, like theirs, could not be assimilated by the contemporary public. It was too original. In any case, the broader public only takes up "unpopular" work on the basis of some misunderstanding. Brecht himself was to become popular through misunderstanding when the German bourgeoisie would take *The Threepenny Opera* to its big clammy bosom in the belief that the philosophy of the piece was summed up in "Erst kommt das Fressen, dann kommt die Moral." If an author cannot be understood, it is important—for his bankbook at least—that he be misunderstood. But *Baal* did not get across in either way. It was intelligible, in the nineteen-twenties, only to persons who themselves had unusual insight into our life and times. In a prologue which Hofmannsthal wrote for the Viennese première in 1926,* the poet put his finger on the very pulse of the play. ". . . all the ominous events of Europe," says one of his spokesmen, "which we have witnessed these last twelve years are nothing but a long drawn out way of laying the weary concept of the European individual in the grave . . ." Oscar Homolka, who played *Baal*, was given this speech by Hofmannsthal: "We are anonymous forces. Psychological possibilities. Individuality is one of the fantastic embellishments which we have stripped from us. You'll see how I'm going to play *Baal*."

We are taught in school about "the end of heroism" in the drama of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The hero of tragedy was replaced by the individual of the nineteenth-century novel and play. Ibsen's work is par excel-

* Hugo von Hofmannsthal wrote a Prologue for the first Viennese performance of the play in 1926. In it the members of the Company played themselves, and so we find parts written for Oscar Homolka, Egon Friedell, Hermann Thimig, and their producer Herbert Waniek. Alfred Schwarz's English version of this Prologue was published in the Brecht Issue of *Tulane Drama Review*, Autumn 1961.

lence the drama of that individual. Yet even here, where the dramatis personae are most individual, individuality is seen as threatened. Failing to be a hero, Master Builder Solness manages to be an individual—but only just, for the threat of complete disintegration is ever-present. In the dream plays of Strindberg the individual is dissolving in mist and mysticism. Instead of personalities there are memories, bits of experience, cross-references, images, names, momentary encounters. In Pirandello's plays of around 1920 the non-existence of the individual is proclaimed. But to sustain the form of a play, Pirandello reverts to the traditional types, a little dressed up in Ibsenish "biography." Hence there is an element of contradiction between the *theory* that there is no such thing as continuity in character, and the presentation, *in practice*, of people who are continuous and of a piece. Yet Pirandello does more than state the idea of discontinuity: he also projects the state of soul of those who believe in this idea, those who feel discontinuous with themselves, the disoriented, the metaphysically as well as neurotically lost: men of the twentieth century.

Baal is neither a Strindbergian dream play, nor a Pirandellian "play in the making." What was in part a theory for the older men is here wholly a practice, a state of being, a fact of life. Few of us did see how Homolka played *Baal*, yet the script itself suggests vividly enough the truth of his remarks. *Baal* is a "stripped" character—is man stripped of character. There is a paradox about the Victorian Man of Character, the Independent Individual of the age of individualism, which is that he was formed by that age and belonged utterly to that society. Conversely, the rejection of the individual that comes with the twentieth century, and especially after World War I, is a rejection of the society around him, and even of society as such. *Baal* is asocial man.

It would be natural enough to call him amoral, and his actions stamp him as what Freud called polymorphous

perverse: sensuality is acceptable to him in itself, and he does not limit himself to the "outlets" which society approves. However, if this were the beginning and end of Baal, the play that bears his name would simply be a tract favoring the noble savage, a return to an innocent paganism. Nothing could be further from the text before us. The image of an innocent paganism is present in it; but is by no means an image of the play as a whole. Baal beholds the innocence, the amorality, of Nature all around us, but he beholds it from a distance and with longing and envy. The *sky* would be an ideal mistress indeed, but how far off it is, how unreachable! Between us and primal innocence stands the world, which includes that very society of men which one would like to reject.

"Screw the world!" Those three syllables sum up a whole school of modern art and thought. Lautréamont had given the idea a homosexual form even earlier:

Oh that the universe were an immense celestial anus!
I would plunge my penis past its bloody sphincter,
rending apart, with my impetuous motion, the very
bones of the pelvis.

The prologue to *Baal* reads:

And that girl the world, who gives herself and giggles
If you only let her crush you with her thighs,
Shared with Baal, who loved it, orgiastic wriggles.
But he did not die. He looked her in the eyes.

No innocent enjoyment of beautiful Nature here! If Lautréamont is sadistic. Brecht is coolly defiant. He looks "that girl" in the eyes. How much lies behind such a look! How much pain and despair, how much living!

Though all drama tends to be about guilt, one might expect that a drama without individuals, without respect for society—a drama without ego or superego, one might be tempted to put it—would be an exception, would be "beyond guilt." One has read here and there that to give

up the individual is to give up the whole notion of responsibility. But it is not so, unless one is uttering a tautology, namely, that to give up the individual is to give up *individual* responsibility. Responsibility and guilt remain, and only seem the more unwieldy, the more oppressive, for not being neatly tied to this person and that action.

Brecht does make Baal seem cut off from the meaning of his own actions: from his killing of Ekart and his virtual killing of Johanna Reiher. Only with difficulty, looking back on the play, can one say to oneself: *it is a play about a murderer*. And yet by any humane standard murder is only one among Baal's several offenses and amid his consistent offensiveness. The immediate reason for this difficulty is to be found in Brecht's special perspective. He lends Baal a quality of innocence, but it is an innocence on the other side of guilt. Our minds, which are used to thinking here of a duality (guilt-innocence), have to stretch themselves a little to think in terms of three instead of two: innocence¹, guilt, and innocence². This innocence² is the subject of much of Brecht's writing in this period. It could even be said that around 1919-1921 his favorite subject was the innocence that can accrue to extremely vicious, even extremely criminal, people. It is as if one were to speak of regained innocence in an old whore.

Dostoevsky, it could be added, does speak of such innocence. It is even inherent in Christianity, and was written out once for all in the New Testament story of Mary Magdalene. But Brecht's second innocence has no such authority behind it. It has no one's blessing except his own. It carries no "fringe benefits" in this world or the next. It is not a state of beatitude that endures, or that presages endurance. It is no more than a poet's feeling, an inspired hunch, a momentary dream, "just a thought": hence its peculiar pathos. If it holds out a hope, it is a hope neither of utopia here nor heaven there; it says merely that a life could be conceived of—at moments—that is not quite so bad.

träumt er gelegentlich von einer kleinen Wiese mit blauem Himmel drüber und sonst nichts.

There is a dream of celestial bliss in Brecht's early work but it has the character of an ephemeral image, something that crosses the line of spiritual vision and is gone, a small loveliness sandwiched in between huge horrors. (Thus too, in a not so early work, the super-subtle lyric "Die Lieben- den" is inserted in the story of *Mahagonny* between copulations that are paid for.) Insofar as Dostoevsky managed to believe in a real heaven, he could see it as transcending and swallowing up all that is unheavenly, even as eternity swallows up time. In Brecht it is hell—hell on earth—that is eternal, heaven that is swallowed up. The pathos of unbelief is pervasive in Brecht's life-work. It is his personal pathos, but is cogent and significant because it is also the characteristic pathos of the whole epoch.

For in the modern era, from Kierkegaard to Graham Greene, even the believers are not sure they really believe, they are only sure that they should. They are only able—like Brecht when later he came to "believe" in Communism—to "commit" themselves to a belief, i.e., take the consequences of joining the ranks of the faithful even though their faith is not really felt. Hence, *Baal* is genuine and solid whereas the Brecht plays that affirm Communism are, in that affirmation, spurious and factitious. *Baal* conveys the actual *Weltgefühl* of Bertolt Brecht throughout his career. A play like *Die Mutter* articulates the *Weltanschauung* which he agreed to commit himself to in the hope that a better *Welt* might come out of it after which the original *Weltgefühl* would change by itself. Even if this plan had all worked out, it would not make *Die Mutter* a better work of art than *Baal*; just the contrary. If all Brecht's later plays had been on the pattern of *Die Mutter*, his later works would simply have proved inferior to the earlier.

Brecht's "heaven" is momentary, and does not redeem: the guilt remains. And the guilt is all the greater for not

being only a guilt for specific offenses. When the individual disappears, what is left is the race. And the race is seen by Brecht as burdened with a primal curse—that which caused the Greeks to repeat that "not to be born is the best for man," and the Christians to formulate a doctrine of "original sin." If, at moments, we think that Brecht takes *Baal's* crimes too lightly—murder after all is murder—we quickly realize that in saying "Baal is no worse than the rest of us" he is not taking a high view of Baal but a low view of the rest of us. He is saying we are ourselves no better than murderers. We may even be worse than Baal, in that we may have missed the romance with the sky and the dream of the little meadow. We may be Baal minus the poetry.

And—what is partly the same thing—minus the pleasure. For though *Baal's* pleasures are ultimately poisoned by guilt and ended by aggression, they were not impure at the source. On the contrary, the search for pleasure is the one truly affirmative element in the play, and the reason why the poetry of the play retains a directly and even innocuously romantic aura. *Baal* really was seeking

Immer das Land wo es besser zu leben ist.

More than thirty years later, Brecht was to take a look back at this play and speak of the love of pleasure, the search for happiness, as its subject. The comment is to be taken the more seriously in that *Baal* is, in all other respects, so unacceptable to the later Brecht. But the human longing for happiness "which cannot be killed" (as he put it) was a theme he was ready to pursue at all times. He reports that he tried to pick up the thread of *Baal* twenty years afterward in an opera libretto about a Chinese god of happiness. (True, he had come by then to believe that Russia was the "Land wo es besser zu leben ist" and that "Das Glück ist: der Kommunismus." With the early Brecht, it is as if he were striving to break through to a hedonism as radical as that of Herbert Marcuse or Norman

O. Brown. That guilt and anxiety blocked this path may, in one respect, have been fortunate: he was a dramatist—conflict was his raw material.)

In the fact that Baal is respected by Brecht as pleasure-seeker (though some readers may come to the play with an unfortunate puritanic prejudice) lies part of the reason that he is not pure villain. Walter Sokel has written of him eloquently as a parody of those Expressionistic heroes whose life was a sacred mission. But since Brecht considered the Expressionist missions spurious, he makes Baal's "mission" genuine. Baal is an ambiguous, ambivalent figure: part monster, but partly, too, the martyr of a poetic hedonism. And the positive element is more prominent than the negative because it is Baal's special contribution—his monstrosity he has in common with a monstrous world. (Later, the peculiar acidity of *The Threepenny Opera* would come from the implied proposition: "We on stage may be little crooks; but many of you out front are big ones.")

Yet if in the figure of Baal the more sympathetic element prevails over the less, in the play of *Baal* the poetry of life is overwhelmed by the prose, the beauty by the horror. If, as I believe, a good play amounts finally to a particular vision of life seen as a whole, then this play is a vision of life as an inferno, and the occasional faint gleam of beauty only makes the ugliness look more intensely black. Baal will let no one persuade him he has lost all chance of pleasure. But self is something he lost so long ago, its discovery is never on the cards. One might better put it that he never had a self. Whereas in Ibsen the self is threatened, and in Pirandello it is *said* not to exist, in Brecht both the Ibsenite self and the Pirandellian discussion are so far in the past they are totally forgotten. There remains the horror: Robert Lowell's "horror of the lost self." And this horror belongs even more to the play than to the protagonist.

"We possess nothing in the world—a mere chance can

strip us of everything—except the power to say I." So said Simone Weil. What then can a poet say for whom there is no I to affirm? "Nada y pues nada y nada y pues nada. Our nada, who are in nada, nada be thy name..." From Hemingway, in this famous passage published in 1933, to Samuel Beckett in the nineteen-fifties with his "nothing is more real than nothing," contemporary poets and poet-novelists and poet-dramatists have found themselves confronted and surrounded by nothingness. Brecht found himself in this situation in 1918 at the frighteningly youthful age of nineteen or twenty: "Das Schönste ist das Nichts." Googoo says this in the thirteenth scene of *Baal*. Brecht says it in every scene of *Baal*. Man, here, is alienated from the others and from himself, to the degree that both others and self may be said to non-exist, to be nothing. This idea—better, this sentiment, this lacerating conviction—gives a new poignancy to the old "ashes to ashes, dust to dust." If death, on the one hand, is an ironic ending to pleasure and beauty, it is, on the other, a direct, unironic continuation of the universal nothingness, the omnipresent death-in-life.

Baal is about nothingness. By that token it is also about death. Brecht might well have taken yet another idea from the playwright who most influenced him, Büchner, and called his play *Baal's Death*. The mythic Baal was a fertility god, hence a god of life. This mythological (i.e., unpsychological) drama presents the archetypal battle of life and death, Eros and Thanatos. Traditionally such a story would follow the pattern of rebirth: death followed by resurrection. Brecht who was always to parody the traditional patterns is doing so already in his first play where death is followed by . . . death.

Some readers have found the play formless. What it finally achieves in the way of organic form must perhaps remain a matter of opinion but analysis will demonstrate at least that there is some very deliberate patterning here. For example, *Baal* is the play in which the protagonist

dies three times—in three ways that are poetically diversified. First, he dies as “Teddy,” and speaks his own funeral oration (as Galy Gay is to do in *A Man's A Man*). Second, he relates his own death in the poem, “Death in the Forest.” Third, there is his actual death scene, with which the play ends. The identity of the three deaths is clearly established by the identical forest setting and the identical cruel attitude of the dying one's fellow men. (“The coldness of the forests will be with me to my dying day,” Brecht said in a famous poem; and he could have said the same of the coldness of those who are in attendance at the dying day—one thinks forward to the death of Swiss Cheese and, for that matter, the death of Brecht's Jesus in his “Song of the Hours.”) Perhaps the whole play was planned as a kind of air and variations on the theme of dying. The drowning of Johanna is less an action than a leitmotif.

A final word on the Baal myth and Brecht's attitude to it. A writer from Augsburg, Brecht's native town, describes the poet's room at the time that he wrote Baal:

. . . over the bed [was] a life-size picture of his idol Baal, that Semitic-Phoenician deity of insatiability which Christianity had declared the principle of evil. . . . Caspar Neher had drawn it in the then current style of Masereel after Brecht's model, a male vamp named K. from Pfersee near Augsburg.

—Max Högel, *Bertolt Brecht, ein Porträt*

And this is probably to place the emphasis correctly: what would interest Brecht is that Baal was the enemy of the Christian-Judaic, puritanic, ascetic tradition. Perhaps he knew, too, that in the Canaanite *Poem of Baal* this god had an enemy, Môt, “the god,” as Theodore Gaster says, “of all that lacks life and vitality”; the very name Môt means death. Standing for fertility, Baal was also the god of rainfall, and the association of fertility with

rain is something Brecht would remember when he created his comic fertility god—the Bloody Five of *A Man's A Man*.

Gaster's book *Thespis* reports many things which it is tempting to connect with Brecht's play, such as that the god Baal copulated with a calf, that “Baal's enveloping robe is . . . identified with the sky,” and that, at his death, Baal “fell into the earth.” In relation to the recurrent image of a corpse floating down a river, it is startling to read in Gaster that the motif is common in the folklore of Brecht's part of the world:

In many of the seasonal mummeries representing the rout of the Dragon, or the expulsion of Death, Blight, or Winter, he is *flung into the water*. Thus, at Nuremberg, the traditional song specified that “we bear Death into the water” At Tabor, Bohemia, it was said that “Death floats down the stream” . . . and at Bielsk, Podlachia, the effigy was drowned in a marsh or pond. . . . In Chrudim, Bohemia, Death was flung into the water on “Black Sunday” . . . [One of Brecht's early poems refers to Black Saturday] . . . In Silesia, children used to throw the effigy of Death into the river . . . while at Leipzig this was done by the local prostitutes and bastards. . . .

There is enough here to guarantee that Brecht's *Baal* will sooner or later be interpreted wholly in terms of myth and ritual. Such interpretations will be unbalanced—but less unbalanced than those that try to make sense of *Baal* on the lines of what was conventional drama in 1918.

Historians have shown that, in *Baal*, Brecht was mocking the Expressionists. Specifically, he sought to debunk Hanns Johst's image of the poet as ecstatic visionary amid the wicked materialism of the surrounding world. In effect, though, the young Brecht had taken on a much

larger antagonist than any Expressionist playwright. He had made a *tabula rasa* of the modern drama as a whole and on that bare surface had erected a primitive and already sturdy structure of his own. For better or for worse, a new era in dramatic art dates from this play.

—E.B.
September, 1963

THE MODEL FOR BAAL

The dramatic biography *Baal* deals with the life of a man who actually existed. He was a certain Josef K. I heard stories about him from people who could distinctly remember not only him personally but also the sensation he created at the time. K. was the natural child of a washerwoman. He got himself a bad reputation quite early. Without any sort of education, he is supposed to have been capable of captivating even truly educated people with his astonishingly well-informed conversation. My friend told me he had made such an impression on a whole succession of fine young people with his incomparable deportment (his way of taking a cigarette, sitting down on a chair, and so on) that they took to imitating him. And yet he sank ever deeper through his heedless way of living, especially because—without ever taking the initiative—he shamelessly exploited every possibility that offered. Various shady episodes—the suicide of a young girl, for example—were laid to his account. He was a skillful mechanic but, so far as we know, never worked. When A. became too hot for him, he wandered rather far and wide with a medical student who'd seen better days, but then came back, in about 1911, to A. There this friend was stabbed to death in a tavern on the Lauterlech, almost certainly by K. himself. Anyhow, he forthwith fled and disappeared from A. and is supposed to have died miserably in the Black Forest.

—B.B., 1926