

WALTER BENJAMIN "THE AUTHOR AS PRODUCER" (1934)

Referring to Plato's desire to banish poets from his ideal state, Benjamin begins his address (at the Institute for the Study of Fascism in Paris) by addressing the "question of the poet's right to exist" (220). This is really a question concerning his "autonomy, . . . his freedom to write whatever he pleases" (220). For the "more advanced type of writer" (220), he argues, such autonomy is an illusion in that his "activity is now decided by what is useful to the proletariat in the class struggle" (220).

However, for Benjamin, a possible tension arises between demanding the "correct political line . . . of the poet" (221) and expecting "his work to have quality" (221) of a literary nature. The "connection can be asserted dogmatically" (221): you can declare that a "work that shows the correct political tendency need show no other quality" (221). Benjamin's view, however, is that a

literary work can only be politically correct if it is also literarily correct.

That is to say, the politically correct tendency includes a literary tendency. . . . [T]his literary tendency, which is implicitly or explicitly contained in every *correct* political tendency of a work includes its literary quality *because* it includes its literary *tendency*. (221)

His thesis is that a "work that exhibits the correct tendency must of necessity have every other quality" (221).

Discussing the "relationship between tendency and quality in literature (221) is, in Benjamin's view, another way of discussing what in other circles is called the "relationship between form and content" (221). The "dialectical approach to this question" (222), Benjamin argues, "has absolutely no use for such rigid isolated things as work, novel, book. It has to insert them into the living social context" (222). Given that social conditions are "determined by conditions of production" (222), the customary way in which a "work was criticised from a materialist point of view . . . was to ask how this work stood vis-a-vis the social relations of production of its time" (222), that is, "what is the *attitude* of a work to the relations of production of its time" (222). Questions arise of the following sort: "Does it accept them, is it reactionary – or does it aim at overthrowing them, is it revolutionary?" (222). Benjamin wants to ask, however, the more important question: "What is its *position* in them? This question directly concerns the function the work has within the literary relations of production of its time. It is concerned, in other words, directly with the literary *technique* of works" (222). By 'technique,' Benjamin intends the "concept that makes literary products directly accessible to a social, and therefore a materialist analysis" (222). It is the "dialectical starting point from which the unfruitful antithesis of form and content can be surpassed" (222) and indicates the "correct determination of the relation between tendency and quality" (223). The literary tendency included in the "correct political tendency of a work" (223), he argues, consists "either in progress or in regression in literary technique" (223). What Benjamin seems to have in mind in all this is in how the formal aspects of a literary work are the function of the social relations of production and, consequently, how the former change as a result of changes in the latter.

Benjamin then turns his attention to providing a concrete illustration of all this: the Russian writer Sergei Tretiakov who was a good example of what he calls an "'operating' writer" (223), as opposed to merely an "informing writer" (223). The former's mission is "not to report but to struggle, not to play the spectator but to intervene actively" (223). The kinds of proselytising, not solely literary, activities in which he engaged might prompt one to argue that these are the actions of the journalist or propagandist, but Benjamin contends that what this demonstrates is how comprehensive is the horizon within which we have to rethink our conceptions of literary forms or genres, in view of the technical factors affecting our present situation, if we are to identify the forms of energy that channel the literary energies of the present. There were not always

novels in the past, and there will not always have to be; not always tragedies, not always great epics. . . . All this to accustom you to the thought that we are in the midst of a mighty recasting of literary forms, a melting down in which many of the opposites in which we have been used to think may lose their force. (224)

This is especially evident in the case of the newspaper (he seems to have in mind in particular the press in the Soviet Union) where the boundaries between "science and belles lettres, criticism and production, education and politics" (224) become blurred. The organisation of its "subject-matter" (224) is dictated, he argues, by the reader to whose interests the publisher caters by "constantly opening new columns to his questions, opinions, protests" (225). Readers are elevated in this way to the level of "collaborators" (225), revealing a "dialectic moment" (225): the "decline of writing in the bourgeois press proves to be the formula for its revival in that of the Soviet Union. For as writing gains in breadth what it loses in depth, the conventional distinction between author and public, which is upheld by the bourgeois press, begins in the Soviet press to disappear" (225). It is here that "one recognises that the mighty process of recasting . . . not only affects the conventional distinction between genres, between writer and poet, between scholar and populariser, but also revises even the distinction between author and reader" (225).

Because the press in Western Europe still "belongs to capital" (225), the "writer's understanding of his dependent position, his technical possibilities, and his political task" (226) is weak. In Germany in particular, many "so-called left-wing" (226) intellectuals (Benjamin has in mind two groups, Activism and New Matter-of-factness) have "passed through a revolutionary development in their attitudes, without being able to simultaneously to rethink their own work, their relation to the means of production, their technique, in a really revolutionary way" (226). This is because the "concept of the intellectual" (226) has been formulated in these quarters "without any regard for the position of the intellectuals in the process of production" (226). Intellectuals such as these are ignorant of their position in the social relations of production, that is, the class structure, and thus can do little to effect substantial change. For Benjamin, quite simply, the role of the intellectual is not that of "ideological patron" (228). Rather, the "place of the intellectual in the class struggle can be identified . . . only on the basis of his position in the process of production" (228). The "progressive intelligentsia" (228) is "one interested in freeing the means of production and serving the class struggle" (228). Brecht's term for the "transformation of the forms and instruments of production" (228) is the German term 'umfunktionierung' (228) or "functional transformation" (228). Intellectuals must not "supply the apparatus of production without . . . changing it in accordance with socialism" (228). Benjamin points out that much of the "bourgeois apparatus of production and publication can assimilate astonishing quantities of revolutionary themes, indeed, can propagate them without calling its own existence, and the existence of the class that owns it, seriously into question" (229). A good example of this occurs in the area of photography which "has succeeded in transforming even abject poverty, by recording it in a fashionably perfected manner, into an object of enjoyment" (230). It is "one of its political functions to renew from within . . . the world as it is" (230). This is, in Benjamin's view, a "flagrant example of what it means to supply a productive apparatus without changing it" (230).

However, what is required is a dialectical fusion of existing genres in line with changing socio-economic realities. The photographer, for example, should fuse photography with writing in order to "give his picture the caption that wrenches it from modish commerce and gives it a revolutionary useful value" (230). From this perspective, "technical progress is for the author as producer the foundation of his political progress. In other words, only by transcending the specialisation in the process of production . . . can one make this production politically useful" (230). Benjamin's argument is that the "barriers imposed by specialisation must be breached

jointly by the productive forces that they were set up to divide" (230). In this way, the "author as producer discovers – in discovering his solidarity with the proletariat – simultaneously his solidarity with certain other producers who earlier scarcely seemed to concern him" (230). The same holds true of music where it must be joined with the "word" (231) which "alone can effect the transformation . . . of a concert into a political meeting" (231). With regard to that "recasting of literary forms" (231) of which Benjamin spoke earlier, his contention is that hitherto discrete artistic genres such as photography and music are "entering the growing, molten mass from which the new forms are cast" (231).

This is why Benjamin asserts that the "present-day writer" (232) must start afresh, must "recognise how poor he is and how poor he has to be in order to begin again from the beginning" (232). The Soviet state will not, like Plato, seek to banish the poet but it will "assign tasks that do not permit him to display in new masterpieces the long-since-counterfeit wealth of creative personality" (232). The inherited tradition of literary classics must be abandoned by any author who "has reflected deeply on the conditions of present-day production" (233) in order to recommence afresh. The work of any such writer will always be a meditation "on products but always, at the same time, on the means of production" (233). The usefulness of such works lies not only in their "value as propaganda" (233): their "political tendency is not enough" (233).

Rather, a

political tendency is the necessary, never the sufficient condition of the organising function of a work. This further requires a directing, instructing stance on the part of the writer. . . . *An author who teaches writers nothing, teaches no one.* What matters, therefore, is the exemplary character of production, which is able first to induce other producers to produce, and second to put an improved apparatus at their disposal. And this apparatus is better the more consumers it is able to turn into producers – that is, readers or spectators into collaborators. (233)

Benjamin is thinking here of Brecht's challenge to the "well-trying theatrical apparatus" (233) found in the tragedies and operas of his day. Contenting himself "with a podium" (234), he "dispensed with wide-ranging plots" (234): what he called 'epic theatre,' he insisted, "had to portray situations, rather than develop plots" (234). The most important principle in this respect is that of "interruption" (234) via the "procedure of montage" (234) borrowed in recent years from "film and radio, press and photography" (234), that is, the process by which the "superimposed element disrupts the context in which it is inserted" (234). It is in this way that the illusion of verisimilitude is dispelled:

such illusion is a hindrance to a theatre that proposes to make use of elements of reality in experimental rearrangements. But it is at the end, not the beginning, of the experiment that the situation appears – a situation that . . . is always ours. It is not brought home to the spectator but distanced from him. He recognises it as the real situation, not with satisfaction, as in the theatre of naturalism, but with astonishment. Epic theatre, therefore, does reproduce situations; rather it discovers them. This discovery is accomplished by means of the interruption of sequences. . . . It arrests the action in its course, and thereby compels the listener to adopt an attitude vis-a-vis the process, the actor vis-a-vis his role. (235)

The means to this end is "nothing but the restoration of the method of montage decisive in radio and film" (235). To the "dramatic artwork he opposes the dramatic laboratory" (235) in order to "expose what is present" (235). At the "centre of his experiment is man. Present-day man" (235). He is "subjected to tests, examinations. What emerges is this: events are alterable not at their climaxes, not by virtue and resolution, but only in their strictly habitual sense, by reason and practice" (236). This

is the purpose of epic theatre which is "less concerned with filling the public with feelings, even seditious ones, than with alienating it in an enduring manner, through thinking, from the conditions in which it lives" (236). And there is no "better start for thinking than laughter" (236): "convulsions of the diaphragm usually provides better opportunities for thought than convulsion of the soul" (236), he avers.

Benjamin concludes that "only one demand" (236) imposes itself upon the writer: the "demand *to think*, to reflect on his position in the process of production" (236). This "reflection leads . . . for the writers who *matter* . . . to observations that provide the most factual foundation for solidarity with the proletariat" (236). Given that most such writers are bourgeois, it is inevitable that he must betray his "class of origin" (237). This "betrayal consists . . . in conduct that transforms him from a supplier of the productive apparatus into an engineer who sees it as his task to adapt this apparatus to the purposes of the proletarian revolution" (237-238). The key questions are:

Does he succeed in promoting the socialisation of the intellectual means of production? Does he see how he himself can organise the intellectual workers in the production process? Does he have proposals for the *Umfunktionierung* of the novel, the drama, the poem? The more completely he can orient his activity toward this task, the more correct will be the political tendency, and necessarily also the higher the technical quality, of his work. (238)