ISSN: 1941-0832

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Teaching Note

Who Hauled the Rocks? Teaching Brecht's "Questions from a Worker Who Reads" in a Non-Humanities Classroom

by Kevin George

UNTITLED, 1983, DAVID WOJNAROWICZ. ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO OPEN ACCESS COLLECTION.

Bertolt Brecht's "Questions from a Worker Who Reads" ("Fragen eines lesenden Arbeiters," 1935) did not arrive in my classroom through the prescribed syllabus. I came across it while wandering through the Brecht archives on Marxists.org — one of those productive digressions that teaching occasionally permits. The poem that was on the syllabus, compact and demanding in its own right, had left my undergraduate students visibly uneasy. I took their discomfort as an opening rather than an obstacle.

I teach in Kerala, where the student wings of the Indian National Congress and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) share campus space and rarely agree on anything. Political argument is a reflex here, sometimes productive, sometimes merely loud. Before turning to "Questions from a Worker Who Reads," I briefly introduced Brecht's "Burning of the Books" — a poem that had, in an earlier iteration of the syllabus, been part of the general English curriculum. A student from the commerce stream, precocious and clearly restless in the wrong programme, raised his hand: "Why would he want his own books burned? Shouldn't he have smuggled them out of Nazi Germany instead?" He had missed the irony entirely — not because he was inattentive, but because the irony was operating at a frequency his training hadn't yet tuned him to. I told him he was right about the impulse, and that Brecht had simply chosen to say the same thing in a more sardonic register. The student nodded, not entirely satisfied. Good.

Then I introduced the poem that wasn't on the syllabus. Written in free verse — deliberately, pointedly so — "Questions from a Worker Who Reads" adopts the voice of a learned worker, almost certainly an autodidact, reading history against the grain. The worker is Brecht's persona — a Marxist who identified with the proletariat not as a romanticised abstraction but as a material and historical fact. The poem's formal plainness is itself an argument: no rhyme scheme, no decorative metre, nothing to soften the questions being asked. Brecht's Verfremdungseffekt — the alienation effect he developed for the stage — migrates here to the page. The reader is kept at a critical distance, forced to think rather than merely feel.

When I read the poem aloud in class, the room changed. The students who were habitually silent — the laconic library-goers who held themselves apart from the louder political debates — began to speak. The allusions drew them in: Thebes of the seven gates (already a battleground in Aeschylus), Babylon destroyed and rebuilt repeatedly, the gold-glittering Lima of the conquistadors, the Great Wall of China, the triumphal arches of Rome, the Byzantine empire, and finally the mythical Atlantis. Each reference is a world, and Brecht moves through them with the economy of someone who has done the reading and is now asking why the reading left out so much.

I gave a brief lecture on Francisco Pizarro and the conquest of the Inca empire — the coerced labour that built the "gold-glittering Lima" Brecht names — and touched on the fall of Tenochtitlan and Moctezuma II in passing, as a parallel case of indigenous civilisation dismantled by European conquest. One student, an avid reader of the Bible, noted unprompted that the Babylon reference carried a double weight: not only the great city of antiquity, but the biblical emblem of imperial hubris, rebuilt each time at the expense of those whose names history did not record. Another observed that the masons of the Great Wall were not merely forgotten but literally buried — entombed within the monument whose scale is still invoked to celebrate Chinese civilisation. The exploitation, in other words, was built into the structure.

The section on Alexander produced the most animated exchange. Most students already knew the Battle of the Hydaspes — 326 BCE, on the banks of the river the Greeks called the Hydaspes and we now call the Jhelum, in present-day Punjab, Pakistan. They knew Alexander's horse Bucephalus died there, and that Alexander's subsequent grief, combined with the exhaustion and near-mutiny of his troops, marked the eastern limit of his campaign. What they had not been asked to consider was the transaction that followed: Alexander's celebrated magnanimity in restoring Porus of Paurava as satrap of his own kingdom. A student known for her incisive wit cut to the centre of it: "Alexander gets the credit for making Porus his satrap. But who fought the war? Who got trampled by the elephants? Who crossed the Hydaspes/Jhelum on makeshift rafts in monsoon conditions?" The poem had produced, in a single afternoon, the question that a semester of conventional history instruction might never have reached.

Caesar's defeat of the Gauls and Philip II's grief over the destruction of the Spanish Armada in 1588 followed in quick succession. Brecht's choice of three rulers from three different [eras?] — ancient, medieval, early modern — is deliberate: the pattern is not a local aberration but a structural feature of how history has been written. Who wept alongside the Spanish king? The poem does not say. The silence is the argument.

Brecht saves his darkest move for last. Atlantis — the one purely mythical entry in an otherwise historical catalogue — appears in the poem's most devastating couplet:

> "Even in fabled Atlantis, the night that the ocean engulfed it,
> The drowning still cried out for their slaves."

Even in a civilisation that never existed, even at the moment of total annihilation, the reflex of domination persists. The masters are drowning and still demanding service. What the slaves did in that moment, Brecht does not say. The poem has no interest in consoling us with their resistance or their escape. The silence where they should be is precisely the point.

The poem ends with a couplet of almost bureaucratic flatness:

> "So many reports.
> So many questions."

One student called it "a final nail in the coffin." The phrase is apt. But what strikes me, having taught this poem

across several semesters now, is that the coffin in question is not history itself — it is the pretension that history, as conventionally written, is sufficient. Brecht does not offer an alternative history; he simply refuses to accept the one we have been given. The questions accumulate. The reports multiply. And the gap between the two is where critical thought begins.

I have not taught a semester in which this poem has not found its way into the classroom, with or without institutional sanction. It is trenchant enough to cut through the assumptions of students trained in commerce and science who arrive expecting literature to be decorative, and leave having been asked — by a poem written in 1935 — to account for who paid for everything they have been taught to admire. That is not a small thing for a supplementary poem to accomplish. It may be the most important thing a poem can do.

Reference

Brecht, Bertolt. "Questions From a Worker Who Reads." 1935. *https://www.Marxists.Org/Archive/Brecht/*.

Notes

1. The version of "Questions from a Worker Who Reads" available on the Marxists Internet Archive does not identify a translator. The wording of the poem, however, closely resembles Michael Hamburger's widely circulated translation, particularly in lines such as "Who built Thebes of the seven gates?" and "Did the kings haul up the lumps of rock?" While this suggests that the archive may be reproducing Hamburger's translation, the page itself provides no explicit attribution. Consequently, any reference to Hamburger as the translator should be treated as an informed inference rather than a confirmed fact unless corroborated by another source.

Kevin George holds a Master's degree in English from the University of Hyderabad, an Institution of Eminence in India, and a Bachelor's degree from Loyola College, affiliated with the University of Madras. His academic interests were shaped during his postgraduate studies through an engagement with Richard Ohmann's English in America, which sparked a sustained interest in pedagogy and American literature. His research interests include American literature, pedagogy, cultural studies, semantics, and continental philosophy.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

This journal is published by Pitt Open Library Publishing..