

## Bertolt Brecht

### When Evil-doing Comes Like Falling Rain

Like one who brings an important letter to the counter after office hours: the counter is already closed.

Like one who seeks to warn the city of an impending flood, but speaks another language. They do not understand him.

Like a beggar who knocks for the fifth time at the door where he has four times been given something: the fifth time he is hungry.

Like one whose blood flows from a wound and who awaits the doctor: his blood goes on flowing.

So do we come forward and report that evil has been done us.

The first time it was reported that our friends were being butchered there was a cry of horror. Then a hundred were butchered. But when a thousand were butchered and there was no end to the butchery, a blanket of silence spread.

When evil-doing comes like falling rain, nobody calls out ‘stop!’

When crimes begin to pile up they become invisible. When sufferings become unendurable the cries are no longer heard. The cries, too, fall like rain in summer.

*Translated by John Willett*

I’ll start with Alexander Pope, although shortly we will move from him into something almost entirely opposite. In his “An Essay on Criticism” (1711) he wrote what is, to my mind, the most pithy and most memorable definition of poetry we have: “True Wit is Nature to Advantage drest,/ *What oft was Thought, but ne'er so well Exprest*” [my italics]. Eminently rational, it was consonant with the “Age of Reason” which was to follow.

I’ve been reading (mostly about) Johann Gottfried Herder, who although a student of Kant, was part of the response to the Enlightenment – the Age of Reason. True poetry, Herder asserted, had its roots in *das Volk*, or in English, the folk – people who live apart from the intellectual world but, according to Herder, undergird culture. Herder was among other things the inspiration behind gathering

folk tales (as with the brothers Grimm) and collecting folk songs. And the decision, most significantly by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, to write folk ballads.

Shortly after Goethe's lyric poems appeared, William Wordsworth began writing in England. Ballads. It is a critical truism that Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the co-author with Wordsworth of *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), was a post-Kantian transcendentalist, a follower of Schlegel and Schelling. Wordsworth, I have been realizing recently, was not. His work, and his interest (at least early) was rooted in the insights of Herder: the *Volk*, the importance of feeling to thought, the importance of language and a language community.

I write this because I want to start with Wordsworth as I approach Brecht's great lyric poem. Wordsworth's long epic poem *The Prelude* [1805/1850] is a history and a register of Wordsworth's feelings and thoughts as he tried to root himself – his life, his poetry – after the despair and loss of confidence he felt when the French Revolution shifted from excitement over the celebration of democracy into a 'Reign of Terror' when the guillotine and draconian judgements replaced an earlier confidence in the people (das Volk?) to govern themselves. What I want to emphasize is how deeply enmeshed this long autobiographical poem is in the political world the poet inhabited and confronted.

*The Prelude* is a personal poem, the story of the poet's emotional life and the growth of his imagination, but its grounding is in late eighteenth century politics. It merges the political and the personal.

Many other poets would do this: Vladimir Mayakovsky, Anna Akhmatova, Pablo Neruda. Closer to our own day, Adrienne Rich and Robert Lowell.

I have already written about Mayakovsky [here](#). Akhmatova's "Requiem" seems to me the most thoroughgoing and successful merging of the personal with the political that I have encountered; I think it is the great poem of the twentieth century. [Why, then have I not written about it? Because it is long, long: ten poems plus an epigraph and introduction and epilogue. Too long to encompass in one mailing, unless I were to mail out a book!] In mourning the lengthy political imprisonment of her son, she seamlessly puts together her own feelings and the Stalinism which she lived through and records.

Neruda wrote about his love life, about South America, and late in his career about the common things that he and his neighbors shared as part of their everyday existence: socks, bicycles, fish stew, tomatoes. Except perhaps in his early love poems, Neruda was always political. And although Adrienne Rich began with

poems focusing on her life, she quickly and powerfully recognized that life is lived as politics shapes us: her poems were deeply engaged with the politics of her time, and especially with what being a woman meant as she lived, and tried to live, her life. Robert Lowell understood, in ways that we may now feel a bit dated (though we shouldn't!) that to be alive, to experience the world, to write about ourselves, required that we confront the political tides and issues that are a necessary part of our lived environment.

I start in this way because I want to make a bold statement: no important poet has ever been as resolutely political as Bertholt Brecht.

Who was Brecht? A German, one of the twentieth century's leading dramatists, he was also a poet. He was deeply anti-Fascist, anti-Nazi, which meant that as Hitler rose to power, with Brecht as a vehement and outspoken critic, the writer was forced to flee Germany for a life in exile, at first in Scandinavia (Denmark, then Sweden, then Finland), and after that in the United States. It was in the years of his exile that his most influential plays were written. After World War Two he returned to Germany (East Germany, then under communist rule) and developed a theater there, one which continued his life-long battle against the twin evils, as he saw them, of fascism and capitalism.

Early on he embraced Marxism, which for his drama meant that he saw the theater as a place, a venue, in which the audience could and should think critically about social relations. He demanded that a certain estrangement and alienation be built into theatrical experience: no spectator of his plays would be allowed to slip into unalloyed identification with the characters and their actions. Always, always, Brecht felt, the audience should see the characters on stage from *outside*, should be forced to think about them rather than solely be caught up in their struggles. He, as a good Marxist, wanted a 'ruthless criticism of all that exists' (that phrase was used by Marx in one of his letters).

The poems Brecht wrote were, I think, another matter. Beyond most poets, he wanted his readers to think; in this sense, his poems were analogous to his plays. Yet in his poems he wanted to express how a consciousness, aware of the teachings of Marx, thinks. Some of his poems lecture readers, others exemplify for them the thoughts of a Marxist. So, in the poems the engagement with politics is direct, immediately apprehensible.

In my view, "When Evil-Doing Comes Like Falling Rain" is one of the twentieth century's greatest poems. You have already seen that it is not long; you

have already recognized that it is not a lyric poem, that it is not primarily an expression of the poet's feelings.

And you have no doubt become aware that it has three stanzas, the first of which is comprised by four similes, which preface a statement:

Here is how the poem opens:

Like one who brings an important letter to the counter after office hours: the counter is already closed.

Like one who seeks to warn the city of an impending flood, but speaks another language. They do not understand him.

Like a beggar who knocks for the fifth time at the door where he has four times been given something: the fifth time he is hungry.

Like one whose blood flows from a wound and who awaits the doctor: his blood goes on flowing.

So do we come forward and report that evil has been done us.

Let's look at this remarkable stanza. First the four similes, the explicit comparisons ('like') that it makes. Each of the four has a similar structure: the simile, and then what follows, which is what the subject of the simile is being compared to. All the similes are to the same thing, which we recognize when we encounter the last line of the stanza: "So do we come forward and report the evil that has been done to us." A post office, a flood, a hungry beggar, a person with a grievous wound. Let's look at each in turn.

"Like one who brings an important letter to the counter after office hours: the counter is already closed." The simile is relatively simple: someone wants to mail a letter, an important letter, but the counter in the post office where he could weigh, stamp and hand over the letter for mailing is closed. That is what happens when we try to "report that evil has been done us."

To unpack the significance of this simile we must recognize that it is also a metaphor – as are all the similes in the stanza. The 'metaphorical' is the realm of the unstated comparison. And what is unstated here is that mailing a letter is symbolic of, a metaphor for, communication. One person tries to get a message to another. The message cannot get through. Why not? Not because the message is deficient, or inarticulate: because whatever mechanisms there are for delivering messages are not functioning: they are closed.

This double figuration, this simile/metaphor structure, is repeated in the second line, whose structure, simile/explanation, is repeated. “Like one who seeks to warn the city of an impending flood, but speaks another language. They do not understand him.” In this instance, it is not a letter but an urgent warning. Flooding, a trope for destruction, is imminent. But we cannot report it, because – again we are in the realm of communication – our language is foreign, incomprehensible. Where in the first line the simile indicated that communication is impossible because of an institutional blockage (which could, conceivably, be remedied) now the difficulty is linguistic. It is not that there are no words to say “a flood is coming,” it is that the recipient of this message cannot comprehend the language the warning is issued in. (The translation, though excellent, does not quite get this line right: the second sentence is in the passive voice: “He will not be understood.”)

In the third line, the message is one of need and survival: “Like a beggar who knocks for the fifth time at the door where he has four times been given something: the fifth time he is hungry.” Here the blockage to communication is the human tendency to ignore that which it has heard before because the message has been heard too many times. In the background is the folktale which lives in common memory, of ‘the boy who cried “Wolf.”’ Too many warnings, too many communications, and no one listens any longer. In this line, the communication gets through – no closed post office, no foreign language barrier – but nonetheless there is no effective communication. [This will be the subject of, the rest of the poem.] As a result of the ‘unheard’ or ‘unattended’ communication, human suffering continues. The beggar is hungry, and not given food.

The fourth simile, “Like one whose blood flows from a wound and who awaits the doctor: his blood goes on flowing,” is unlike the previous three. It is not about an impediment to effective communicating. Here, in the simile, a person has been wounded, but because no doctor arrives, his blood keeps emptying out of his body. (To be quite literal, the ‘flows’ of our translator is in the original German, ‘flows out.’ Which, to my mind, indicates the life-sapping process more acutely. The simile is of a waiting that goes on so long that the parlous situation gets worse. The implication is that of death as the result of inaction, an inaction caused by waiting. Conjoined with what came before, this final simile indicates that even if communication could be made, nothing will happen but waiting. Inaction reigns. No response, even to “important” communications about impending destruction (“flood”) or imminent suffering (“hungry”), will be an effective spur to action.

“So do we come forward and report that evil has been done us.”

Warnings about impending catastrophe, the stanza informs us, are not sufficient. We can try to utter a warning. It will not get through. If it does, no one will understand it. If they understand it, they will feel they have heard it before and can ignore it. If they understand and recognize that action is needed, the remedy will not come.

The next stanza is one very long line, comprised of three sentences. Brecht does not want us to live in a land of poesy, evading through imprecision or avoidance what he is referring to. He is writing about destroying human beings, about what Norman Mailer once called “the mass liquidations of the state.” “The first time it was reported that our friends were being butchered there was a cry of horror. Then a hundred were butchered. But when a thousand were butchered and there was no end to the butchery, a blanket of silence spread.” Butchery is the state of affairs, about which we cannot effectively communicate – that is what the first stanza told us – and even if we could, no one will listen or, worse, nothing will happen to remediate the evil. At first we – like with the precautions we take the first time the boy cries ‘Wolf,’ like with the first beggar who comes to our door saying he is hungry – take action. But as the destruction continues, we become inured to it. Too much, too often. We accept it and a “blanket of silence spread.”

The next stanza is the obvious conclusion. “When evil-doing comes like falling rain, nobody calls out ‘stop!’” As in the final simile of the first stanza, the “blood goes on flowing.” That it comes like falling rain – here, we read it I think as a trope for ubiquity – will be addressed again, with great significance, in the poem’s final line.

The final stanza provides a summary beneath which lies an explanation. The explanation is Marxist, but it also grows out of Giambattista Vico before Marx and out of countless sociological thinkers after him. “When crimes begin to pile up they become invisible. When sufferings become unendurable the cries are no longer heard. The cries, too, fall like rain in summer.” Here, alas, the translation is lacking because it conflates two lines one. The German original ends with the starkness of single line, set apart from the two sentences which precede it: “The cries too fall like rain in summer.”

“When crimes begin to pile up they become invisible.” The more things recur, the more we take them to be a part of ‘what happens’ and the less we notice them. Fish do not notice that they swim in the sea, nor do we (unless we have severe trouble breathing) notice that the air is all around us. We take what happens every day as usual, and therefore it becomes part of what just happens;

what happens all the time is therefore un-noteworthy. (Political aside: there are many who have noted that this is the case with our current President. He lies so often and so casually, his administration is laced with so many scandals, that the lies become un-noteworthy and the scandals just another instance of politics-as-usual. I am often reminded of my grade school long ago, in which the lesson of our first president was ceaselessly drummed into us. George Washington chopped down a cherry tree, and when confronted by his father about that destruction, he said – reportedly – “I cannot tell a lie,” and confessed to being the culprit. It was a lesson, I think, in how important honesty was, and how needful it was to have as our first President, and political model, someone who couldn’t tell a lie. I wonder, often, if that story is still offered to students as the prerequisite to good and admirable governance....or even as a necessary constituent of ‘good character.’)

We have the largest prison population in the world. We are very used to this, and find it unremarkable. Over one-fifth of our children live – in the richest country in the history of the world – in poverty. As with the blood of the wounded person in the first stanza, this ‘keeps on flowing.’ Few of us remark on this silent but prevalent devastation. “Crimes become invisible.” We do not see what is all too common. “When sufferings become unendurable the cries are no longer heard.” Whether it is the imprisoned, the impoverished young, the twelve million refugees generated by the Syrian Civil War, the over five million dead during the past two decades in the Congo, we do not hear suffering because it is so common and because – alas – we cannot bear to hear that suffering. It is unendurable to live when there is so much suffering around us: like Melville’s Bartleby we, when asked to attend to that suffering, respond “I would prefer not to.”

My wife speaks to me, often, about the times we live in, that we are like frogs in a pot of water that grows slowly hotter. We do not notice the temperature rising because it is so slow and incessant, and yet we will somehow, someday, find ourselves boiling to death. So it is with the corruption occasioned by the Trump presidency, environmental degradation and, obviously, climate change. Brecht recognizes this in his poem.

But it is great poem, and a necessary poem, because he recognizes something more. Consider its last sentence: “The cries, too, fall like rain in summer.” What happens in the course of this poem is that, even as communication fails, even as outrage dissipates and silence spreads, even as we cannot see what is happening because it is omnipresent – all around us, as familiar as the air we breathe or the ground we walk on – another mental ‘adjustment’ is engaged. What is man-made, what we can change if only we respond – food to the hungry, staunching of the bleeding wound – is made natural. That is, hunger or bleeding

without a bandage for the wound are natural and not social or historical events. As something natural, as natural as the rain which falls, they are now something immutable, beyond human response. Beyond our capacity to change them.

This naturalizing of the human, this shift from the humanly created – and therefore humanly correctible – to the realm of the natural is the very bedrock of every effort of maintain and perpetuate injustice.

I've been reading what I think is an extraordinary book, Shoshana Zuboff's, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*. Early in that book she writes of the new economic and social order that is coming into being in our times, initiated by Google. Zuboff is no Marxist: she admires capitalism. Yet early in the book she writes of Google CEO Eric Schmidt:

Schmidt's statement is a classic of misdirection that bewilders the public by conflating commercial imperatives and technological necessity. It *camouflages* the concrete practices of surveillance capitalism and the specific choices that impel Google's brand of search into action. *Most significantly, it makes surveillance capitalism's practices appear to be inevitable when they are actually meticulously calculated* and lavishly funded means to self-dealing commercial ends. [My italics]

What Zuboff is saying is that what is happening with the internet is exactly what Brecht is talking about when considering mass destruction: once something that men (and women) do is made to appear natural, part of the natural order and development of things, it becomes unassailable. In the case of a process (what she is writing about is turning our interior lives into products to be bought and sold by corporations intent on having us do as they wish and will us to do), the process is seen as inevitable. What is unassailable and inevitable cannot, of course, be successfully resisted. And so the result of naturalizing social decisions and actions is that they appear not just impregnable, but 'the way things are.' Who would try to stop the rain from falling?

Brecht's poem is great and essential because it shows us that we do not 'fix' what is wrong because, finally, we see the wrongs as natural, as part of the way things naturally are. The enemy of the human fight against injustice is the 'natural:' human nature, 'just the way things are,' 'the reality of the world.' This naturalization is the ultimate weapon in the systems that maintain injustice, and often profit from it: that things are immutable because, like the summer rain, they just are that way. Who would fight against nature, who would seek to rail against the summer rain?

Brecht is revealing, as the poem evolves, a very great truth. To naturalize the human world is to put it beyond changing, to make unthinkable any attempt to remedy it. We may find it hard to communicate (as when the post office is closed), we may not have adequate language to warn of what is happening, we may have warned so often that listeners no longer heed what we say. But the blood keeps flowing, to use the final simile of the first stanza, because it seems natural that it flow (like the summer rain falls). Therefore, action is useless.

It is not only that crimes are invisible because they are ubiquitous, nor that we cannot endure to hear of endless suffering. The final defense of injustice is that it is a thing of nature, and like summer rain, will fall all around us.

We can and must do better, the poem finally urges, even as it catalogues the difficulties of stopping the slaughter of human beings. We can go on speaking despite the difficulties of and impediments to communication, we can insist on feeling even as repetition of injustice deadens us to suffering. And, most important, we can insist that as Giambattista Vico maintained long ago, what humans have created, humans can know, and humans can change.

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When I began this essay, I wanted to check to see if the English translation was faithful to the German – that run of four similes in particular. It was a tough slog to get the original – it is not available on the web, nor in most editions of Brecht's work. I had to go – I guess I am bragging here – to Brecht's collected work, his *Gesammelte Werke*, volume 9, to find what I was looking for. For those of you who read German, here it is:

### **Wenn die Untat kommt, wie der Regen fällt**

Wie einer, der mit einem wichtigen Brief an den Schalter kommt nach den Bürostunden: der Schalter ist schon geschlossen.

Wie einer, der die Stadt vor einer Überschwemmung warnen will: aber er spricht eine andere Sprache. Er wird nicht verstanden.

Wie ein Bettler, der zum fünften Mal an einer Tür klopft, wo er schon viermal bekommen hat: er ist zum fünften Male hungrig.

Wie einer, dessen Blut aus einer Wunde ausfließt und der auf den Arzt wartet: sein Blut fließt weiter aus.

So Kommen wir und berichten, daß an uns Untaten verübt werden.

Als zum ersten Mal berichtet wurde, daß unsere Freunde langsam geschlachtet wurden, war da ein Schrei des Entsetzens. Da waren hundert geschlachtet. Aber als tausend geschlachtet waren und des Schlachtens kein Ende war, breitete sich Schweigen aus.

Wenn die Untat kommt, wie der Regen fällt, dann ruft niemand mehr: halt!

Wenn die Verbrechen sich häufen, werden sie unsichtbar. Wenn die Leiden unerträglich werden, hört man die Schreie nicht mehr.

Auch die Shreie fallen wie der Sommerregen.