

## A Marxist Approach to *The Trial of Lucullus*

Nazanin Nayyeri & Farideh Pourgiv

### Introduction

Wars usually entail great revolutions in scientific and literary fields, and the Second World War is no exception. As for the scientists of the nations in war it is a great opportunity for intellectual growth and development most primarily in the case of defense. This issue of war, however, has various effects on the intellectuals. We cannot separate the literary works of 20th century from the contexts in which they are produced though in some cases the spirit of the time can be traced more easily. For Brecht, the great German author and critic who lived within the context of war, the policy toward Hitler's massacre was not an escapist one. Rather, some of his plays reflect the socioeconomic and political pressure imposed on people. One of his plays, *The Trial of Lucullus*, best represents this pressure. In his article, "Yes to Nothingness", Obermayer discusses this play as a reaction against Hitler's regime in invasion of some European countries (217). He adds that in this play the lower class which was once oppressed becomes the Judges of the aristocracy, in this case Lucullus (Obermayer 224).

Martin Esslin in his book *Brecht: A Choice of Evils* mentions the way Brecht thinks of drama, as mainly didactic. Furthermore he explains Brecht's theory of epic theatre as it is put against Aristotelian drama in its being mechanical. What he meant by mechanical is the devices in the play that constantly remind the reader that he is reading a play; thus he should avoid identification with the characters, that is called "verfremdungseffekt" or estrangement, and he should remain like a conscious critic (122). In both cases, as Obermayer and Esslin approve, Brecht's work is considered as a reaction whether theoretically or thematically against tyranny. We are faced with key concepts of Brechtian drama which are, as mentioned, consciousness on the part of readers and the consequent didactic use. On the theoretic level he makes use of devices such as estrangement and on the thematic level he uses the concepts of Vulgar Marxism.

### Brecht and Marxism

What makes the Marxist approach to his works easier is the fact that for Brecht the mere reaction to the exploitations of the fascist regime was not enough. In other words, he thought of a work of art not only as having aesthetic features but as bringing about some sort of practicality and use. As Tyson explains in *Critical Theory Today*, Marxism respects the practical nature of any ideology e.g. the consciousness of audience and their profiting from a didactic play (54). Brecht's theory of the epic theatre is the inevitable result of his Marxism and the main goal of this paper is

put to prove this hypothesis, particularly in *The Trial of Lucullus*. In fact his Marxism and his literary devices enhance each other's effect in an artistic way. For the analysis of the play we switch to plot and some inherent themes while making use of several tenets of Marxism and Brecht's theory of epic theatre. It should be noted, however that as much as Brecht's dramaturgical theory was inspiring for so many dramatists, his Marxism has quite often been condemned as utterly simplistic.

Such simplicity may be the effect of the fact that Brecht only insists on the base/superstructure distinction as Terry Eagleton asserts in his *Ideology: An Introduction*. The statement as such is manifested in the way Eagleton attempts to show Brecht as standing against the idea of "selfhood" as "received". The "selfhood" as a consequence becomes the "ideological illusion" that is imposed on people's minds (162). The kind of "received identity" that Brecht describes is actually the product of the superstructures. Although Eagleton as the representative of so many other Marxists underestimates Brecht's vulgar Marxism, the field of western Marxism itself- as enjoying a more philosophically accomplished scholarship- is replete with contradictions that emerge in the works of its well-known practitioners. The contradiction, on the other hand, might be one of the important elements that bind the western Marxists due to the expanded topography of the field itself. The main contradiction in the field of western Marxism owes to the Hegelian pedigree of its forefathers. According to Tony Bennett, the western Marxists see Marx through Hegelian lens as an example we can turn to Lukacs whose treatment of the Hegelian concept of "Totality" as the *other* to ideology proves to be quite idealistic (32). The escape from idealism, however, seems to be a far-fetched dream of every Marxist, a dream that has never come true.

Therefore despite the general tendency for splitting the Marxism of Brecht and that of the much more philosophically accomplished western Marxists there is a certain tinge of idealism in them all. The concepts of the western Marxism such as ideology, alienation, reification are covered by all western Marxists though some of these scholars provided these terms with more philosophical overtones than others. Comparing the Marxists with each other reminds us of what Freud refers to as the "narcissism of difference" as Jay states in his *Marxism and Totality* (10). He adds that such a phrase tends to show the desire of the Marxist scholars for "theoretical correctness"(ibid). The point here is that this tendency clearly shows the extent to which idealism is involved in the Marxist theories. Attention to this argument makes us rethink the boundaries that distinguish scientific, critical and vulgar Marxism. The analysis of this play not only helps the reader to identify Brecht as an illuminating rather than simplistic playwright but also introduces the bridge between Brecht's drama and his Marxism. When analyzing works of Brecht, one does not

have to do much to keep her distance from the zone of complexity in that the dark times Brecht lived in demanded a response that needed to be more "urgent" than complicated as Karen Leeder observes (Leeder 278).

### **The Marxist Approach to the Play**

The play starts with the funeral of the great general of Rome, Lucullus, who as people say conquered many countries of Asia and brought honor for the people of Rome. As the procession and the soldiers hauling his corpse make their way to the place intended for his burial, the author introduces us to different classes of society ranging from the aristocracy to common people. As the leader of a class-based society Lucullus had to find a way so as to confirm his position and that of his very class. According to Marxists as mentioned by Tyson, the best way to keep people calm and obedient is making their minds occupied with ideology (Tyson 56). In the very first scenes we are exposed to one of these ideologies that is the belief in honor. No matter what Lucullus has done to slaves they still admire him because he is the very honor incarnate as the conqueror of Asia. In his way to absolute power he has imposed so much pressure on people. There is a reference for instance to the increase in prices signifying the socioeconomic pressure on people when women talk about the price of fish and cheese. As the play goes on however this very class-based ideology with which he ruled, while living, condemns him since the jury of the underworld belong to the lower class: a baker, a slave who was a teacher, a fishwife and a courtesan.

The trial is not a religious one and for the people who sit on the high bench what counts most is *usefulness*. Lucullus, for whom seven kings waited, should wait up with common people until his turn comes. Whereas honored when living, he should stand all the humiliation of the underworld. There are several devices that highlight the anti-authoritarian theme of the play. The fragmentary nature of the play for instance is particularly significant. At certain points the dialogues are interrupted by the chorus, Herald and a variety of voices such as the hollow voice and the threefold voice which try to make readers aware of the changes or some news. At times they also take the role of the narrator and a commentator on the action of the play if there is any. As reductive as they might be through the perspective of aesthetics, these elements augment the readers' alertness. Tony Bennette in *Formalism and Marxism* states that the treatises responsible for developing Marxist criticism are aesthetically noticeable "with the possible exception of Brecht's work" (84).

In fact Brecht sacrifices beauty in order to achieve his famous *verfremdungseffekt* that is translated as "estrangement" or "alienation" in English. In his *Literary Theory*, Terry Eagleton considers this effect as having "political ends" in that it "defamiliarizes" or "denaturalizes the

political society" to make us as readers suspicious of anything which seems natural to us. Eagleton introduces this technique as belonging to the tradition of Barthes that is continued most radically in the works of some of the artists of "German Weimer Republic" and specifically Brecht (Eagleton 118). The episodic nature of his play strives to make apparent such alienating effects. In the course of the play, on the other hand, the reader is not demanded to decode any mysteries or solve any insoluble problems and the main character is chosen from history, however he is changed in order to help Brecht in achieving his very socialist objective.

Brecht might have been inspired by Petrarch's *Life of Lucullus* in which Lucullus was primarily known by his invasion of some parts of Asia. Brecht's borrowing of history is however an unusual one. He takes a regular event, in this case the funeral of Lucullus, and turns it to a work of resistance against the capitalist or bourgeois culture. Brecht's theories are all based on his "praxis-oriented" philosophy (Leslie104). The philosophy of praxis does not make us look at past as being fixed series of events, rather history becomes a critical scene for the readers of scientific and industrial age who want to make use of the past in order to resist the authoritarian culture. As an obedient follower of the communist credo, Brecht chooses the funeral of Lucullus in order to look at it from a different perspective. His divergence from the course of history is a relative one in order to also preserve it. As a lifelong friend of Brecht, Benjamin presents his theory of history so as to propound that history should be "preserved and sublated"(qtd. in Steiner168). Accordingly, the prospect of history proves to be similar in the eyes of Brecht and Benjamin.

The concept of history, as a synchronized totality, is under question. The fragmentary structure of *The Trial of Lucullus* connotes such an outbreak in the coherent course of history. The sovereignty of bourgeoisie on our very minds bans us from pondering on the condition of human beings. While history mostly covers Lucullus's action as a great warrior, Brecht focuses on his condition in the society based on what he has done for the Romans (Marxist praxis). In *Story of Civilization* Lucullus is referred to as the victorious hero of the *Third Mithridatic War* (75-63 BC) (110) and he was said to be quite a scholar in literature and "all philosophies" (132). Age of Lucullus was known with lavish luxury to the extent that he "became the synonymous of glory after his campaigns in east"(129). However he was responsible for the slaughter and enslavement of so many people (87).With regard to Benjamin's paradoxical theory of history as being "preserved and sublated" Brecht shows us a different account of Lucullus story in the world of living and in the underworld. He does not deny his greatness rather he introduces it as being of a different kind.

The Herald renounces the death of Lucullus as well as his greatness in the first lines:

Hark, the great Lucullus is dead! /The general who conquered the East/ who overthrew seven kings/ who filled the city of Rome with riches. / Before catafalque/ Borne by soldiers/ Walk the most distinguished men of Rome/ With covered faces, beside it/ Walks his philosopher, his advocate, and his charger (Brecht 191).

The "greatness" here is the ideological one which only refers to deeds of Lucullus as magnifying his class and his power. In addition, the issue of class as one of the key concepts of Marxism or as a driving force behind the way they think is explicitly embedded in the play. The merchants who have made so much profit out of the unstable economic conditions are the ideological thinkers as they constantly boast of the great Lucullus. The slaves and common people who have felt the pressure of their class react diversely to distributors of ideology (upper class and merchants in particular). Most of them reject it and some thoughtlessly accept it. The complaints are put in dialogues while a few of choruses admire him as the chorus of children. Here are the examples of versatile views:

FIRST MERCHANT: Greater than Pompey/ Rome would have been lost without him. /Enormous victories./ FIRST WOMAN: My Reus/ Perished in Asia/ All this fuss won't bring him back to me./ FIRST PLEBEIAN: When/ Will they spare us this twaddle about fame? (BBP 193)...CHILDREN'S CHORUS: In the school books/ Are written the names of great generals./ Whoever wants to emulate them/ Learns their battles by heart/ Studies their wonderful lives...(Brecht 195)

Brecht can be considered as belonging to the group of Marxists who were interested in different forms of "cultural productions". Tyson names some of such productions like television, theater, literature, art and music as "bearers of ideology in what seems to be an innocent form: entertainment"(60). In the quotation above there is a reference to one of the forms of cultural production which is the children's school book. The capitalist culture wants to implant the very seeds of ideology in children's minds. What is written in children's book abuses children's innocence and turns them to sympathizers of the capitalist culture. While such a culture insists on the consumption of its products, Marxists try to project its use. The idea of consumption conveys some sort of obligation while the idea of a product's use is associated with a critical mind and free will. Leslie reflects Benjamin's view on "use" that is put against consuming. In the light of such philosophy Brecht becomes the "engineer of production apparatus" which should be "used" rather than "consumed"(qtd. in Leslie 146).

The interesting point about the play is that except for Lucullus there are no names in the play and characters are introduced according to their

roles e. g. the plebeian, the soldiers even in the underworld the role is favored over the names. The juries of the world of shadows are also named after their jobs for instance the baker or the teacher. In the capitalist society labor robs people of their identity. Benjamin believes that the modern world's development enforces the division of people by promoting the cause of "labor"(qtd. in Steiner 26). The most typical example of laborers in the play is the slaves who haul the frieze. Epic theatre is mostly about condition than action and the labor of bearing the frieze is an emphasis on the misery of the underclass:

SONG OF SLAVES DRAGGING THE FRIEZE: Careful, do not stumble! / You who haul the frieze with the scene of triumph/ Ay, though the sweat runs down to your eyelids/ still keep your hand to the stone! Think, if you drop it/ it might crumble to dust. (Brecht 192)

The frieze is carved upon with the scene of the triumphal procession and symbolizes the heroic deeds of Lucullus. The significance of commodity is based on Marx's idea of "fetishism" according to which "commodities" own a lively essence and they have a "relationship to one another and to men"(qtd. in Jenings 26). Benjamin mentions this idea as existent in Marx's *Capital* (ibid). When in his trial Lucullus finds his first witness, Alexander, absent he calls the frieze as his second witness. Such an action proves the importance of commodity as metaphorically living entities in the eyes of aristocracy. There is a triumphal procession on the frieze:

THE COURT CRIER: And so they go through the wall/ For nothing holds them back, neither can/ This wall hold them back./ And they set their burden down/ Before the highest tribunal of the Realm of the Shadows-/ This frieze with the triumphal procession. You jurymen of the dead, look upon it: A captured king, sad of countenance/ A strange-eyed queen with provocative thighs/ A man with cherry tree, eating a cherry/ A golden god, borne by twoslaves, very fat/ Two girls with a tablet, upon it the names of fifty-three cities/ A dying legionary, greeting his general/ A cook with a fish. (Brecht 205)

Lucullus wonders at the fact that the slaves can easily enter the underworld to bring in the very frieze while his philosopher and his general could not lead his corpse there. The underworld is exclusively that of the dead but there comes the justification of the judge of the dead as Lucullus says:

.... Entrance is forbidden here/ To the living. THE JUDGE OF THE DEAD: Not to slaves. So little divides them/ From the dead that one can say/ They scarcely live. They step from the world above/ Down

to the Realm of the Shadows/Is to them a short one./ The frieze shall be brought. (Brecht 204)

The frieze as a kind of commodity indicates a loop-back in the capitalist societies. For the living Lucullus it is a symbol of honor achieved in battlefields. It is, on the other hand, the representative of imposing war on the people who are mostly afflicted with poverty. Thus, Aristocracy gains commodity and property to the extent of the lower class suffering. The slaves in the play bear the burden of commodity on an ideological basis.

They should not question their condition whatsoever; this is exactly the role of ideology that teaches them to accept their life as it is. The commodity moreover "ebbs" life out of men and paves their way to the world of the dead, as Benjamin asserts in his *Selected Writings* (qtd. in Jennings 26). That is why the slaves are so welcome to the underworld. The loop proclaims its totality when this very ideology of distinction between the social classes becomes the motive of Lucullus's condemnation. The proof to this argument as we mentioned early in the paper is social class of the jurymen in the play. In his effort to reach "Elysian Fields" Lucullus tries to convince the jury of his greatness. Greatness however, is not significant as much as the use of his deeds. This is what the old woman waiting for her trial says early in the play:

THE VOICE OF AN OLD WOMAN WAITING:.... Sometimes/ The trial is quite short. One glance is enough for the judges./ This one here, they say/ Has led a blameless life and he was able/ To be of use to his fellow men./ With them a person's usefulness counts most. (Brecht 200)

With Lucullus the trial is so long since his only use for the people is putting them under so much pressure. When the shadows of the frieze come to life to speak of his acts, they are asked one by one by the jurymen so as to explain their knowledge of Lucullus. In all their remarks Brecht's crude Marxism is apparent. The king stands as the first shadow to talk. The teacher from jurymen asks him the way he was attacked. He says "strange hands seized baker's bread loaf/ Before it was fully baked"(Brecht 207). The queen explains to the courtesan the way she was assaulted which was regarded by Lucullus's troop as proof of victory over her husband who had lost his "property" in the war (Brecht 208).The girls with the tablet describe "the waves of men" who took their "goods" away (Brecht 209). The slaves who haul the golden god claim that Lucullus carried them away and all the witnesses of the frieze take their turn to testify his capitalist policies.

According to what the witnesses say he becomes the promoter of the capitalist cause. He strives to invade their land and own their commodity and sacrifices many innocent lives in so doing. A capitalist never thinks of

the society, he only tries to rule them or objectify them. The conversation of Lucullus with the fishwife of the jury proves this claim. The fishwife who has lost his son in the war of Asia requires the warriors to explain their involvement in that war. The first warrior says that he has been hungry and the second one indicates his empty hand to the general. The cause of any war according to Brecht is not Patriotism or honor which compromise only the surface structure, rather it is poverty. The warrior's empty hands are the unconscious forces of capitalism in the war. Only two characters remember Lucullus as useful. One of them, the cook, emphasizes "That even while waging war/ He found time to discover a recipe for cooking fish...gave me a word of praise/ And himself mixed a dish./ Lamb a la Lucullus/ Made our kitchen famous"(Brecht 217). The other one names Lucullus as the first one who introduced cherry tree to Rome (ibid).

The teacher in the last scene considers such an introduction as worthless compared to his slaughtering of so many lives. When the jury men vote to his being guilty, the judge of the dead, in harmony with them all, condemns him to "oblivion" since "With all this violence and conquest/ Only one realm is extended:/ The Realm of the Shadows" (Brecht 221). History as it is put in this play has a profane nature. Steiner recounts the definition of "profane history" to Benjamin as being "the history which is subject to primacy of the political" (qtd. in Steiner 171). In the course of the play Brecht makes use of a historical event as the building block of his philosophy of resistance against the rise of capitalism. His *verfremdungseffekt* is achieved partly by the setting of the play and partly by the episodic structure of the play. This effect is itself the fruit of his Marxism. Through putting his characters in the time of the antiquity Brecht provides the distance from the readers and consequently promotes the cause of the readers' alienation from the time and place of the play. Catherine Belsey also argues such a "distancing device" as existent in Brecht's *Life of Galileo* (78). The interruptions of the numerous narrators in the play who are constantly reporting along with the comments of the chorus avoid the formation of the plot as a coherent one. Such interruptions bring about fragmentation.

### **Conclusion**

Finally like a chain reaction, the alienation caused by the fragmentary structure and setting, avoids any emotional involvement with the protagonist. Rather it invites the reader to look at the play from the critical perspective. The Marxists then insist on the consciousness of the audience who should try to form a judgment on the play. In the course of the play we never sympathize with Lucullus as if we are the jurymen of his trial. Lucullus's social class as the ideological greatness does not let him to Elysian Fields since Marxism requires utility rather than false grandeur.



We may conclude that Verfremdungs effekt is created after this philosophy of utility or praxis implying the didactic uses of a play. Unlike the old epics we never make an icon out of Lucullus and we never regret his damnation to the very Hades. Whereas Lucullus, through the ideology turns his slaves and soldiers to the unconscious force behind his very objectives, the reader of the play, in the light of "estrangement", embraces the didactic overtones of Marxism.

### WORKS CITED

- Belsey, Catherine. *Critical Practice*. 2nd ed. London & New York: Routledge, 2001.
- Bennette, Tony. *Formalism and Marxism*. NY: Routledge, 2003.
- Brecht, Bertolt. "The Trial of Lucullus." *Bertolt Brecht Plays*. Trans. H.R. Hays. 2 vols. London: Methuen & Co, 1960. 1:190-222.
- Durant, Will. Caesar and Christ. Vol. 3 of *The Story of Civilization*. 11 vols. NY: Simon, 1950.
- Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996.
- Esslin, Martin. *Brecht: A Choice of Evils*. London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1959.
- Jennings, Michael. "Walter Benjamin and the European Avant-garde." *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*. Ed. David. S. Ferris. Cambridge: CUP, 2004.
- Leeder, Karen. "'Des toten Dichters gedenkend': Remembering Brecht in Contemporary German Poetry." "Verwisch die Spuren!" Bertolt Brecht's Work and Legacy: A Reassessment. Eds. Gillet, Robert and Godella Weiss-Sussex. Amsterdam: Radopi, 2008.
- Leslie, Esther. *Walter Benjamin*. London: Reaktion Books, 2007.
- Obermayer, Hans Peter. "Yes to Nothingness!" *Condemnation of Lucullus\_ An Opera of Peace by Bertolt Brecht and Paul Dessau. International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 8.2 (2001): 217-233.
- Steiner, Uwe. *Walter Benjamin: An Introduction to His Work and Thought*. Trans. Michael Winkler. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago, 2010.
- Tyson, Louis. *Critical Theory Today: A User Friendly Guide*. 2nd ed. NY & London: Routledge, 2006.

**Ms. Nazanin Nayyeri,  
Department of Foreign Language and Linguistics,  
International Division,  
Shiraz University, Iran.**

**&**

**Prof. Farideh Pourgiv, PhD**  
**Department of Foreign Language and Linguistics,**  
**International Division,**  
**Shiraz University, Iran.**