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Don't let yourselves be allured! Don't let yourselves be deceived! Don't let yourselves be consoled!

Philosophical Meditation on Brecht's youth poem „Against Seduction”

These three lines from the poem „Against Seduction”, positioned at the end of „Bertolt Brecht's Hauspostille” (*Homilies for the Home* [„Manual of Piety”¹]; first published 1927), embrace some of the poet's principal thoughts that also emerge in the later stages of his work. How important this piece was to him is evident in that he not only published it separately under the title of *Luzifers Nachtlied* (*Lucifer's Nightsong*), but also recommends in the introduction that „each reading in the ‘Manual of Piety’” be concluded with this poem.

*Against Seduction*²

1.

*Don't let yourselves be allured!
There is no turning back.
The day stands leave at the door;
The night wind is spurred:
Morning will never again break.*

2.

*Don't let yourselves be deceived!
Life is precious little.
Gulp it in eager greed!
It won't have filled your need,
When you must quit it!*

3.

*Don't let yourselves be consoled!
Not too much time remains!
Leave the Redeemed to their mould!
Life's greatness is untold:
It won't wait in vain.*

4.

*Don't let yourselves be seduced
To servile austerity!
What fear can still come to roost?
In death, to creatures reduced
What follows is nonentity.*

¹ Title given the translation by Eric Bentley; Grove Press, 1994.

² Translation of the poem *Gegen Verführung* by Bertolt Brecht © Judith Whittaker-Stemmler 2012.

The poem is the work of a brilliant young man in his *Sturm und Drang* phase (*Storm and Stress*). It will always be relevant as long as humans live. It will move people as long as they read poetry and can be enthused by linguistic arts that directly address their readers with clear and down-to-earth language. It holds three programmatic warnings that can continue speaking to generations to come; three warnings of critical content toward religion and ideology, three warnings in the tradition of the European Enlightenment, born in the spirit of sobriety, of alertness, of disillusionment.

A shocking message the reader of a home postil is left with! A *postil* was originally a devotional homily and prayer book for believers' use. A well-known example was „Dr. Martin Luther's Home- and Church Postil" with edifying readings and guidance for the everyday life of a Christian. Brecht ties his writings to these in an ironical parody, picks up the thread of temptation and gives it a contextual twist.

The Christian religion has warned and still warns against temptations from the sinful world and its haughty pleasures. Bertolt Brecht warns against being seduced into believing in eternal life after death in an imaginary Hereafter, an illusionary realm.

*Don't let yourselves be allured!
There is no turning back.
In death, to creatures reduced
What follows is nonentity.*

The poem of course does not limit itself to atheistic criticism against religion. The thoughts extend far beyond that. It cautions us against illusions of any kind, whether religious or non-religious. It alerts us to both pious and profane self-delusion. It reminds us to stay on the ground before castles in the air, whatever they may be. The poem expresses the great link between life and death, the interweaving of life's pleasures and life's hardships. Its tenor is the delicate art of surviving the world and then bidding it farewell.

The three thematic lines of the poem, *Don't let yourselves be allured! Don't let yourselves be deceived! Don't let yourselves be consoled!*, I would like to paraphrase with the words:

- Don't let yourselves be manipulated! Don't let yourselves be abused! Don't let yourselves be taken advantage of!
- Don't let yourselves be fooled and don't fool yourselves!
- Don't fall for false assurance or simple solutions. Don't let yourselves be snubbed, rebuked, cut short!

Maintain your own interests, make use of your own intellect! Say no to the human mind's aberrations, to the delusions behind claims of absoluteness and infallibility! Likewise resist the impertinent distortion of modern thought that no longer differentiates between the relative and relativism, that swings back and forth between arbitrariness and dogmatism. Of course, all of this is easier said than done! A critical exchange of ideas with others can help one to accomplish this difficult task more easily than trying to manage it alone, although the latter cannot be completely excluded. Often enough, a broad consensus in politics or in the sciences has proved itself to be deceptive. True and false, right and wrong are not synonymous to majority and minority.

Brecht's poem encourages us to say no. Saying no is often more difficult than saying yes. Being able to reject false consolation and false guidance – that is, deceit and seduction – stems from a deeply affirmative attitude to life, to life in its transitory beauty. With respect to life itself, the poem makes two contradictory, but highly charged statements: *Life's greatness is untold*, it says. And, *Life is precious little*. Yes, life is of untold greatness – in fact, it is the greatest of all things. In the rank order of values it comes in first place because all other things of value depend on it. Without life there is no striving for happiness, success, justice; without living, striving is irrelevant, fathomless, pointless.

At the same time, however, life is small. It is short, from the first moment onward it is threatened by dangers, beginning even in the prenatal stage. It is vulnerable, it is susceptible to illness, subject to wear and tear, it is mortal. Brecht does not say: life is senseless. He says: life is *precious little*. With an air of solemnity he impresses upon us how small, how transient, how irretrievable life is. At the same time, exactly this is at the root of its preciousness – *it won't wait in vain*. Those who neglect their lives, who miss out on life, who ruin their lives, must be aware that: *there is no turning back*. The arrow of time is irreversible. A conscious affirmation of life includes the acceptance of death.

In the poem „Against Seduction”, Brecht draws the ideological sum of his early years in Augsburg and Munich. The feverish breath of a youthful, impetuous outlook on life drifts through the lines. This is particularly clear in his use of the allegory ‘thirst for life’ to appeal to the reader:

*Gulp it in eager greed.
It won't have filled your need,
When you must quit it.*

In his plea to gulp up life *in eager greed* there are admittedly some contextual and aesthetic problems. One can only gulp from the goblet of life when it is full, filled with pleasurable contents. What about those whose goblet of life is empty or is more akin to a cup of suffering? Does it make any sense to cheerfully call out to the homeless or unemployed: „Gulp down your life in eager greed!“? And what about the lesson to gulp life *in eager greed*, of all things? Here Brecht has allowed inconsistent, but revealing images to slip in. A good drink, whether tea or coffee, wine or brandy, is not greedily gulped down, it is savoured and enjoyed, sip by slow sip. In a later version, Brecht wisely revised *gulp in eager greed* to *savour to the fullest*.

Certainly, summing up a situation quickly and dealing with it immediately both belong to the art of living. But just as essential are inward calmness, complacency and, not least, slowness – slowness especially when eating and drinking. Should we want to gulp life down, the goblet must be filled with drink. This is why Brecht also warns us of *servile austerity*:

*Don't let yourselves be seduced
To servile austerity!*

In other words: Don't let yourselves be exploited or abused! Also don't fall into the trap of self-abuse and self-torment! Not in your working lives, not in private life, not in political life, not in volunteer service. Especially in the service of humanistic ideals can people become drained, in their commitment to higher goals be shamefully exploited if they do not watch out for themselves. Brecht ties life's enjoyment and struggles together. Neither does he commend the parasitic lifestyle of the upper ten thousand, nor does he belittle the deprivations of the millions at the base. In order to enjoy life, people must work and struggle. In order to be able to work and struggle, they require pleasures and of course discipline.

On the other hand, the majority of humans – globally – are not so much ideologically seduced into *servile austerity* as they are brutally condemned to it. The silent power of circumstance damns them to it. Today we are witnessing the historic process by which they are no longer accepting that fact. They too deserve a fair share of both material and ideal nourishment, of the providential goods of this life. Who would hold it against them when they relate the message of this poem to themselves and their situation?

*Don't let yourselves be consoled!
Not too much time remains!*

The materialistic philosophy that we are given only this one life to live does admittedly make us aware of the bitter, the tragic dimension of human existence. What has happened cannot be undone. What has been neglected can never be fully retrieved, what has been denied can never be fully compensated. This is the soil, drenched in blood and tears, in which religion takes root, and it explains how religion has maintained control by offering consolation and promises of redemption in an imaginary afterlife, free of suffering.

Brecht's poem „Against Seduction” has sometimes been suspected of being a subtle depiction of nihilism. This, however, is a misinterpretation. The final two lines

*In death, to creatures reduced
What follows is nonentity.*

emphasise – in a truly naturalistic sense – how much the same animals and humans are in dying, and express the finality of individual death. This can appear nihilistic only from the perspective of a religious belief in redemption or condemnation that reckons with eternal pleasures in Heaven or eternal suffering in Hell. However, these two final scenes were what Brecht had rejected since the days of his Latin lessons at the academy in Augsburg when he became acquainted with Horatio's poetry, who in turn was inspired by Epicurus. From Horatio he learned the saying „Carpe diem!”, „Seize the day!” Do so, for each day could be your last. Implicit to this is the premise that death is final because, according to Epicurean atomism, the individual's body and soul will decompose to its most minute elements, which the Biology of our day has meticulously verified.

What is remarkable here is the fact that in the Old Testament of the Bible, in the book of the preacher Solomon, in Hebrew referred to as Qoheleth, there is a short passage that says nearly word for word what Brecht says. I will quote the translation of Martin Luther (translation from the King James 2000 Bible): *For that which befalls the sons of men befalls beasts; the same thing befalls them: as one dies, so dies the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man has no advantage over a beast: for all is vanity* (Ecclesiastes 3:19). It is an established fact that Brecht was well versed in the Bible; however, whether he was acquainted with this soberly realistic Jewish wisdom from Hellenistic times remains unknown.

In the way this poem interprets death, it loses its frightful quality. *What fear can still come to roost? Leave the Redeemed to their mould!* When you're dead, you're dead, dead as a dog,

dissolved into your tiniest elements, and in this sense delivered from all evils that are a part of life. The religious intimidation that for centuries overshadowed living and dying does not exist in classical antiquity's tradition of enlightenment, to which Brecht also belonged. That we will definitely die as all creatures before us, next to us and after us, is both disconsolate and consoling. Disconsolate, because each life ends as a fragment. Consoling, because this same fate is met by anyone and everyone, with no exception, founded in the great law of evolution. The dictate of death and democracy of death come to terms with each other.

Brecht's poem „Against Seduction” is a masterpiece of German poetry. It also lends itself as a literary contribution to a secular-humanistic culture of last rites, which is evolving before our eyes. The poem commends the love of life with no delusions. It advises us to enjoy life in union with earnestness and melancholy. We should learn it by heart.

Translation from the German into English: Judith Whittaker-Stemmler/Marburg