

CHAPTER I

Brecht's Augsburg Years

Jürgen Hillesheim

Bertolt Brecht's family background was unspectacular. It would be downright admirable if Brecht were, as so many claim, an author who placed himself unreservedly at the disposal of class struggle. Brecht's father Berthold Friedrich Brecht came from Achern in the Black Forest. He moved to Augsburg on September 1, 1893, after finding a position as a commercial clerk at the Haindl paper mills, which played a major role in the economic life of the city. Brecht's mother Sophie Brezing hailed from Bad Waldsee in Württemberg and had been trained as a seamstress. Toward the end of 1893 she visited her sister in Augsburg, who was married to another white-collar employee at the Haindl paper mills, Hermann Reitter. While visiting her sister, Sophie Brezing met her future husband. The Protestant wedding took place in May of 1897. Initially the Brechts lived in a small house in the center of the city, where Brecht was born on February 10, 1898. Today it is the "Brecht House" and features a permanent exhibition on the life and works of the playwright.

Brecht's father enjoyed rapid success at Haindl, becoming an officer and administrator of the Haindl almshouses and eventually making it to commercial director of the mills. On September 12, 1900, the family moved to a comfortable apartment in one of the almshouses. A few months earlier, on June 19, 1900, Brecht's brother Walter was born. Their mother, who was in charge of raising the children, was a housewife. Brecht was raised by his mother and his grandparents as a Protestant. Even at an early age he was acquainted with the Christian tradition, the Bible, and devotional literature. His knowledge of the Bible was extraordinary, and throughout his life the Bible formed one of the most important sources for his work.

From the outside the Brecht family's life may have looked idyllic. From within, it was anything but. Brecht's mother developed cancer, and hence a caretaker, the housekeeper Maria Röcker, moved into the family's apartment. Brecht had to move out of his room and into the attic, which

subsequently became one of the primary meeting places for him and his friends. Even before this Brecht's mother had been unwell. She suffered from severe depression, which sometimes caused her to remain in bed for long periods of time. This also led to tensions within the family, particularly between Brecht's mother and father, a man of the world who was highly regarded in the city.¹ On May 10, 1920, Brecht's mother died of cancer. Brecht's father was already having a relationship with Maria Röcker, who continued living with him after his wife's death.

It was perhaps this difficult family situation that led to Brecht's sensitivity and sense of being different from other people. These feelings were developed at an early age. Thanks to a number of unique documents, scholars now know a good deal about Brecht's literary beginnings. Indeed, the extent of this knowledge is almost unheard-of for an author of Brecht's magnitude. The most important documents are the *Tagebuch No. 10* (Diary Number 10), which gives an account of the second half of 1913, and the school literary journal *Die Ernte* (The Harvest), which Brecht edited. The six issues of this journal were created between August 1913 and February 1914. In addition to these documents, scholars have access to the diary entries of Oskar Lettner, one of Brecht's friends, which cover the period from 1912 onward. Thanks to these documents, we know that the young Brecht was often sick, that he was highly sensitive, that he suffered from heart problems and that he was afraid that his health issues might prevent him from taking part in the normal day-to-day routine of school. Brecht compensated for these problems with his artistic talent and the extraordinary magnetism that he exerted on other young people. As we know from Lettner's notes, Brecht's earliest interests lay in the realm of music. Soon, however, he became an expert in literature for his fifteen-year-old friends: a kind of authority figure to whom they submitted their literary efforts for appraisal.

By 1913 it was Brecht's goal to become a great writer. The school journal *Die Ernte* was created primarily because the self-confident Brecht was already submitting some of his poems to literary journals but – as might have been expected – not receiving even the courtesy of a reply.² Hence, with typical brashness, Brecht created his own publication. More than 80 percent of the contributions to *Die Ernte* were written by Brecht

¹ See Jürgen Hillesheim, "Zwischen 'Frühlingserwachen', Melancholie und kleinbürgerlicher Enge: Ein Notizbuch Sophie Brechts, der Mutter des 'Stückeschreibers,'" *The Brecht Yearbook* 35 (2010), 241–265, esp. 256–258; and Walter Brecht, *Unser Leben in Augsburg, damals* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985), 102.

² BFA 26, 67, 71.

himself, and they covered all the major literary genres. The earliest extant work by Brecht is his poem "Der Geierbaum" (The Vulture Tree), which Brecht wrote in July of 1912.³

The *Tagebuch No. 10* goes beyond merely documenting some of the young Brecht's minor early works. It also demonstrates Brecht's awareness of the fact that he could only achieve his life goal of becoming a great writer by acquiring, through hard work, the fundamental skills that a writer needs. Brecht's journal entries document this struggle for proficiency, revealing a young man wavering between optimism and despair. They also show that Brecht was a voracious reader who devoured not only the classics of world literature but also large numbers of contemporary works. The journal entries mention writers such as Richard Dehmel, Stefan George, and Gerhart Hauptmann. Again and again there are also references to the Bible. Friedrich Nietzsche was the subject of two small works. And the adolescent Brecht even wrote a counter-poem to one of Hugo von Hofmannsthal's works.⁴

Thus, as early as 1913, Brecht's literary work was already characterized by two aspects that were to determine his aesthetic for the rest of his life. The first aspect was the recycling of cultural material, especially with respect to literary history, the Christian tradition, and Brecht's specific environment and context. From a multiplicity of sources and diverse areas, Brecht constructed works that were highly artificial and aesthetically demanding. The second aspect that was to determine Brecht's work, and that remained present throughout the rest of his life, was that, for him, writing constituted a form of agonistic struggle and contradiction with respect to other, competing literary models.

Brecht's anti-idealist aesthetic was always also highly ambivalent and multilayered. Brecht was not interested in communicating messages with his works – except perhaps for the message that there are no messages, no moral or religious maxims to which one should adhere. Even the early *Tagebuch No. 10* is a document of Brecht's estrangement from a Christian faith whose content and traditions nevertheless remained important for him and furnished him with literary raw materials. Even in these early years the most important philosophical influence on Brecht was Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche's power is evident as early as 1913, with the ballad

³ Jürgen Hillesheim, "Brechts literarischer Erstling? *Das Lied vom Geierbaum* von 1912," in Brecht, *Zwischen Tradition und Moderne*, ed. Jürgen Hillesheim (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2018), 13–26 (14–20).

⁴ Klaus-Dieter Krabiel, "Die Beiden: Ein Sonett Hugo von Hofmannsthals, fortgeschrieben von Eugen Berthold Brecht," *The Brecht Yearbook* 31 (2006), 63–81.

“Heimat” (Homeland). As time passed, Nietzsche became even more important for Brecht. This never changed, although Brecht admittedly appropriated Nietzsche’s philosophy for himself, making it conform to his own needs, accepting some elements while rejecting others – even as, in later life, he attempted to hide Nietzsche’s considerable philosophical influence.⁵ Especially in the GDR, any affinity to Nietzsche was inopportune. It was probably because of Nietzsche that Brecht’s relationship with dialectical materialism and socialist ideology was always to remain problematic and broken.

From the very beginning, Brecht was interested in the relationship between the individual and society. This was clear even in Brecht’s first finished drama, the one-act play *Die Bibel* (The Bible), which appeared in *Die Ernte* in 1913. Should the individual always sacrifice his wishes for the greater good of the community? How can one answer this question if, like Nietzsche, one no longer accepts the values of “good” and “evil” laid down by the Christian religion? Such questioning led Brecht to moral freedom, to flexibility, and to a pragmatism that was to characterize his thought for the next four decades. Such pragmatism can already be found in the texts that Brecht published after the beginning of World War I, starting on August 8, 1914, in two Augsburg newspapers. Viewed superficially, Brecht’s newspaper contributions are full of the typical nationalist clichés that were popular at the time. Brecht undoubtedly had to pay lip service to such clichés in order to satisfy his editors; otherwise the young man’s texts would not have been published at all. Examined more closely, however, even in his newspaper texts the young Brecht used ironic caesuras to distance himself from nationalist pathos. He thus criticized the insanity of Germany’s war policies and the suffering those policies caused. Brecht was by no means a pacifist, however. For him the enigmatic ambiguity of these early newspaper texts was not a moral but rather an aesthetic challenge that he used for the purpose of exploring and honing his own talent: an artificial game foreshadowing the very elements that were later to contribute to the formulation of his theory of epic theater.

Brecht’s reading continued to expand. Among the authors who influenced him, and from whose work he profited, were François Villon, Arthur Rimbaud, and Paul Verlaine from France, as well as Rudyard Kipling from England and the innovative German playwright Frank Wedekind. By 1917 one of the most important literary figures for Brecht was the nineteenth-

⁵ Christof Šubik, *Einverständnis, Verfremdung und Produktivität: Versuche über die Philosophie Bertolt Brechts* (Vienna: Verlag des Verbandes der Wissenschaftlichen Gesellschaft Österreichs, 1982), 59, 92.

century German playwright Georg Büchner. Brecht saw his own view of art and life reflected in Büchner's fatalist, anti-idealist works. He used Büchner for the further development and concretization of his own literary ideas. One can trace Büchner's influence in the early poem "Der Himmel der Enttäuschten" (The Heaven of the Disappointed, 1917),⁶ and Brecht's first great drama, *Baal*, was influenced not only by Nietzsche but also by Büchner.⁷

As early as 1915, Brecht's contributions to Augsburg newspapers began to taper off. He no longer found the genre interesting. In fact it bored him. In the middle of 1916 the quality of his literary work took a quantum leap forward. The poems "Vom Tod im Wald" (Death in the Woods) and "Lied von der Eisenbahntuppe von Fort Donald" (Song of the Fort Donald Railroad Gang)⁸ were of such high quality that Brecht later included them in his first book of poetry, *Domestic Breviary* (Hauspostille).⁹

It was also around 1915 that a renowned circle of friends began to coagulate around Brecht. This was an artistic community reminiscent of the circle of admirers around the German symbolist poet Stefan George – whom Brecht, however, parodied, creating a materialist counter-project even in this realm. Brecht and his friends formed an elite group bound together by a fanatical interest in literature. Brecht was the undisputed focal point. He and his friends lived for and with literature. For them the border between fiction and reality – between "Poetry and Truth" (Goethe) – became increasingly blurred. The Brecht circle planned collaborative literary projects, and Brecht was inspired by his friends' ideas, just as he, in turn, encouraged and supported them in their projects. One should not idealize this constellation, however. A number of Brecht's friends, particularly Hanns Otto Münsterer, ultimately felt that they had been used by him – especially after Brecht became better-known and more

⁶ Jürgen Hillesheim, "Woyzeck im 'Himmel der Enttäuschten': Zur frühesten Büchner-Rezeption Bertolt Brechts," in Brecht, *Zwischen Tradition und Moderne*, ed. Hillesheim, 51–64 (61–63). For the English-language translation, see Brecht, "The Heaven of the Disappointed," in CPBB, 27.

⁷ Jürgen Hillesheim, "Geschichtspessimismus und fatalistische Vitalität: Georg Büchners *Dantons Tod* und Bertolt Brechts *Baal* im Horizont der Philosophie Arthur Schopenhauers," in *Der Junge Brecht: Aspekte seines Denkens und Schaffens*, ed. Helmut Gier and Jürgen Hillesheim (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1996), 103–125, esp. 113–121.

⁸ Helmut Gier, "Brechts erste Begegnung mit einem Komponisten und Dirigenten: Tod und Verklärung in seinen Gedichten aus dem Jahr 1916," in *Auf den Schultern des Anderen: Festschrift für Helmut Koopmann zum 75. Geburtstag*, ed. Andreea Bartl and Antonie Magen (Paderborn: Mentis, 2008), 133–143, esp. 138–141.

⁹ For English-language translations of these two poems, see CPBB, 208–211.

successful and, correspondingly, demonstrated less interest in his previous friends.¹⁰

The Brecht circle bore Brecht's spirit into the outside world. They celebrated Brecht publicly and provocatively in Augsburg's pubs, and on forays through the city and into the surrounding countryside around the river Lech. One of the Brecht circle's favorite locales was the "Augsburger Plärrer," a city carnival that still takes place twice a year in Augsburg. It was here that Brecht first experienced popular folk ballads ("Bänkelsang"), which were also a key influence on his literary idol Frank Wedekind, as well as the carnival atmosphere that he was to encounter again during his collaboration with the comedian Karl Valentin in Munich. At the "Plärrer," Brecht had a chance to observe ordinary people and study their milieu. This was to remain an important source of inspiration for him throughout his life.

Increasingly, Brecht began to acquire the reputation of a "bad boy" or an *enfant terrible*. He took great delight in this role. A number of important personalities who were later to enjoy impressive careers in their own right belonged to the Brecht circle. One of the most important of these was Caspar Neher, who became a world-class set designer and, in spite of frequent interruptions, worked with Brecht throughout his life, designing many of his book publications and creating the scenery for some of the key productions of Brecht's plays.

The "male community" around Brecht was complemented by Brecht's extensive relationships with women. The relationship with Paula Banholzer was to be one of the most important. When Banholzer became pregnant with Brecht's child, Brecht wanted to marry her, but as a young and relatively unknown writer, he was rejected by Banholzer's father. As a result, Paula Banholzer had to give birth to her and Brecht's illegitimate son Frank in the mountainous Allgäu region of Bavaria, far away from Augsburg. Frank was born in the summer of 1919. At the same time Brecht was involved with Rosa Maria Amann. This relationship resulted in one of the most beautiful love poems of the German language, "Erinnerung an die Marie A." (Remembering Marie A.).¹¹ Brecht was still connected to Paula Banholzer when, in 1919, he met the mezzo-soprano Marianne Zoff, who was to become his first wife. The opera singer, who was several years older than Brecht, was working in Augsburg and still involved with

¹⁰ Tom Kuhn, "Ja, damals waren wir Dichter": Hanns Otto Münsterer, Bertolt Brecht und die Dynamik literarischer Freundschaft," in *Der junge Brecht*, 44–64, esp. 55–58.

¹¹ CPBB, 220–221.

a substantially older businessman. Since she was not particularly successful in her own career but nevertheless enjoyed a lavish lifestyle, she chose not to dissolve her relationship with the businessman – just as Brecht did not end his relationship with Paula Banholzer.¹² Brecht's journal entries and letters to Zoff reveal the conflicts inherent in this constellation. Finally, one should not forget Lilly Prem, a radical left-wing democrat, whose husband Brecht is believed to have helped escape abroad in 1919 after the suppression of the revolution connected to the short-lived Bavarian Soviet Republic.

It was at this time that Brecht's "second career" as an author for an Augsburg newspaper began. From October 1919 until January of 1921, Brecht wrote a series of theater reviews for *Der Volkswille* (The People's Will), the daily newspaper of the Augsburg USPD (Independent Social Democratic Party, a political grouping to the left of the more moderate Social Democratic Party). In these reviews Brecht began to develop his own unconventional, provocative approach to theater, and one can also discern Brecht's ambivalent relationship to the literary classics. He valued them highly, but at the same time he also believed that they were no longer relevant to modern times. He thus confronted the German classical poet and dramatist Schiller with the more modern work of the American novelist Upton Sinclair, and he wrote counter-poems to works by Goethe. Many of these counter-poems were subsequently collected in the *Domestic Breviary*.

All of these developments form the background to the extraordinary outpouring that emerged after the end of World War I. The most important of these works were the two great Augsburg dramas *Baal* and *Drums in the Night*. In *Baal*, Brecht created an individualist protagonist characterized by both brutality and poetic sensitivity who dedicates himself to a life of Nietzschean vitalism. *Baal* was also a response to expressionism, which was the primary, attention-getting literary movement of the era. With his own dramatic effects and an amoral protagonist, Brecht distanced himself from the moral pathos of expressionism. He borrowed elements from expressionist "Stationendrama" – a form of drama featuring loosely connected scenes centered around a key figure – but developed those elements along the lines of his own more materialist, anti-idealist aesthetic. Admittedly, *Baal's* hoped-for lustful return to the womb of the earth does not take place; his death is painful. Has *Baal* – a figure who continued

¹² Karoline Sprenger, "Der 'Bürgerschreck' und die 'verkrachte' Opersängerin: Brecht und seine erste Ehefrau Marianne Zoff," *The Brecht Yearbook* 34 (2009), 25–41.

to fascinate Brecht – thereby ended his life in failure? This question remains unanswered to this day.

In *Drums in the Night*, Brecht attacked every form of ideological cooptation – a real danger in Bavaria and Augsburg at the time of the Bavarian Soviet Republic. The protagonist Andreas Kragler – a war veteran betrayed by his fiancée Anna, who is pregnant with another man’s child – is urged to support the Bavarian Soviet Republic. Kragler declines. Instead he prefers to focus again on Anna, whose parents own a prosperous business. Kragler thus also assures himself of financial success. He has arrived in the more pragmatic, anti-ideological society of the Weimar Republic, a society characterized by the so-called New Sobriety. Kragler throws all the moral demands that are made of him out the window. *Drums in the Night* is a play in which all the key elements of what later became epic theater are already developed.¹³ It expresses Brecht’s pragmatic, goal-oriented materialism. Brecht continued to return to this work almost until the end of his life.

One should not neglect the poetry of the young Brecht, which is both better-known and more significant than his two early full-length plays. Almost all of the poems in the *Domestic Breviary* – which, with fifty poems, constituted Brecht’s most substantial lyric cycle – were created during Brecht’s time in Augsburg. Once again we are confronted with a counter-project. The poems constitute a kind of religious book of devotions *ex negativo*.¹⁴ They are not intended to cultivate religious values and the Christian belief in resurrection. On the contrary, Brecht confronts the Christian faith of his parents with a “cold” world that, in the Nietzschean manner, has been liberated from God. It is into this cold world that human beings are unlovingly thrust. Finitude and death are the constant theme of the poems – but also a sober, objective stoicism consonant with the New Sobriety: a determination to accept and confront a painful existence. The *Domestic Breviary*, which was published in 1927, contains many of Brecht’s most famous poems, from “Legend of the Dead Soldier” to “Poor B.B.”¹⁵

Brecht continued to keep a journal in the early 1920s. In it he no longer dwelt on his health problems. Instead he took on the attitude of an ambitious and powerful young poet who fully intends to conquer the literary landscape of the Weimar Republic and become a “city dweller.”

¹³ Jan Knopf, “Trommeln in der Nacht,” in *Brechts Dramen: Neue Interpretationen*, ed. Walter Hinderer (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1984), 48–66, esp. 53, 62.

¹⁴ Michael Morley, “Bertolt Brechts Hauspostille,” in *Brecht-Handbuch*, vol. 2 (*Gedichte*), ed. Jan Knopf (Stuttgart and Weimar: Metzler, 2001), 147–161, esp. 149.

¹⁵ CPBB, 243–246; 250–252.

Brecht succeeded – as one can see in his receipt of the Kleist Prize in 1922 and the success of *The Threepenny Opera*, which constituted his international literary breakthrough.

Brecht left Augsburg in September of 1924 and moved to Berlin to become a “city dweller.” But Brecht’s father kept a room for him in Augsburg; and until Brecht’s exile from Germany during the Nazi period, Brecht came home every year for a few weeks. In 1932 he even bought a vacation house near Augsburg, in Utting on the Ammersee. Because of the Nazis, he was not able to use that house for long.

After Brecht’s return to Germany from exile, he only came to Augsburg – briefly – twice. During the Cold War, Augsburg and its citizens had difficulties with the famous Brecht. Newspapers reported regularly about his activities, and the city’s theater performed his plays. Otherwise, as a purported representative of the socialist GDR, Brecht was treated with mistrust. A request to name a street in Augsburg after him was denied in 1963. Since 1966, however, there has been a Bert-Brecht-Straße in the city of his birth. In 1981 the city council purchased the house where Brecht was born, and in 1985 the first permanent exhibition was opened there. It was only after the collapse of the GDR that the Brecht-Forschungstätte (Brecht Research Center) Augsburg began its work. The Center is now part of an international network of scholars. Since 1995 the Brecht Prize, one of the most significant literary prizes in Germany, has been awarded in Augsburg. Augsburg also hosts an annual Brecht Festival.

Brecht has gradually become a classic author to whom Augsburg’s citizens feel they can relate. From time to time they are even proud of him.

– *Translated by Stephen Brockmann*