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BRECHTIAN V-EFFECT UPDATED:
Implications for Poetic Praxis

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If we want to question the continuing viability of Modernism, to ask what use we can make of its heritage in our contemporary poetics, we notice right away its commitment to distancing and reflexivity, to artifice and newness. We also notice an aestheticizing that removes its texts from any political embrace, and a frequent worship of the lyric self-centered expressive subject (one of the most antisocial impulses in the modernist pantheon).

Here, Bertolt Brecht's V-Effect, and the epic theater it serves, stands for a social modernism, to visibly connect what happens on stage (or on the page) to the forms of making sense that operate within society (or class struggle) at large. "It is not a matter of 'getting acquainted with the poet' but of getting acquainted with the world, and with the people in whose company he is trying to enjoy it and alter it" [BP 663]. The V-Effect, the *Verfremdungseffekt*, involves devices for social estrangement — not just the aesthetic autonomy that the Russian Formalist version of making strange emphasizes. Brecht suggests a less formalist, more political brand of defamiliarization. Not to lay bare the literary device, but to help lay bare the devices by which a social order holds itself together. Not to alienate — as in the bad translation, the "A-effect" or "Alienation Effect" — but to disalienate, to immerse us in social explanation and social prescription. To facilitate radical praxis.

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“What!” [BT 97].

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First, let’s look at what the V-Effect opposes, its negative magnetic charge — and then see how it might direct a socially engaged poetics today.

First would be the Natural, the Obvious — as both theatrical characters and norms get naturalized or made invisible. In Reading, this includes our customary reliance on a fixed subject’s speech. Doesn’t an author’s centrality become our natural or perfectly everyday focus, taken-for-granted, self-evident? Look how quick we are to take that author voice — a comforting mimetic armature of intonation and atmosphere — as natural, “far too natural for anyone to pause and go into it thoroughly” [BM 23]. As if this one subject needs no explanation, and readers need see no further than the lyric packaging. Ignoring its “rehearsals,” removing all traces of how subjectivity is produced. And so the reader is kept from adopting a quizzical attitude by this protective stamp of familiarity. The social order, built up out of similar protective mechanisms, is saved from attack.

V-Effect: questions smuggled in against the natural, to bring the fixed and the familiar into crisis. The Anti-Obvious: the stereotype treated as “the never-before-known” [B] 328], the normal as something artificial or socially posed. Like a semiotics of language might suggest, its estrangements interrogate any naturalizing of the sign, any counter-explanation the obvious imposes. To make taken-for-granted behavior incomprehensible, to give it “a kind of fame” or exceptionalism, but “only in order that it may then be made all the easier to comprehend” [BT 201, 143–4]. “Spectator and actor ought not to approach one another but to move apart. Each ought to move away from himself. Otherwise the element of terror necessary to all recognition is lacking” [BT 261]. Yet this dishevelment is less generic, more social and particularized. “The object of this ‘effect’ is to allow the spectator to criticize constructively from a social point of view” [BT 125]. To disenchant lies (and names) and the ways that lies (and names) are socially built. It makes something special out of the ordinary menu choices of discourse and ideology as well as of the basic (or generic) shape

of the sign. To resignify norms. To lacerate a social givenness. To lay bare the framing devices that society uses (for purposes of secrecy, of hiding itself in the everyday). To create a social noise, an “ideology-busting.” To explain: “disbelief can move mountains” [BT 189]. So that a V-Effect counteracts the self-evident; it gets “resolved into its components . . . and turned into a new form of the evident” [BJ 82]. To be explained again and again; as incessant experiment and learning — “a certain form of learning is the most important pleasure of our age” [BJ 392] — as weapons in “a revolutionary pedagogic theatre” [BL 228].

Brecht’s V-Effect works against illusion and immediacy, against the text’s repression of any self-awareness of its status as artifice, as staging. This pits it against the givens of transparency or any direct conduit of unmediated imagery (especially when the image upholsters an easy [or occult/auratic] readability by having its mood intensified “until its physical character disappears completely” [BJ 222] and change seems impossible). It works against an atmospherics of inevitability, the elegantly directive surfaces that take their fetishistic course, papering over their contradictions. Fate — history disappears; whatever happens, happens: “they only ever play the last act of anything” [BJ 120]. Textual fate (as reification): the rigid patterning of particulars by formal structure — (or sing-songy repetition).

To oppose this, make everything open to change (and violation). A V-Effect poetics would stage a public exhibition of the materiality of language, crossbreeding a disobedient emphasis on “the word as such” with a historicizing “take” on language as a whole. To show language (like the subject) dialectically operating as process, the sociolect as an alterable construction, mistakes and all. To deactivate any sense of predetermination, so that “an imposed schema is being broken up here” [BJ 82]. Writing designed to make strange, to expose the machinery and mediations of meaning, without burying their traces or sidestepping contradiction. To recast discursive language as opposing rejoinders and responses; to headlight the physical reminders of the conflicts that keep the social material from being frozen. This is the reading-shock of montage, the jamming together of dissimilars, flaunting its artifice, sparking an “anticipatory illumination.” “Contradictions are our hope” [BT 47]. But the force behind contradiction is social; aesthetic form alone is not a sufficient motor.

And this affects the time horizon. Here the V-Effect resists a through-line to keep particulars from blurring together pseudo-organically or gaining their meaning at the end, retroactively, as the lock clicks shut. Any smooth frictionless unity risks being anaesthesia or triumphalist, quarantining the reader from a socially engaged, or socially alerted vantage. Continuity makes for passivity and illusion, getting help from any sustained or overall metonymy, from words tied to author expression slithering imperceptibly into one another. The familiar showcasing of succession and wholeness — the invisible indivisible — is open to question; and along with it: modernism's antisocial face.

Instead, one of the V-Effect's hallmarks is discontinuity — a more fragmented, interruptive, or cubist montage that keeps illusion from "taking." The callback is for a broken choreography of curves and jumps, to discontinue, by fits and starts, each scene demonstrating its own independent identity, or jolt, the autonomy of its parts outranking the whole, cut up into its atomic or episodic elements and relations that remain self-contained, "fully capable of life" [BT 70, BM 75]. An anthology: to let "the piling up of resistances," the leveraging of the tensions of the parts against one another, help rehearse the individual units, to perform their contradictory (and often noising, clashing) semantic charges or "social tone" [BT 46, 116]. All to differentiate, to space out the particulars, to perforate an overall seamless whole (or an illegible dense overlay), just as Brecht wants actors to interrupt, not bunch up together, centerstage. Instead, like the individual media of a production, words are separated out for their own sake, orchestrated spatially, like directors might block a scene. To let readers repunctuate and judge, interposing their constructivist response. Separation comes first, to nominalize or autonomize, so that relationships stand out clearly — "the individual episodes have to be knotted together in such a way that the knots are easily noticed" [BT 201] — and then various reconnections are possible. (Brecht even talks about bringing in to playwriting the interruptive habits of footnoting, of ranging back and forth over a text to check a point — as a return, not a repetition.) By letting the social implications or social "attitudes" of the language work their magnetism, to let separate elements take on a freedom of calculation and a critical stance toward their content, by mapping their relationships and mutual interruptions, building them from the bottom up, inductively, no longer held hostage to some overall unifying form or naming, we get an "informalist" praxis.

And a constructivist one. The illusion Brecht most gleefully attacks is the so-called fourth wall: as if actors on a proscenium stage, going over wholly into their roles, were not operating before a visible audience. The literary rough equivalent: authors adopting an intimate, confidential kind of speech (or scenic picture-making) that readers could just peer at through the keyhole, in a surrogate voyeurism. The author, alone with her own sincerity on the stage/page, is willingly peep-holed or bugged — to create the illusion that we merely overhear her unselfconsciously “behaving,” that she’s under remote-control surveillance without it affecting her testimony — as if through a transparent textual “fourth wall” (or as if even intimate direct address were a textual “fourth wall” of concealment for social discourse).

Brecht wants to smash the fourth wall. To reshow the show, to point up the performative, rather than constative, quality of what’s on stage. To treat what is said as “really” only what is supposed to have been said [BJ 409] — as parable or proverbial. To spoil the illusion of transparent representation. For poetics, the lesson is to reperform or citationally redeploy its pieces, to bring out their multiplicity or arbitrariness, separating the author/subject from the range of social sense — and to invite criticism of both. To make it seem as though social material (the determining factors behind statements and voices) could have been different, could have been not this, but something else, to highlight at all points the decisions implied, the rehearsals, the counter-examples which might have been. Available alternatives are what estrange or dialecticize, showing echoes or palimpsestic traces of possibility and conflict, of what’s almost, what anticipates. A status quo open to change — if the reader sees how alterable matters are because of these contradictions built into them, because of the excesses they make possible. Show the alternatives, “to encourage the audience to keep their heads” [BM 62]. To inventory, to operate legislatively, to cast their ballots, especially enjoying the creative transformations imaginable: “it is the difference between ‘mirroring’ and ‘holding up a mirror’” [BJ 91]. The ability to anticipate an alternative; the laboratory conditions; the pleasures of liberation.

The spectator as victim would be a byproduct of the identification and empathy the actors on stage solicit. They identify with the characters they perform and encourage the spectator to identify with them, and therefore with the destiny of the protagonists — “a simultaneous act of autosuggestion and suggestion,” appealing to portable emotions in “the

emotions racket” [BJ 126, BL 228]. Something similar may happen in poetry — where identification is supposed to reveal the relational states that chart our own possible desires and personhood. But look how confining this is! Reading gets forced through this conduit, ensnared by the stickiness of this simulation, this combination mirror and filtering device that keeps us from seeing any further. The emotions conjured up are vicarious stand-ins, making for some phony sense of “the natural,” of automatic transference or catharsis, of some “we” shared suggestively between the reader and the author’s interior monologues, with their stagey spontaneity. Here, “the casual nexus is obscured” [BJ 222] since events and social tensions have to first show up on the internal radar screen of the author/protagonist; the objective has to be subjectified. But the sympathetic assurances, the resulting feelings of mastery, are bogus.

The V-Effect gives us something more startling and realistic — “Realist means: laying bare society’s causal network” [BT 109]. To make society fess up, to expose its laws of cause and effect, its social rule-governedness — not to listen to the exculpatory confessions of the author as they solicit empathy. To break the spell. To have the writer astonish herself, estrange herself from persona and character — the waste-products of the socially conditioned material being worked on. So if identification happens, it’s an identification with the diegetic distance that the writer marks off from character or persona, a distance designed “to create interest in its fathomability” [BM 43]. We take up a more demythologizing scientific stance, to find probative value in whatever’s denaturalized, to show the social strings being pulled. So that the readers won’t just be manipulated to follow some pre-set message — often a problem with didactic political art. Instead they’ll be empowered as social interpreters or co-authors: “no identification, no empathy, no going along. On the contrary: criticize, risk predictions, shake your head” [BL 199]. Here, “the theatre gets a viewer who produces the world” [BJ 110] — and maybe the future.

One advantage: the break away from any antisocial (or non-site-specific) notion of the subject and the credibility of its cognitive claims — from the lyric tradition’s dwelling on insulated decontextualized private experience. Screening in: a raft of humanist generalities that cling to the “overheard” privacy of the subject’s inwardness. Screening out: the particular external sources of its socially rule-governed action.

A V-Effect helps keep us from identifying directly with the dramatic protagonist or author — that expressive simulacrum. To shock to show how much the protagonist's path follows social norms, lacks autonomy. In both his actor training and play construction, Brecht tries to bring out what is socially operative, what language can do to work out social relationships mimetically and gesturally. He emphasizes its *gestus* (usually translated by the English word *gest*, a person's customary "bearing," a "combination of gesture and attitude" [BM 46, translator's note]). The *gest* is not something generic or insulated from social force-fields. It's referential raw material, something that can be socially weighted, not deparicularized but "socially set" [BJ 83]. Instead of being designed to show off some internal psychology, it highlights the socially customized lacework that exists between the characters (or the characterful words and phrases). To demonstrate a "sociological motivation and sociological characterization" [BL 317] and measure them as they get physicalized in bearing and stance. To show their socially typical side, the responses or practical action they might call for. To tease out a prescription from the explanations implied. To "formulate the incident for society" [BT 140]. You're enclosing these social attitudes in a frame, to implicate the workings of a larger social situation: "the social *gest* is the *gest* relevant to society, the *gest* that allows conclusions to be drawn about the social circumstances . . . about the entire structure of a society at a particular (transient) time" [BT 104–5, 98]. Discursive orders, the system of the sign, would both be worked over — as individual phrases (or potential phrases ghosted by individual words) are empowered to broadcast a social stance and attitude of their own. Tableau-like, framing at a standstill: to interrupt or objectify the separate units to set off the larger contradictions.

Highlighting social gesture cuts against one modernist cliché: that of idealizing the author as a site of unique mastery. It refuses to celebrate the voracious "I," the uniquely individual lyric voice, with its usual self-centered (not language-centered) expressive modes: the capitalizing of the first person singular; the enshrining of personal tone; the hazardless self standing for nothing for itself; to engineer the fetish of personality; the "getting acquainted" edifice of psychological portraiture helping readers "more to shine your little egos up" [Ben Hecht's verse, BJ 195].

A counterpoetics would swerve in the opposite direction. "Today, when the human being has to be seen as 'the sum of all social circumstances' the epic form is the only one

that can embrace these processes which serve the drama as matter for a comprehensive picture of the world” [BT 46]. Stop psychologizing — so that collective or institutional patterns of meaning-making can get implicated by social montage. When you twist and turn an entire system of language, its semiotic base and its layers of discourse, the estrangement is a seismology, a testing of social conditions — their contours directly affecting the details of composition. Not just keeping things fixed on the author as a single individual: that’s what forces all the intensive intertextual work to be squeezed through its filter or risk getting the intertext lost in its subjectifying circuitry. Instead of glamorizing the attitudes of the author, you’re more consciously orchestrating the independent aptitudes of the words and phrases: their semantics, acoustics, tone. Intertextuality rules. Multiple viewpoints in fluctuating focus. Using these social raw materials can make for a differentiation that starts to take apart the centrality (and compass) of the author. Subject and voice appear less like guaranteed signatures than a jewel-box of discourse and multiplicity where the reader can position herself amidst the raw materials, “ranging [her]self with the determining factors” [BT 60]. “Motto: I saw it!” [BL 199].

In writing and reading, one of the big exhibits of a less politicized modernism is the autoregulating subject. Self-responding, adept at glossing over differences, shaving away otherness. Rather than being “brought up short,” it is plied with prosthetic sensations to compensate for never being given a larger enough vantage to take on general tasks [BT 35]. We end up not appreciating how discontinuous and diverse the social text really is, our attention limited to whatever can assure the reader some lessons in autonomy — “as though the individual had not simply collapsed long ago” [BT 46]. Solipsism — with self-disciplinary hand-mirrors.

A “V-poetics” alternative embraces Brecht’s anti-subjectivism: to bring forward the (at least) call-response (and possibly echo-chamber) quality of the subject’s formation, the (at least) dialogic nature of an implicit contract between reading and writing. Not command or hypnosis, but a kaleidoscoping of point of view; an examination, anti-noun not pronoun. (Which reminds us of a problem with irony: it still confines us to point of view, to personalized attitude.) Here, beyond any direct conversation between I and I, is polyphony, a mass circuitry. Otherness is inside — or Moebius-like. And the decentered reader uncovers meanings that are tellingly social — like the quotation, like the archive inventory,

like the anthology — and especially symptomatic of the way subjects get formed. It spotlights common speech, its sources and explanation. Outside the stagey psychological “tall tale” of self-made personalism, we find a social allegorizing going on. Because discursive identities are built up out of contradictory pushes and pulls. “The continuity of the ego is a myth” [BT 15]. Not self-identical, but split, relativized; it takes shape within a chainwork of substitutions, like the linguistic system. It’s best to play it in the third person, in the past, in quotation marks. We negotiate difference intersubjectively, just as we get socialized by being inserted into social phrases: here’s a process that this V-Effect is allegorizing. To spotlight the contingency of the social person — with the “higher type of interest [that] can be got from . . . whatever is . . . impossible to take in as a whole” [BT 9] — we counteract a totalizing of identity. (And yet this calls for one more caution. Confronting a wide range of diverse social material can risk becoming a reassuring prop, as the preening reader gets puffed up with the heroism of a “wide-ranging,” cosmopolitan author. And so that identification must be treated with suspicion too — by a more performative process.)

Brecht calls for social troublemaking. After all, too often identification is a seduction, consenting to directives issued from systems of meaning that get socially enforced and put us “at ease” (in the military sense). “Forced conformity . . . All must move as one” [B] 462]. The social appears as a colonizing apparatus, where our choices are often just programming effects or test results, in which subjects are disciplinarily fitted into slots. Pokes in our face: social order, that’s us; this is an aggressive interpellation that society carries out on us. And traditional reading threatens the same absorption. Illusion makes us feel that there’s some preestablished fit to our being socialized, some lack of force, some innocence or affinity. The message: no need to resist. But no, more often this is a contagion, a reterritorializing or suturing on behalf of a status quo — in which the individual (reader) stands front and center, with all the stipulated mimicry of a voice-over, a lap-dummy ventriloquism, wearing down the capacity for resistance or movement forward.

What about a Disalienation Effect? A disabusement? Because, for Brecht, we can reframe these conditions. “Criticism of society is ultimately revolution” [BT 146]. And pleasure. Stage the intricate textual hard work, but on the discursive (and not just semiotic) raw material out of which the social is built. To challenge what Brecht calls “inplotation” —

“calls for a kind of resistance by the listener, and for his mobilization and redrafting as a producer” [BT 32]. To front the chunks of language in their own presence — their own social radiation — and at the same time to show the layer of other choices which lay hidden (or partially disappeared) underneath. The speeches are quoted; the figures trying out their parts; the choices eccentrically precise, farflung; the machinery and machination very visible. The norms that we’re operating inside of have to be shaken up, inside — with “productive stimuli” [BT 272], to show us how much the language (and contextually appropriate language) could be altered under different circumstances [BM 43]. First, to inform the reader (the glint of the critical light cast on things), then to let the reader become available for collective activity, for carrying a politicized productivity forward. “In future . . . conditions will no longer be stipulated; there will only be requests” [BL 491]. Not to lose all your bearings within total flux or nonreferential opacity. Not to reify the confining norms by offering up attracting subject positions, but to survey how much space is left for subjective freedom and self-determination. To imagine an end to the hostage situation, to experiment with what it’s like to be free from these prevailing networks of sense. Reading retrained as solidarity: to de-reify, to energize into decision-making, to deprogram rather than to internalize. The spectator “has again and again to make what we might call hypothetical adjustments to our structure, by mentally switching off the motive force of our society or by substituting others for them” [BT 191]. Making the impositions seem provisional, incomplete — “treating society as if all its actions were performed as experiments” [BT 195, 205]. Readership: an allegorizing, negotiating otherness, tracking the words separated out on their different planes of significance and then variously piecing them back together. Dialectics rewrites the social contract — for the reader, at least. Framing as Productivity tilted toward an unforeseeable future. Critique, disillusion; free discussion, part of great production, as Enjoyment [BJ 136, BL 411]. Laughter as the final stage (of three: Position, Opposition, Composition), as Negation of the Negation, “laughing at what is strange” [BL 297, BJ 430]. The pro-social — as [BJ 207] “the basic mood of this kind of theatre . . . the gest of beginning, the enthusiasm for a new millennium, the passion for research, the wish to unleash everybody’s creativity.”

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Bertolt Brecht, Works Cited

BJ Journals 1934–1955

BL Letters 1913–1956

BM The Messingkauf Dialogues

BP Poems 1913–1956

BT Brecht on Theatre